On being a Jew and a Quaker

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My Uncle Hymie asked me not long ago, "I thought you didn't go to synagogue because you don't believe in God – so why have you become a Quaker?" Good question – and one I have been pondering for some time now.

First of all – after reading an article on Judaism and Quakerism in the *Friends Quarterly*, I learn that there are some close similarities between the religions of Judaism and Quakerism, although, as any Jew will tell you, Jewishness is not synonymous with Judaism.

The article says that Jews and Quakers have a strong sense of divine immanence – that is that God, the spirit, whatever we want to call it, is in the world and in us human beings. But whatever that spirit or God is, it is to be experienced but never comprehended.

Both Quakers and Jews talk of a covenant with God. This is a direct relationship. Margaret Fell, an early Quaker, talked about "the King of her conscience" as opposed to the earthly king. The faith of both Jews and Quakers is a lived faith. In living our faith in the world we aspire to be "a light unto the nations."

Both Jews and Quakers have a sense of themselves as a "peculiar people" – called to live differently and to rise above the domination of material and social forces that run counter to the dictates of conscience. Not to say that ordinary Jews and Quakers in everyday life achieve this aspiration! But we therefore perceive ourselves as "strangers and aliens".

Amongst Quakers and Jews there is a radical vision of a better world that we as human beings, with the guidance and collaboration of the spirit, can achieve here on earth, not in some future place. We have a prophetic vision of a peaceable kingdom. Jews talk about "repairing the world", which harks back to the story of the creation, when some of God's original light was hidden in the matter of the world, and it is necessary to strive to uncover it so the world can be made whole. Quakers also talk

about "the light" as a means to knowing what is right and true.

Given this, teaching and learning are an important part of both religions. Rabbis are not priests, they are teachers, interpreters. Quakers talk of "discerning" the will of God.

God is not in a temple. Holiness is in us, our families, our homes. Much of Jewish ritual takes place in the home. Quakers too have no need of temples – they can worship anywhere. The greatest emphasis is on community. Quakers are a "priesthood of all believers", able to incorporate and welcome difference and disagreement. Jews too make debate and argument a part of their practice.

But these are all similarities. Why choose one over another then? At this point the answer to this may be revealed by telling some of my personal story.

My mother, Zelda Curtis, was a well-known communist and atheist. Religion being, as Marx called it, the opium of the people, I was denied initiation into Judaism, although never allowed to forget that we were Jewish. Being both Jewish and Communist meant we were outsiders. As such we had the necessity of proving ourselves to be good, worthy and brilliant. No one should ever be able to say we were anything less because we were Jews, (or communists). I was born in 1947, very close to the holocaust. The fact of retaining a strong sense of being Jewish has more to do with a thousand years of persecution than it does with religion. And Jews were "a people", not just in the sense that Quakers talk about being a people, but one longing for a homeland, a nation, somewhere that would be theirs, from where no oppressors would expel them.

Communism was a natural path for many Jews. Jews, as I said earlier, believe that the world is perfectable, that it is a duty to work for the betterment of this world, for positive change and against injustice of all kinds. Oft quoted from Judges in the Bible is the phrase "Justice, justice you shall pursue". In London, where I grew up, there was a joke that without Scots and Jews there would be no communist party. Scots and Jews share that palpable sense of oppression, which blossomed into a striving for the end of oppression for all –at least amongst a great number of Scots and Jews.

But I learned later in my life that Communism divided the world

into the capitalists, who were self-interested and evil, and those whom they oppressed. When the evil-doers were forced to change by the revolution of the oppressed, the world would become a paradise on earth. Simplification I know. And clearly history shows us that this does not, has not, probably never will happen. Certainly in Quakerism, and in Judaism as well, change has to start with ourselves. How we treat people, including our "enemies", is crucial. I was looking for a more convincing model of change and gradually I began to find it in a more spiritual place, initially through engaging with Buddhism, then through my study of Nonviolent Communication, and latterly with Quakers.

So why haven't I gone back to the religion I was born into to find this path? This leads to how I perceive the differences. Not that I have directly experienced anything of Jewish worship in much of the last forty years. For me a synagogue was where I went when someone in my family was married, barmiztvahed or dead.

What is special about Quakers for me is first and foremost the waiting silence. I never experienced that to such a degree anywhere else in my life. In a synagogue I never found much silence. Or much sense of the spiritual – but at the time I occasionally frequented them, I wasn't looking for spirituality. Interestingly, since I became a Quaker I am now more interested to explore Jewish spirituality, but as yet haven't figured out how I want to do that. I have started to attend a group called Quakers with Jewish connections, which is a starting point.

But it is hard to let go of the prejudices that I developed as a young person, when I found synagogues unsympathetic places, where women were separated from men, where people spoke in Hebrew, a language I never learned or understood, where there was inexplicable, to me, ritual, where men swayed backwards and forwards as they prayed.

And then there was always the box where you put your donation for trees in Israel. And there was the jubilation when Moshe Dayan led Israeli troops to victory against Jordan and Egypt in 1967, occupying territory in the West Bank and Gaza. Shops all around Finchley, a very Jewish area, displayed posters of the man with his eyepatch. We didn't talk about this much in my family, but I know at a family wedding, when the Israeli national anthem was played, my father refused to stand up. As a young left-wing person, involved in CND, anti-apartheid, and the protests

against the Vietnam war, the last thing I wanted was to put myself on what I thought was the wrong side of history in regard to Israel and Palestine. I understood very little of the conflict or its history – as I say, we never talked about it – but I felt alienated from my "community".

But something else changed for me very recently, this February, 2015, when I joined a delegation of American Jews, twenty-two of them, to Bethlehem to plant trees at a Palestinian farm. The farm had had 1500 trees uprooted by the Israeli army to make way for a settlers-only road. And given the significance for Jews of planting trees in Israel, there was an added poignancy. These Jews were radical, critical, committed people who had worked in civil rights with Martin Luther King, been active in trades unions, stood up against the Vietnam War, climate change, racism – and now were all taking a position on justice for Palestinians – and they were mostly deeply religious and observant Jews, knowledgeable about their traditions, rituals and worship. Suddenly I felt bereft. A part of my heart had, it seemed, been pushed into the darkness. Like the light of the world, it needed "repairing".

I had thought of clinging to old traditions and rituals as a backward thing, shoring up the defences of a people beleaguered and persecuted, a people feeling threatened, even paranoid in my eyes. I had grown up in one of the most privileged parts of the world at a most privileged time, taking full advantage of free education, the burgeoning liberation of women, freedom of speech and access to all kinds of radical ideas. I felt no common cause with this inward-looking community. I remember the shock I felt when my grandmother asked me of my non-Jewish boyfriend, "But when you have an argument, doesn't he then call you a dirty Jew?" It was she also who thought that her non-Jewish neighbour only wanted to befriend her because she thought Jews had lots of money.

But equally, perhaps ironically, I have always trumpeted my Jewish identity and heritage. And there is no denying, even though I can't quite figure out how and why, Jewishness feels like an identity, like being a woman, in a way being a Quaker never will. Quakerism is something I chose. Jewishness I can never shake off. And the knowledge that oppression can always happen again, even though I don't feel it imminently as some Jews do, is part of that. Also, ironically, the question of Israel is a factor. It seems to me important that Jewish people should

stand up and say "Not in my name". It is almost a moral duty to fully inhabit my Jewishness.

And in case anyone thinks that retaining my Jewish identity is an entirely negative thing, I have to say that I loved my funny old grandmas, with their funny English spattered with Yiddish. I remember my grandmother sending me to the shop to buy "ein knobbel garlic". I remember her telling me I shouldn't correct her English because she had been speaking it for sixty years, whilst I had only done so for less than twenty. I loved the humour. I loved looking for the hidden matzos at Passover. I loved my mother doing Russian dancing at weddings. I loved our difference from more restrained and polite English people.

So, back to Uncle Hymie. "I don't believe in God," he told me, "but when I am in the synagogue on Saturday, with my community, I feel something." That's exactly how I feel in a Quaker meeting, and I guess others might too. In a way, in a Quaker meeting I don't feel weighed down by everything that being Jewish means. I fear I might in a Jewish service, but I need to test this. And no other gathering can replace for me the beauty of that silence, the flexibility and inclusiveness of a Quaker meeting, the gentle hand that guides us, the lightness with which we wear our traditions, and for me, the unrivalled commitment to engagement with the difficult issues of injustice in the world and the overriding commitment to peace. This is where, for now, I have found my spiritual home, my Jerusalem.

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> Now I was come up in spirit through the flaming sword into the paradise of God. All things were new, and all the creation gave another smell unto me than before, beyond what words can utter.
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> George Fox, 1648, *Quaker faith & practice* 26.03