

I approach most Jewish holidays with dread. Am I going to make some terrible mistake? Like drop the etrog? Or forget something on the Seder plate? Or, not show up in Temple on the most important day of the year – which is when? Festivals, especially big ones, like Passover are when being Jewish is scariest for me. I know how to put up a Christmas tree and make a bunny cake for Easter because I watched my Christian mother stir the batter and string the lights. But I can easily forget the opening words of the Amidah. And, as for the etrog, is that the fruit thing, the one that looks like a lemon but isn't?

When I finally made the jump and converted, I found that one does not become Jewish overnight. It takes years and years, even generations, although I did not realize this at first. After my conversion mikvah, I felt a thrill of exhilaration. At last, I was finally legitimately, truly, wholly Jewish. The rabbis on the bet din had given me a large certificate that said so. Rabbi Geller made me go up to the Bima and give a talk. I had arrived.

But very soon the cracks in my new Jewish life began to appear. When Passover drew near, I began to worry. I listened as people in Temple talked about their plans to gather with families and friends. Some were going to Maine. Others to New Jersey. Would anyone invite us to their home? Or should I invite people to mine? The problem was that if I invited real Jews to my house, they would expect a real Seder, and I was not sure what to cook or how to lead us through a Haggadah.

I decided to take the plunge. I invited everyone I could think of and then began many days of hard labor. My Korean daughter-in-law and I found a recipe for brisket from a Jewish web site. I raced to Shaws and stared at the meat. I am a vegetarian and so all the cuts of meat seemed the same to me. There was no one to help me, and so I chose something that looked like the picture we had seen online: a big, very red chunk of meat.

When the big day came, I carefully followed the instructions for making Traditional Jewish Brisket, left the meat in a pot to simmer and turned my attention to arranging the Seder plate. I had memorized the symbolic meaning of each item in my conversion class with Rabbi Geller, but symbolism is very different from the real thing. I stared at the diagram in my Jewish text book and carefully placed the

egg next to the bone and the parsley next to the salt water. I ground up apples and walnuts. I laid out the Haggadah I had bought at the Israel Book Store. By the time my guests arrived, I was so nervous I swore I would never do this again. We stumbled through our prayers. I tried to lead things as best I could, but I was so terrified we would leave out something crucial that we read every single word of a very long haggadah. People did not leave my house until the early morning hours.

When at last the evening was over, one exhausted guest paused at the door, “What a creative idea,” she said.

“What?” I asked.

“To serve corned beef for Passover!” she exclaimed.

Suddenly, I felt nostalgic for Christianity. Hiding Easter eggs had been easier than this.

Fortunately, after that first year, friends have included me in their celebrations and I always watch with wonder at the ease they seem to have with tradition. However, I have also begun to notice that even if you are not a convert, Jewish ritual can be a troublesome issue. I have one friend who sneaks a chocolate chip muffin every single day of Passover. Another is always trying to find ways to be more observant. For me, a turning point came when I noticed that even Rabbi Geller would skip entire pages of the Haggadah during our community Seders.

Slowly, I am beginning to learn that we each have to shape our own relationship to traditions, whether we were born Jewish, or chose Judaism. I hope I don't drop that etrog next fall, but if I do, I think it will be ok.