

Yom Kippur 2026/5767 Chapel Meditation

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About 60 years ago, I found myself sitting in a secular private school, a nine-year-old girl with a religious identity rooted in Classic Reform Judaism.

I was sitting in a school-wide assembly, surrounded by my new classmates, when all of a sudden, we were all asked to recite the Lord's Prayer.

So, I did.

But as I read the words, something inside me started to stir.

I remember thinking, I don't know this prayer. What is this? What does it mean?

I knew that I was Jewish. I went to Temple Beth-El. I went to religious school. I knew the prayers and the holidays. Judaism was an important part of my family and of my life.

And yet, here I was, saying a Christian prayer.

And what did it mean if I did?

I carried those questions home with me.

I grew up in a time when Classic Reform Judaism placed a strong value on assimilation. My parents believed that being Jewish did not have to set you apart from everyone around you. My mother used to say, "People should not judge you by your religion. People should judge you on you."

And so, when I asked my parents: *"Is it okay that I said the Lord's Prayer?"*

They told me it *was* okay. Their reasoning was that saying the prayer did not mean that I accepted it as my own belief.

And at nine years old, that made sense to me.

But looking back, that little question was the beginning of something much bigger.

Because I would spend much of my life asking versions of that same question:
What do I believe?

What does being Jewish mean to me?

And eventually: What parts of what I inherited do I want to make my own?

I grew up knowing that Judaism mattered because I watched it matter to the people I loved.

My grandparents, Minnie and Max Koepfel, were highly active in the Reform Movement.

When I was very young, I remember going to so many gala events honoring them and thinking, wow, Grandma and Grandpa must be important in this community.

I came to realize, that if they were willing to give their time, their effort and their money to Judaism, it must be very important to them.

And I was proud of that.

My parents, Louise and Fred Feldman, were life members of Temple Beth-El and very active here.

As a child, I even sometimes wished my mother would spend a little *less* time at Temple meetings and a little more time at home.

But as I got older, I understood what that participation really meant.

She was not just attending meetings.

She was helping create the community that I was growing up in.

My family gave me a Jewish home, a Jewish community and Jewish traditions that I didn't have to go looking for.

But what they could not give me were answers to all of my questions.

Those I would have to work out for myself.

And because I have always been a person of science, I continue to question things. I want to understand why. I want to know how something works and whether it makes sense.

And when it came to Judaism, I was no different.

I learned the prayers, the holidays, Jewish history and the traditions of Reform Judaism.

But I struggled with the idea of God.

For a while, I even wondered: Did questioning God mean I was a bad Jew?

Part of that questioning came from the way I experienced Judaism growing up. At the time, Temple Beth-El was very different from the Temple we know today.

The clergy then stood in front of the congregation and preached.

The rabbi spoke.

We listened.

And then, at Friends Academy, the Quaker high school I attended, I encountered something completely different.

Every week, the entire student body gathered for Quaker Meeting.

We sat in a simple wooden building, on wooden pews where we sat in silence.

For an hour.

There was no service or sermon.

No one stood in front of us and told us what to think or what to feel.

If someone felt inspired by God, that person could stand and speak.

I never spoke.

But I absolutely loved it.

There was something about that experience that *spoke to me*.

At Temple, the rabbi spoke. We listened.

At Quaker Meeting, nobody spoke. We listened *to ourselves*.

I loved having that space to sit quietly, to reflect, to wonder, and to decide what I was thinking and feeling for myself.

I loved it so much that I actually considered converting.

But when I learned that Quakerism was a Christian religion, I knew, as a person of science, that I could not consider a religion that believed that Jesus was the son of God.

So, I didn't become a Quaker.

But I did not leave that Meeting House empty-handed.

I took some things with me: silence, personal reflection and permission to question.

I eventually realized that I did not have to convert to another religion to make room for what I had learned there.

I could bring those things back with me.

I could make room for them within *my Judaism*.

That realization became clearer to me during Senior Seminar here at Temple Beth-El.

I asked Rabbi Davidson a question that had been troubling me:

"How do you envision God?" I asked.

His answer was that he thought of God as "all the unanswered questions in the universe."

I remember feeling total relief.

It was only this year when I took a course about Maimonides that I learned that he argued, almost a thousand years ago, that God has no physical body, shares no attributes with physical things and is the unchanging, necessary first cause of all existence.

It was what I had believed myself, and suddenly, I felt more confident in my Judaism and in my questioning.

And over time, I began to realize that making Judaism my own wasn't only about figuring out what I believed. It was also about deciding what I wanted to carry forward.

When I married my husband Andy, we had a Jewish wedding. We joined Temple Beth-El as a couple, and we had children.

And then my questions changed.

I was no longer asking only: What do *I* believe in Judaism?

I started asking: What do I want *my children* to experience, to remember, to love?

One of the first committees I became involved with was Tot Shabbat, for children under five, where we worked with the assistant rabbi to plan Shabbat songs, art and activities.

I wanted a child's first experience at Temple to be positive, to be fun and to be joyful.

I wanted a child to walk out through those doors and think *I want to come back here*.

I wanted them to have a Jewish community they could belong to, traditions they could explore, and eventually, the freedom to make those traditions their own.

And as I was parenting my children and shaping their Jewish journeys, Reform Judaism itself was changing.

There was more Hebrew. The rabbis wanted the congregation to become more involved in prayer. The cantor wanted everyone to join in singing rather than simply listening.

And I wanted to be part of that change.

I joined the Religious School Committee and the Worship Committee because I wanted to have a voice in what we were giving our children and how people experienced Jewish life.

We created more opportunities for people to participate through music, singing, participatory prayer, chanting Torah, leading a service.

But over time, I came to understand that participation meant something much bigger than standing up to lead a prayer.

It meant being willing to shape the community you belong to.

At Quaker Meeting, I discovered that I could be responsible for *my own spiritual experience*.

Through Temple Beth El, I eventually discovered that I could also be responsible for helping create meaningful Jewish experiences *for other people*.

I didn't want Judaism simply to be something I received. I wanted to participate in creating it.

And that has become one of the most meaningful parts of my Jewish life.

There are certain moments when I feel that meaning most deeply.

It might be hearing the organ play a familiar melody and suddenly being brought back to another time in my life.

It might be hearing the shofar and feeling connected to people who heard that same sound thousands of years ago,

Or, it might be when I host a holiday dinner with my extended family, reminding me of holiday dinners made by my mother and grandmother, and the traditions we have kept going year after year, whether it is the food we eat, the prayers we say, or the stories we share.

Those moments remind me that tradition can be ancient and still become completely personal.

When I hear the shofar sound, say an ancient prayer, or gather around that table, I am the one experiencing it.

The tradition was handed to me.

But meaning is something I create through the way I engage with it.

Sometimes I think about that nine-year-old girl who came home and asked: "Is it okay that I said the Lord's Prayer?" She thought she was asking about one prayer.

But she was really beginning to ask: How do I figure out what I believe?

And now, looking back, I can see the connection.

My grandparents gave me a Jewish tradition.

My parents gave me a Jewish home.

Reform Judaism gave me the freedom to question what I inherited, to choose what was meaningful to me and ultimately, to help shape the Jewish life I wanted to pass on.

Because I do not think we honor tradition only by preserving it exactly as it was handed to us.

We honor it by engaging with it and bringing it to life.

That, for me, has been my Jewish journey.

And I am grateful for every question that brought me here.

May your journey be meaningful.