A Place of God

I had my Bat Mitzvah when I was 13 years old. A Bat Mitzvah ceremony was supposed to be a great event in a young girl's life, where she became a woman to her congregation and to the eyes of God. Before a collection of people I'd been praying with for a good eight or nine years, I recited the chants I'd spent months before learning, spoke at length of the passage I'd been given to study from the Torah, and made a face from tasting wine for the first time that I still haven't lived down. I remember feeling accomplished, feeling the pride from my parents when they looked at me and when they spoke, and the sense of welcoming from the congregation.

I don't remember feeling God's presence.

My relationship with religion has always been this way. I was raised in a Jewish household, and while we were far from an Orthodox home, my parents still felt it was important for my sister and I to know where our families came from, and the beliefs they held even when they were persecuted for them. I'm proud of my heritage, and I do care about their beliefs and the stories they passed down. I could probably tell you a fairly accurate version of the most common Jewish stories, the origins of our holidays, and why you're supposed to wear a hat (yamaka) inside. I have a relationship with Jewish culture, and what it means to me, and all of that comes easily. Spirituality is much more difficult.

Growing up, I was taught that God was ever-present, omnipotent, and you could "feel his presence" if you were open to it. I don't remember who taught me that last part; it might have just been a lesson I took from hearing other people talking about it. Perhaps it was just that I was young, and literal-minded because of my Asperger's, but I always interpreted that to involve an actual sensation or emotion. Standing in synagogue, looking at the book in my hands and reciting

words I did not understand, I never felt anything other than the presence of other people, and it always bothered me at least a little. I had to be doing something wrong.

The closest I ever came to feeling His existence was when I questioned it, and it was a heavy feeling in my chest that came only in times of loss and confusion. It seemed I had to be close to death to feel close to God. Otherwise, I tucked the doubt into the back of my mind and focused on other aspects of my life, my grades, my family. I eventually learned that everyone experienced spirituality differently, and I did not need to necessarily worry that I never had a "spiritual" moment.

While I did not have a deep sense of spirit, I did have one of culture, and the importance of my peoples' history. The history of the Jewish people was always one I held a deep interest in, from the stories told by the Torah to the historical accounts of important Jewish people and their accomplishments and contributions to history. I would tune out of lessons regarding the Jewish alphabet or the importance of certain prayers, but paid rapt attention to stories and history lessons; these were concrete, something I could hold onto and make into something tangible in my mind. I internally celebrated Jewish victories as I outwardly did the holidays (or at least the ones I understood), and the tragedies of the Jewish people I felt deeply and personally. As was the case with many Jewish people, none held me so personally as the Holocaust.

I learned about the Holocaust at a very young age, I think as early as six or seven. At first it was just numbers; a terrible event in which that immortal number of six million Jewish people were locked away and killed by Germany. As I grew older, my understanding grew deeper and more expansive. I learned about it in my actual classes outside of Sunday school, saw short films and photos, read personal accounts of the horrors that people endured in the concentration camps. I can't remember what it was exactly, but at one point I had to put a book down because

the stories had brought me to tears of fright and despair. I kept coming back to it as I aged, doing projects on it in middle school and essays in high school, trying to grapple with the sheer inhumanity of the whole inhuman massacre. I could not bring myself to understand how it could happen, and I still don't understand. I'm not certain I want to truly understand.

Reading these stories, these accounts, was never about spirituality to me. Judaism was as much a heritage as it was a religion to me; I cared about the people being persecuted for living, not for the God they believed in. I could think of nothing more Godless and unholy as the willful massacre of other human beings, slaughtered en masse by a wicked regime.

I never really let go of my struggle with understanding the Holocaust, even if I didn't think about it most days of the year. However one day, on vacation with my mom, I found myself facing it unexpectedly. We were in D.C. after my mom had dropped my sister off for a college program, and we were staying for three more days before heading home. On the last day, after visiting a number of others, we went to the Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The museum itself is built, fittingly enough, like a prison. We stood in a long, tight line to the elevator leading to the main exhibit; visits had to be scheduled, and I remember holding my ticket a little too tightly, feeling a knot in my throat as I looked at the dark gray bricks surrounding us. It wasn't the first Holocaust museum I'd been to, but it was one of the most well-known, and I didn't know what to expect.

As a large group was shuffled into the elevator, we were handed booklets containing profiles of people; actual Holocaust victims, their life stories before the war, and where they went. I received one of a young teenage girl, and I can't remember if it said she died in the camps. I remember seeing her photo and feeling my chest sink with the knowledge that, escaped or not, she had to be dead by this point.

The museum itself was quiet, crowded, and almost suffocating. The place was packed and the line moved slowly, people stopping to read and look at everything, myself included. Old uniforms, propaganda, torture devices were on display; plaques detailed cries for help that went denied, how people were trapped and had nowhere to go. Towards the end of one floor was a scale model of the gas chambers, and the next room was filled with shoes collected from the camps, all that remained of the victims. The smell of burnt rubber nearly put me into a coughing fit, and I had to leave quickly from how strong it was.

I moved through the museum in a sort of quiet trance; I took everything in, but I could feel myself keeping my mind at arm's length from it all, trying not to absorb it immediately lest I cry from the shock. I made it to what I thought was the end in a mood of somber, heavy calm, until I realized there was one room left.

It was a memorial. Three walls of candles in a circular room, dedicated to the three major death camps, and visitors could go up and light the candles in memory. I lit one on all three walls, and stood there in relative quiet, trying to absorb it all. It didn't feel like enough; I felt like these people deserved more, somehow, although I wasn't sure what I could give. My mom told me she'd be outside when I told her I wanted to stay a little longer. I stood there, thinking about the candles, the people, what they died for. I wanted to do something, say something. I wanted to pray for them, but by that point I hadn't prayed in synagogue for years; not since I was thirteen.

I eventually pulled out my phone and looked up the Mourner's Kaddish.

Jewish prayers have a certain rhythm to them, not quite like a song so much as just a pattern of emphasis. I remembered how to say it, but not the words; and finding the prayer, I found I could no longer read the Hebrew. I instead had to scroll down to the English alphabet

phonetic spelling, and quietly recited the syllables, stumbling and having to start over at least twice. When I finished, I left to find my mom.

I bought a pair of handmade ceremony candles from the gift shop, and the rest of the day was spent packing to go home. Most of the visit only lingered for about a week or so before fading into a normal memory; that moment alone, however, stayed with me. While saying the prayer, I found myself disappointed; disappointed this tragedy had happened, disappointed that I couldn't remember the prayer, and disappointed that I couldn't even read my people's language. But standing there, trying not to cry as I said words that meant everything in one language and a different everything in my voice, I still knew that the Jewish people, as a legacy, had somehow survived, and my family was still here. I couldn't say the Kaddish correctly, but I was here, and I was trying to say it, and for what it was it was enough.

It was no great revelation, and it wasn't a sensation or a light or anything that had been described to me in my life. But somehow, in this place with the heaviness of death weighing down on me and my own fractured prayer, I felt something that might have been God's presence.