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RS 301

Professor Hart

30 April, 2020

Oral History: Lisa Hoffman

Religious studies is a subject that is largely centered around culture, and it continues to evolve each day. To fully understand a religion, it is important to have conversations with members of the community. I was fortunate to have a conversation with Lisa Hoffman, a Jewish woman from Los Angeles, California, and once she arrived in Arcata, she became a part of the Temple Beth El community of practice.

Our conversation began with talk of life and religion before the pandemic hit when Lisa was still living in Los Angeles. In 2019, Lisa would celebrate Shabbat once or twice a month with friends. Her and her community would take turns hosting Shabbat in their homes, creating a strong sense of community. However, once the pandemic hit in early 2020, these practices involving community came to a halt, as she lived in an urban center where the virus could easily be transmitted. The tradition of gathering with members of the community for Shabbat was stolen from Lisa. She describes how celebrating Shabbat by herself would feel silly, as it would just be a celebration for one. She found the lack of community during the pandemic demoralized her religiously.

Like many during the pandemic, Lisa had difficulty finding motivation to seek out religious community. She also mentions how she lost her religious focus during the chaos of early 2020. However, she eventually adapted to zoom interactions after moving to Arcata. Sometimes she celebrates Shabbat over zoom with her Jewish friends from Los Angeles. She goes on to highlight how this is not preferable, but her faith is strong enough to motivate her to use these less than perfect resources. However, she mentions what a shock it was to have to change the way she performed traditions she's known and practiced for 5 decades.

From this point on, the conversation shifted gears from practicing religion during the pandemic to the intricacies of Judaism. She mentioned a local Orthodox community church that she occasionally attends service at, however, she highlights how, as a Reformed Jewish person, her ideals do not align with the many guidelines upheld by Orthodox Judaism. She brings up an anecdote from her interactions with Orthodox Jewish people during her travels to Israel. While she was there, food and rocks were thrown at her because she was not dressed modest enough.

Later in the conversation, Lisa brought up her personal experiences in the lens of her religious beliefs. She struggles with her identity as a Jewish woman. She speaks of considering Orthodox Judaism, and when she talked to her parents about this, she was met with a list of ways in which she does not or cannot follow Orthodox practices: she has tattoos, she does not keep kosher, she was adopted into a Jewish family and her birth mother is not Jewish, and as a divorced woman she would need to get a proper Orthodox divorce referred to as Gett. Gett is Jewish divorce where the divorce papers must be presented by the man. All these obstacles between her and Orthodox Judaism led her to ask herself, "Am I Jewish enough?"

Also, Lisa works with the Blue Lake Rancheria Tribal Agency. This experience has helped her understand local tribal culture, and she has found many similarities between Jewish and tribal culture. One similarity is the emphasis on intergenerational relationships. In Indigenous culture extended kin often care for the children, and in Jewish culture it is important to involve them in your life and make them feel important through acts such as inviting them to Shabbat. There is also a tradition in both cultures of passing stories orally through many generations. The two cultures also value light and charity. Indigenous culture encourages one to avoid thinking selfishly, instead they should put the community ahead of their own needs. In turn, performing acts of kindness for your community is an important virtue of Judaism.

Overall, I learned a lot about Jewish culture that I would not have learned without speaking with Lisa Hoffman. She also told me about the Jewish tribes that are still thriving in

Africa in 2021. She also opened my eyes to what is like to believe in a minority religion in the United States, especially Arcata. She mentioned around Hanukkah she went to CVS to ask for a Menorah and they were not even aware of what a Menorah is. This anecdote shows how limited the availability of Jewish Resources are. This deterred Lisa that much more during quarantine when she was already having a hard time finding motivation. However, her strong connection to Judaism and spiritualism ultimately led her to seek out Jewish community. In conclusion, it was great to have this conversation with Lisa, as I found this conversation to be extremely informative and interesting, and it was great to have this conversation with Lisa.