

DIY Religion: My Faith Wasn't Doing It For Me ... So I Made My Own

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By *Lynne Meredith Golodner*



Don't tell me I have to fast or for how many hours; let me find my own way to it.

On the day of my son's bar mitzvah, rain misted all around us, dripping in perfect rivulets from the roof of the tent at a local farm. The Torah was slung in an REI bag over one of the tent posts as my son, Asher, and Rabbi Evon Yakar stood behind an eight-foot table on the damp grass, chanting into a microphone.

Because my son says he finds God most in nature, I created an outside-the-box bar mitzvah immersed in natural surroundings.

Our guests said it was the best bar mitzvah they'd ever attended.

The day before, the rabbi led my family on a hike through the farm grounds. About midway between the barn and the forest at the edge of the property, he stopped us on the gravel path.

"Behind us," he said, pointing to the barn, corral and out-buildings, "that's man-made. That's

the weekday."

He turned toward the forest. "Ahead of us, that's Shabbat, the Sabbath — what man cannot make. We can replicate, but we can't create plants or animals from nothing. That's the difference between the weekdays and the day of rest."

I grew up in a Reform Jewish household, so secular that there were more eye rolls than cups of wine at the Passover table.

We attended High Holiday services with our friends, standing in line behind the movie-theater ropes in the hope of getting a good seat for our "shift" (services occurred at three different times to accommodate the entire congregation at our populous temple).

My father inevitably fell asleep during services, despite the stand-sit regiment and by the time the sermon started, my sister and I were usually ensconced in the restroom, talking with other girls hiding out there.

When I was in college and [dating](#) a Catholic man, he asked me how I could "*be so Jewish and not know anything about it.*"

After 12 years of Catholic school, church on Sundays and no meat on Fridays, he answered all my questions — but I had to dial my grandparents whenever he lobbed one my way.

I knew I had to figure out what role I wanted religion to play in my life if it were to mean something to me.

That led me to devote a decade to [living an Orthodox lifestyle](#), which got me no closer to feeling at home in my [religion](#). When I filed for [divorce](#) at 37, I felt it was time to put up or shut up. It was time to figure out how I could live an authentic spiritual life where it felt like home to me, and not someone else — not a rabbi, a [husband](#), my parents, or the community around me.

Not many people ask themselves what they believe in, nor how they want to observe. It's just not how we're conditioned. In countries around the world, religion and spirituality are tailor-made for you from birth and when you try to shake it up, people protest.

It's not easy to create a DIY religion — but I'm so happy I did.

I can't tell you what denomination I prefer because there isn't one. I am a smorgasbord of Judaism — a little bit of Orthodox, a dash of Reform and a hearty helping of Conservative with some Renewal and Reconstructionism thrown in for good measure. I even pull some spiritual inspiration from Christianity and Hinduism, and some wisdom from Vedanta and Sikhism.

A rabbi friend calls my family "post-denominational." I think that's the way all religion is going, really.

On the first day of Passover this year, my husband and I took our four kids hiking in the woods and open fields. As we walked through yellow grasses down a meandering path, we heard a rhythmic thumping that grew louder and louder. It was so forceful, we thought at first it was man-made or a speaker system from the house on the hill a mile away.

But as we listened, we realized it was a symphony of bullfrogs. On the first day of Passover, we met one of the plagues head on and felt our religion was right in front of us.

My ex, who is Orthodox, would've blasted me for driving on the holiday to get to this sanctuary. (Orthodox Jews do not drive on the Sabbath and certain holidays.) But if we hadn't, we never would've experienced a real immersion in the symbolism of the holiday.

After the hike, we ducked into a coffee shop in the nearby town. Its logo — three figures in robes with halos, the middle one holding a steaming mug — communicated a trinity of identities: Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, taking its identity from the biblical chapter of Daniel.

A Christian coffee shop ... on the first day of Passover.

Our Seder the night before was meaningful and fun, creatively apportioned with added questions and a variety of Haggadahs (books outlining the Passover order) so everyone could provide their own insights. And when the kids had enough, they went off to play — no harm, no foul.

The next day, the coffee was delicious. We were together as a family having a spiritual day in our own way.

I've never like being penned in. Don't tell me I have to fast or for how many hours; let me find my own way to it.

Don't tell me the meaning I'm supposed to take; let me find my own.

Once, a friend and I argued over the meaning of a two-line poem. We went to hear the poet read one night and approached him, asking which one of us was right, what he intended the poem to mean.

"It doesn't matter," he replied. "Once the poem leaves me, it means whatever the reader gets from it."

That's how I see religion.

Back in college, I went to church with the Catholic [boyfriend](#) and was inspired by the priest's homily every time.

Last year, I went to India with a client to blog and do photography on her yoga retreat. In the Hindu mecca at the foot of the Himalayas, I found incredible spirituality. As I boarded a plane to leave two weeks later, tears streaked my cheeks at the thought of leaving that mystical milieu.

I didn't turn Hindu; I simply incorporated some of the wisdom I picked up there into what I do every day.

That's the beauty of spirituality. It's a do-it-yourself kind of thing anyway.

At least, it should be.

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