

# Journal Entries

## “Essential Judaism” at BSS

### ***General Topics***

- Why have you decided to take the *Introduction to Judaism* class?
- What are some of your concerns or expectations? What are you looking forward to?
- During this class you are encouraged to try new "Jewish experiences." Be aware of the feelings that arise from these experiences and record the experience and your feelings.
- Talk to members of your family and, if you are taking this class with a partner, talk with your partner's family. Find out more about your religious heritage. What does this family religious heritage mean to you? If applicable, what does family religious heritage mean to your partner?

### ***Shabbat***

- Make two lists in your journal - one list of those things in your life that are ordinary and another list of those things that are extraordinary. What is it that makes the difference between the two?
- If you could find an island in time - a day free from outside obligation - describe what you would do with it.
- What is holiness? How does an object or an experience become sacred or holy? How does holiness manifest itself in your life?
- Try incorporating one or more aspects of Shabbat into your life from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. Describe how it felt to experience Shabbat and some of its traditions (e.g., candle lighting, Kiddush prayers, worship services, havdallah, no TV, no cooking, etc.)
- Why might it be important for us to set aside sacred time - a time when we stop "creating" and appreciate creation? How can doing this enrich our lives?

### ***Family Relationships***

- If you are taking this course with a partner, has it influenced your relationship? If so, how?
- If you decide to become more involved in Jewish life, how will this affect your relationships with your family members? What might you need from them? What might they need from you?

### ***Jewish History***

- As you were growing up, what factors in contemporary Jewish history may have shaped your thinking about Judaism and Jews?
- What key factors do you feel are shaping Jewish history in the 21st century? What do you see for the future of the Jewish people?

### ***Holidays: Winter***

- *Chanukah* (Festival of Lights): After studying the history and rituals of Chanukah, what do you consider its central message?
- *Chanukah*: What are your childhood memories of the December holidays? How can you make meaningful Jewish holiday celebrations in your home?
- *Tu B'Shevat* (Birthday of Trees): What is your own relationship to the natural world? What do you see as the connection between God and nature?
- *Purim* (The Feast of Esther): Have you experienced or witnessed anti-Semitism? Have you experienced a time when you wanted to hide your identity? What risks might you be willing to take in the face of discrimination or persecution?

### ***Holidays: Spring***

- *Pesach* (Passover): If possible, experience a Seder and record your feelings. What moments were meaningful for you? What moments felt awkward?
- *Pesach*: What kinds of experiences have you had where you saw yourself as moving from *enslavement to freedom*?
- *Pesach*: Make an effort to eat only unleavened foods if you don't already do this. How did it feel? What connections can you make to this ritual observance?
- *Yom Hashoah* (Holocaust Remembrance Day): At the moment of conversion, one promises to "cast one's lot with the Jewish people." What are the implications of this statement? Given what you know about the history of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, why would a person choose to become Jewish? Why would a Jew choose to remain Jewish?
- *Yom Ha'atzmaut* (Israel Independence Day): What does Israel mean to you? What do you see as the connection between Israel and Jewish who lived elsewhere in the world?

### ***Holidays: Summer***

- *Shavuot* (Feast of Weeks): It is a tradition to study the Book of Ruth on Shavuot. Read this short biblical text. What might have been some of the issues that Ruth faced in deciding to go with Naomi? Put yourself in her place. How would you feel? What might you be thinking about?
- *Shavuot*: Jews have been referred to as "the people of the Book." Why do you think Torah is central to the Jewish people? From your exposure to Torah, do you think it is still relevant to our lives today?
- *Tisha B'av* (Day of Mourning): What do you think is the purpose of communal mourning and fasting as a Jewish ritual practice? Do you think it's important to recall periods of pain and exile for the Jewish people?

### ***Holidays: Fall***

- *Rosh Hashanah* (the Jewish New Year) & *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement): Reflect on the past year...What did you do that you feel was meaningful? What would you change? What is one thing you could do to make the coming year more special?
- *Rosh Hashanah* & *Yom Kippur*: According to Jewish tradition this is the period in which one does *teshuva* (repentance). Through *teshuva* we try to be our best selves. In which areas can you see yourself doing *teshuva*?
- *Sukkot* (The Festival of Booths): Participate in building a sukkah (booth, hut) or share a meal in a sukkah. What memories do you think this holiday could have for adults and children who fully celebrate it?
- *Simchat Torah* (Rejoicing in the Torah): Participate in a Simchat Torah celebration in a synagogue. Describe your experience and how you felt about your contact with the Torah scrolls.

### ***Life Cycle: Birth to Adult***

- The covenant of circumcision (*brit milah*) for a male child is a central and vital commandment. Its origin is the ancient Biblical ritual that marked the covenant between God, Abraham and Abraham's descendants. Why do you think this ritual has survived? How does this birth ceremony compare to birth ceremonies in other traditions?
- Observe a baby naming in a synagogue on Shabbat. What rituals were incorporated into this event? What feelings did this ceremony raise for you?
- Attend a Bar or Bat Mitzvah in synagogue on Shabbat morning. What were your impressions regarding this rite of passage into Jewish adulthood? How does it compare to rites of passage in other religious traditions?

### ***Life Cycle: Marriage***

- What makes a house a Jewish home? In what ways might you create a Jewish home?
- "*Kiddushin*" is the Hebrew word for marriage. It means "to set apart and make sacred" and refers to holiness through separation from other people. What do you think is "sacred" about marriage?

### ***Life Cycle: Death & Dying***

- In what ways do you imagine that the Jewish traditions of burial and grieving help an individual or family move through their time of loss and begin the process of healing?
- How do the traditions of sitting *shiva* (seven) and observing *yartzeit* (anniversary of the death) compare to rituals in other traditions?

### ***Life Cycle: Conversion***

- What do you think might be the most challenging aspects of changing one's religious identity as an adult?
- For those anticipating conversion for yourself or your partner:
  - What would you like those close to you to know about the process?
  - What supports would be helpful?
  - What excites you about it?

### ***Prayer***

- Prayer is a way in which we draw close to God and to community. It is a way of thanking God for the beauty in our lives, a way to praise God and a way to ask for God's help. One can pray spontaneously or within the context of a service. Describe a time when you experienced the power of prayer.
- What are you thankful for?
- What gives you a feeling of awe?

### ***Shabbat Experience***

- Describe your feelings as you participated in the Shabbat service. What made this a meaningful experience for you? What would have enhanced or improved this experience?

### ***Jewish Values***

- Reaching out to others, such as visiting the sick, providing food/clothing for those in need, or donating money and time to organizations, we fulfill the Jewish obligation to make the world a better place. Describe ways in which you have worked to make the world a better place in the past. What might you do in the future?