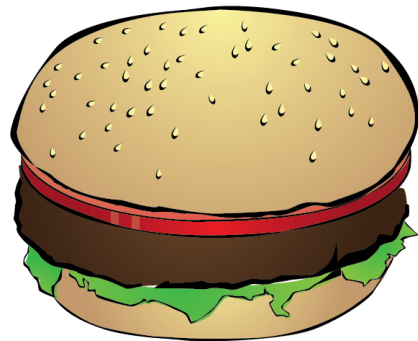


A Reconstructionist Readymade: Living in Two Civilizations

For students in grades 3-6 • American Version



Thinking It Over

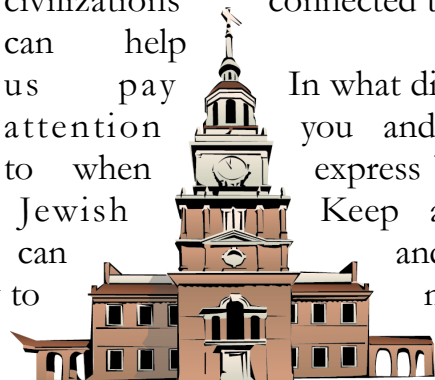


The idea of “living in two civilizations” can help us pay attention to when and where we have Jewish moments. This week, you can use the list in the box below to

think about the times and places where you feel most connected to being Jewish.

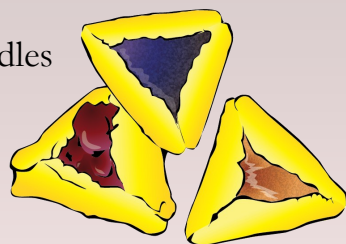


In what different ways do you and your friends express being Jewish during the week? Keep a list of your moments and share it with your classmates next week.



What “Jewish things” have you done during the past week?

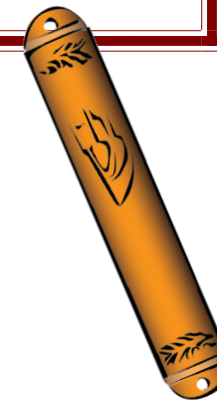
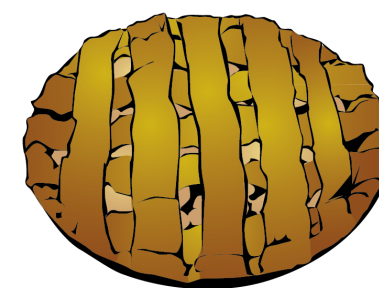
- Eating **כָּשֶׁר** Kosher or Jewish Food
- Lighting **שַׁבַּת** Shabbat or Jewish candles
- Learning **עֵבְרִית** Hebrew
- Reading a Jewish book/story
- Listening to Jewish music
- Going to synagogue for services
- Celebrating a Jewish holiday
- Studying about the weekly **תּוֹרָה** Torah portion
- Wearing a **כִּיפָּה** kippah (yarmulke/round head cap)
- Communicating with someone who lives in **יִשְׂרָאֵל** Israel
- Doing a **מִצְוָה** mitzvah



By Gabrielle Kaplan-Mayer • Rabbi Erin Hirsh: editor • Ezra Sherman: designer/illustrator

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When a new friend comes over to your house, what are the things that she



in America were living in “two civilizations”: one was Jewish and one was American.

sees that show that your family is Jewish? Is there a **מְזוּזָה** mezuzah on your door? **שַׁבַּת** Shabbat candlesticks, **קִידוּשׁ** a kiddush cup or **הַנּוֹבָה** Hanukkah **מְנוֹרָה** menorah (**הַנּוֹבֵיָה** hanukiah) on display in a special place? Maybe there is art with Hebrew writing on the walls? Are there Jewish books on bookshelves in your house?

Rabbi Kaplan noticed that important parts of people’s lives were Jewish, like celebrating Jewish holidays, listening to Jewish music and reading Jewish books. He also noticed that people had other important parts of their lives, like going to public school and celebrating American holidays, that did not have to do with being Jewish.

Of course, anyone coming over to your house would also see lots of things that don’t have anything to do with being Jewish: favorite games, toys, books, posters. Being Jewish is one part of who you are, but it doesn’t tell the full story of your life.

Rabbi Kaplan saw that we could participate in both civilizations (or communities) and he believed that we could be part of both at the same time. Have you ever thought of yourself as Jewish when celebrating Independence Day or as American when celebrating



In the 1920s, a rabbi named Mordecai Kaplan became very interested in this idea. He observed that Jewish people

when celebrating **יּוֹם הָעִצְמָאוֹת** Yom Ha’atzmaut (Israeli Independence day)?



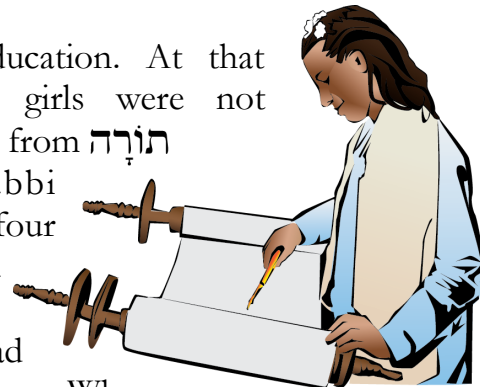
Learning from Democracy

Rabbi Kaplan moved to the United States from Lithuania in 1889. His father was an Orthodox rabbi. When Kaplan grew up, he became a Conservative rabbi. Conservative Judaism tries to *conserve* (save or hold on to) as much of Jewish tradition as possible. When Rabbi Kaplan became a congregational rabbi, he started to think about the ways that Jewish life could learn important lessons from American life.



For example, Rabbi Kaplan decided that girls and women should have equal access

to Jewish education. At that time, Jewish girls were not taught to read from תּוֹרָה Torah. Rabbi Kaplan had four daughters and he taught them all to read עִבְרִית Hebrew. When Rabbi Kaplan's oldest daughter Judith turned 12, he brought her to synagogue and she became בַּת מִצְוָה Bat Mitzvah — the first in North American history!



Rabbi Kaplan learned from American life that girls and women should have equal rights and that value became an important part of Reconstructionist Judaism.

Living in Two Civilizations: Queen Esther

It was not only when Jewish people came to live in North America that they started to experience the idea of living in two civilizations. There have been stories throughout Jewish history of people living in two civilizations at the same time.

One famous example is Queen Esther, who lived in Persia. We celebrate Queen Esther's heroism at פּוּרִים Purim. What do you remember about the פּוּרִים Purim story?

There are some details in the story that show us that it was not always easy for Queen Esther to feel comfortable being

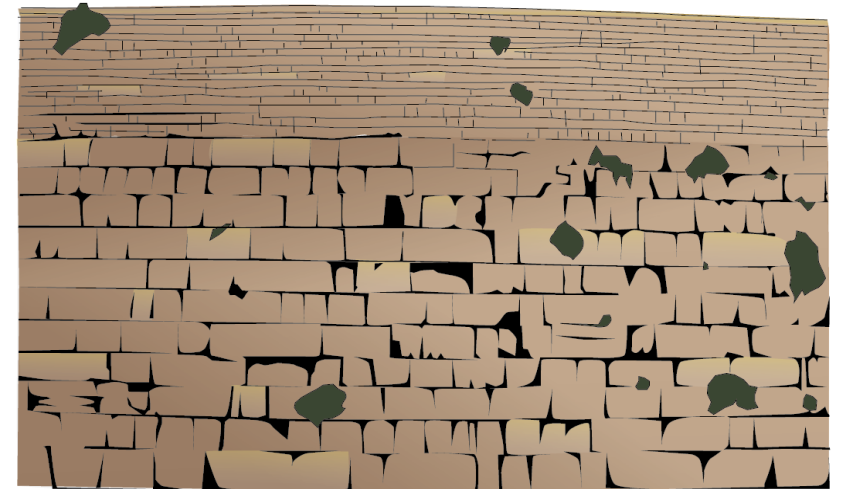
both Jewish and Persian. See if you can answer the following questions:

- Why doesn't she tell the king that she is Jewish when she is selected to be queen?
- Why is it so difficult for her to reveal that she is Jewish to the king?
- What do you think Esther's story tells us about the challenges of living in two civilizations?
- Is it sometimes hard for you to share the Jewish part of you?
- Have you ever been in settings or places where you did not share that you are Jewish?
- If so, how did that feel?
- If not, can you imagine how it would feel to be uncomfortable sharing that you are Jewish?

More than Two Civilizations

When Rabbi Kaplan introduced the idea of "living in two civilizations," he gave us an interesting way to help us understand being Jewish in North America.

Today, you and your family may come from *more* than two civilizations. For example, someone in your family may not be Jewish and so your family may celebrate non-Jewish holidays and traditions.



Do you consider yourself to be a Jewish American or an American Jew?

What is the difference between these two ways of describing yourself?

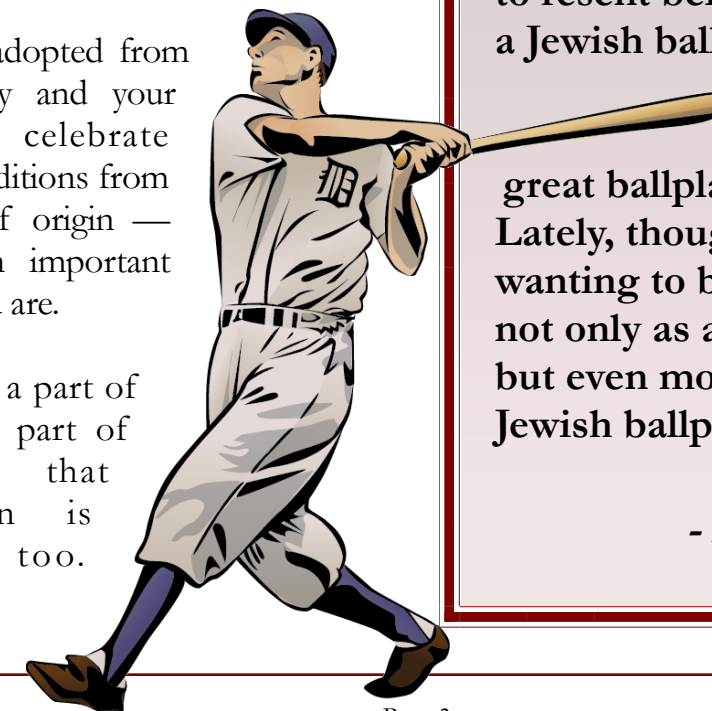
What other "civilizations" make up a part of you?



That is an important part of who you are and those traditions, customs and values may inform your identity.

You might be adopted from another country and your family may celebrate holidays and traditions from your country of origin — and that is an important part of who you are.

Being Jewish is a part of you and being part of the country that you live in is important, too.



"When I was playing, I used to resent being singled out as a Jewish ballplayer... I wanted to be known as a great ballplayer, period... Lately, though, I find myself wanting to be remembered not only as a great ballplayer, but even more as a great Jewish ballplayer."

- Hank Greenberg