

Hed: What It Means to Never Feel “Enough” of Who You Are

Subhed: How dancing in the kitchen and sitting in silence shaped my understanding of identity.

By Sofia Marcus



My mom and I visiting Puerto Rico in 2019 – for the first time since I was 1 year old.

“You can’t be both,” a boy in my fourth-grade classroom said, after I told him I was Puerto Rican and Jewish.

My classmates laughed. So, I laughed too, wanting to fit in. But inside, I felt shaken. What if he was right? I didn’t speak Spanish well. I didn’t go to synagogue. I had no idea where I fit, but I knew I wanted to belong somewhere.

I wasn’t exactly raised in a Jewish household, but my father was born and raised Jewish. Until I was about 11, we celebrated Hanukkah and other holidays. It was a quiet kind of observance as my dad’s relationship with Judaism was complicated.

Then, one day, we simply stopped. No more candles. No more prayers. And slowly, I let go of that part of myself.

When I asked him why, he told me, “I’m not very religious, and probably not having family around – other than you – made it less important to celebrate.”

That answer stuck with me. It wasn't rejection – it was distance.

According to a March 2025 [Pew Research Center report](#), about a quarter of American adults who were raised Jewish no longer identify as such. Many now identify as atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular.” I'm not alone – identity is messy for a lot of people.

As my connection to Judaism faded, I leaned more into my Puerto Rican identity. Maybe it was the warmth of the culture or how easily I found pride in it. Being Puerto Rican felt loud, alive and proud. Being Jewish felt quiet, complicated and like something I didn't fit into anymore.

My mother made sure I felt connected to our Puerto Rican roots. Still, I sometimes wondered: *Am I Puerto Rican enough?* I didn't speak Spanish, my skin was pale, and I'd only been to the island twice. Even what felt familiar could feel distant.

Still, my mother never let that distance define our traditions. In our home, Christmas was never just one day – it was a season filled with music, family, and food. We celebrated [Three Kings Day](#), leaving out hay for camels and filling the kitchen with the smell of [arroz con gandules](#) and [pernil](#).

One of my favorite memories is dancing in the kitchen with my mother as she blasted music. I also remember cooking with my grandfather, stirring pots while learning more than just recipes.

“You cooking with your grandfather in our kitchen – I'll never forget that,” my mother reminisced. “I'd put merengue music on and pick you up and dance.”

Those memories grounded me, even as I drifted away from another piece of myself.

The [2020 U.S. Census](#) shows the number of multiracial Americans grew from 9 million in 2010 to nearly 34 million in 2020. Among Hispanic and Latino individuals, those reporting more than one race rose from 3 million to over 20 million.

To some, that's just data. To me, it's proof that many people live in the in-between, like I always felt I did.

It wasn't until college that I started to rethink identity. That fourth-grade comment still lingered, but I didn't want it to define me.

Senior year, my roommate invited me to a Jewish student event. I hesitated, unsure if I belonged. But something about it felt familiar – warm, even.

I didn't talk much during the event, but I didn't feel out of place either.

Even as I sat there, part of me kept waiting for someone to ask, "Are you really Jewish?" No one did. They welcomed me with open arms, despite me not knowing every prayer. That surprised me. For the first time in years, I let myself wonder: *Could I really be both?*

Looking back, I realize I never had to choose. My mother never made me feel like I did.

When I asked her what it was like raising a daughter who was both, she smiled and said, "It was the best of both worlds."

Even though my dad stepped back from religion, he still sees me as someone shaped by both sides.

"You have become a good, compassionate person," he said. "That is more about knowing who you are than being Jewish."

Now, when I speak broken, Duolingo-influenced Spanish, cook arroz con gandules, or talk about Puerto Rico with my mom, she lights up.

"It makes me so proud that you share that love for the island with me," she told me.

For years, I believed I had to pick a side. But that boy in the fourth grade was totally wrong.

I can be both.

I am both.

Source List

1. Enid Widdis (my mom), interviewed over the phone, 561-573-8532
2. Scott Marcus (my dad), interviewed over the phone, 561-838-3187
3. Pew Research Center Report:
<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/03/26/religious-switching-into-and-out-of-judaism/>
4. Three Kings Day: <https://miami.momcollective.com/holidays-in-miami/three-kings-day-puerto-rican-traditions-and-how-to-celebrate-with-the-kids/>
5. Arroz Con Gandules: <https://www.delishdlites.com/occasion/holiday-recipes/arroz-con-gandules-puerto-rican-rice-with-pigeon-peas-recipe/>
6. Pernil: <https://themom100.com/recipe/pernil/>
7. U.S. Census Report: <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/08/improved-race-ethnicity-measures-reveal-united-states-population-much-more-multiracial.html#:~:text=to%20self%2Didentify,-.Multiracial%20Population,people%2C%20a%20230%25%20change>.