



Charles, Jew

Charles' family is an important part of his life.

My dad is a Christian, my mum is Jewish and my two sisters are Christian. I chose to be Jewish like my mum. We are Liberal Progressive Jews.

My local Jewish community is small (about fifty people), and has been established for 11 years. We don't have a rabbi or a synagogue; we meet to celebrate Sabbath in each other's homes about once a month. Usually twenty or so people attend these services, which are said partly in English and partly in Hebrew. For special days, like *Rosh Hashanah*, we meet in a Roman Catholic parish hall.

The monthly service:

Someone (usually the lady of the house) lights the Sabbath candles and says the traditional blessing. We say the *Kiddush* (the blessing of the wine and the bread) to celebrate what God has done for us by giving us the vine and the grain.

We have a discussion (the topic for the week) and sometimes a Torah reading, which we discuss. These can be on lots of things – the liberal Jewish community is interested in lots of issues like the environment.

Celebrating festivals:

At home we celebrate both Christian and Jewish festivals. At Passover we have all the traditional foods of the *Seder* meal – salt water, *haroseth*, the roasted egg and so on.

Children read from the *Hagadah*. I remember that when I was younger I had to ask the questions – they were in Hebrew, and I didn't know Hebrew and I got quite worried. It was very helpful to me having to take part, as it helps you feel accepted as part of the community. *Yom Kippur* is one I'm not so keen on as I find it quite difficult. You are supposed to think about your actions in the previous year, and if you have made errors try to put them right. It's no good just asking God for forgiveness – you've actually got to do something about it yourself.

Keeping kosher:

Orthodox Jews believe that commandments were given and don't change, but we believe rules were made for the time and can be adapted. I don't keep kosher; I tried to for a long time but the bacon butties and sausages were my downfall!

Asking questions and talking with others help Charles to work out what he believes.

My religion is very important, I think. I'm still very much deciding. I got quite confused when I was younger and kept asking questions about belief. I went through a stage of asking what proof is there and then I realised that I didn't need proof – that's what faith is about!

My mum and Rabbi Hooker helped me sort out my questions. I really admire the Rabbi. I admire his energy and the way he can always explain anything you are having trouble with. I talked to him when I was thinking about which faith to follow. I also talked with my friends.

I haven't had a Bar Mitzvah. I thought about it, but at thirteen chose not to. There's still a chance, as in Progressive Judaism it usually takes place at 16, when you have made up your own mind. Today people often leave it till later. Mum knows someone who is preparing for her Bat Mitzvah at 25.

Being accepted:

I don't think anything is harder because I am Jewish. I am accepted for who I am – there's nothing that's not accepted. In fact, I found it easier to make friends once I had decided, probably because once I had made that decision it helped me be more confident and to accept people for who they are.

One thing I did find hard was trying to learn Hebrew. I didn't do too well, but I can just about follow it now! Also, quite a lot of the time I wish there were more Jewish young people. There are summer camps and things, but I haven't been on them. I have quite a lot on at school. I am in Year 11, and studying for my GCSEs.

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What matters most?

- Friendship** – this is the main thing.
- Faith** – this is part of who I am. It helps me make up my mind a lot more.
- Community** – I like to go to the monthly services. I'm not forced to go – I choose to go. I like the sense of community and the food afterwards! It helps a lot when you think you are not the only one. You can share your ideas and beliefs with others.
- Guidelines** – something else that is important is that I have been brought up to remember not to do anything to anyone else that I wouldn't like done to me. This is one of the things at the back of my mind when I have to make choices.
- Money** – I enjoy spending money. I don't think my faith affects it. My mum makes me save some!

Asked about God and the problem of pain and suffering, Charles explains:

I know God exists, whatever he or she exists as. Hebrew has the neuter word for God – 'it' exists. God exists in everyone's head, in their thoughts and in what's written (the Torah and Talmud). It's one thing I have only ever doubted briefly and never again. I can't figure out how people can be atheist – I could not imagine life without something there.

My friend's dad was seriously ill and I really wanted him to pull through. But I know that people live and die, that it is not for us to decide. One of the rabbis said that we have to decide one of two things – either God is all-powerful but cruel or all-loving but weak. But he went on to say that there is a third option – that he gave us free will. So it is for us to decide what we should do and for us to carry on God's work.

If I have trouble with anything, I find praying helps a lot with calming the mind. My faith helps me make my mind up about a lot of things.

