Jacobs Story Essay, Research Paper

JACOB’S STORY Jacob, who does not want his last name used, grew up the Jewish section of Montevideo, the capital of Uruguay. Although it was the “Jewish section,” there were few synagogues and most Jews were not religious. Jacob’s father was one of those people that were not very religious, although the family kept the high holidays like Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. Growing up in such an environment, Jacob knew he was a Jew but that designation meant little to him. For his first five years of schooling, he went to a Jewish school where he learned Jewish history, Yiddish, the Hebrew alphabet and biblical studies. He had knowledge of, but not a passion for Judaism. Although his parents were not religious, the bar-mitzvah was a practice expected to occur. When Jacob turned thirteen, he had his bar-mitzvah, “the rite of passage where a Jewish boy becomes a Jewish man. A man becomes responsible for his actions,” Jacob explained. From then on, he was taught, God would hold him accountable for his own actions. He found studying for his bar-mitzvah “more a hassle than anything else.” But after his bar-mitzvah he found great joy from the experience as he felt himself more a part of the Judaism than before. His newly found appreciation heightened his sense of Judaism and he found a dark side to his epiphany; he sensed in Montevideo a latent anti-Semitism. “There were certain people who were not too fond of Jewish people, just because they were Jewish,” Jacob said. “I heard a lot of racial slurs, but there was little violence against Jewish people.” He heard anti-Semitic remarks at the public school he attended from Grade six onward. Although the remarks were not made directly to him, he heard them and felt the pervasive anti-Semitism in the larger community. “It bothered me a lot.” As Jacob became older he wanted to emigrate to Israel. His father’s life had a large influence on this decision. Jacob’s father was a soldier in the Polish army at the onset of the Second World War, and after the Polish army was defeated, he fought alongside the Russian army. For his bravery in his fight against Nazi Germany, his father was awarded the Medal of Honor and a certificate from Russia, both of which he proudly showed to any friend who visited. Jacob was always aware of what his father had done though it was not until later that he gave great thought to it. “Many people believe that six million Jews died so that the Jewish people could get a nation of their own,” said Jacob. “And I feel my father was a part of the Jewish people attaining their own nation of Israel.” Although Jacob did not know what these honors meant as a child, he is today tremendously proud of what his father has accomplished. When Jacob turned nineteen he informed his parents he would be moving to Israel, to be a part of what his father, indirectly, made possible. He told his parents in November and moved to Israel by May. His parents were disappointed to see their son leave and wondered whether or not he was mature enough to make such a decision at such a young age. “They certainly had their doubts about me leaving,” he said. “I didn’t.” Jacob believed strongly in the Zionist movement, a movement that believed that all Jews in the world should live in Israel. “I desired to be in Israel to be with my fellow Jews, in a Jewish nation.” He went on to say, “it felt right to me that the Jewish people should have a nation of their own.” As much as he liked Montevideo, Israel, not Uruguay, was his homeland. His parents gave him some money and wished him well, directing him to a Jewish agency in Montevideo. The agency set him up with a free boat ride to Israel, as it had for many Jews who wanted to emigrate to the homeland of their people. He was granted citizenship upon immigration as all Jews are who come to Israel. He lived on Kibbutz Palmachim near Be’ersheva. Jacob describes the kibbutz as “a form of communal living where a group of individuals share the tasks of everyday living.” The men worked in the fields or produced things with their hands. The kibbutz was self-sufficient, everything was shared and any money that was made was used to support the kibbutz. “The kibbutz was a close-knit community, almost family. There was no financial gain for the individual.” Jacob went to the Ulpan center in the kibbutz. The Ulpan center was a place where people could learn Hebrew for four hours a day and later work for four hours. Just a few weeks after his arrival in Israel, he met his future wife, Elisheva, in the kibbutz. She helped him learn Hebrew and more about Judaism, expanding on the meager knowledge he came to Israel with. “I was eager to learn more and more,” he said. But he was still not a devoutly religious person, although he continued to observe the holidays. Six months later they got married. He said, “I felt excited and fortunate to get married in the nation of my people and to a Jewish woman.” Marrying a Jewish woman meant that his children would be Jewish, in accordance with Jewish tradition. In Judaism, the mother’s religion determines the child’s religion. Soon after being married, Jacob and Elisheva left the kibbutz and moved to Arad, a small city in Israel. His life was markedly different from the one in Uruguay. They celebrated every holiday and family came over often (his family from Montevideo later joined him in Israel). The special family gatherings was something he lacked in his childhood home.

A few years later, his first son was born. Although Jacob admits it may seem strange, “I was proud of my son’s circumcision.” He continued, “the circumcision is what makes a boy Jewish. My son, sons, would be raised in a more traditional home and learn more about religion than I did as a child.” Another example of the importance of family and celebration was demonstrated by the large traditional party with family, friends and food. But he still did not regard himself as religious and did not attend a synagogue regularly. Three years later he had another son and had those feelings again. But this time he was even happier as his two sisters and parents moved to Israel from Uruguay. “It felt so right to me that me and my family lived in Israel.” With his family living closer, family gatherings gained further significance, as both his and his wife’s family spent holidays together. “It is about being together with family and friends and sharing the beauty of the holiday,” he said. Five years after his parents’ arrival in Israel, his father passed away. Faithful to his religion, he and his family observed the Shiva tradition. The Shiva is a one week mourning of the passing of the dead where family stays in the home of the deceased, covers the mirrors, sits close to the ground (not using cushions or pillows to decrease the comfort) and pray thrice daily. Two days before the end of the Shiva, Jacob had a dream which profoundly changed his life. He envisioned his father coming off a bus and Jacob asked what he was doing there. His father said “I just came to see if you were okay–you, your wife and your children.” To Jacob though, it was more than a dream as “I felt my father touch me. It had to be more than a dream.” Jacob said with a serious tone, from this time he “strongly believed in the after life of the Jewish soul.” The occasion is cited by Jacob as an epiphany, as the moment he became devoutly religious. Jacob moved to Canada in his mid-30’s and he would not say what led to his immigration to this country. He came directly to Toronto. He said nothing of religious significance happened in his life for nearly a decade until a childhood friend from Montevideo who now lived in San Francisco visited. His friend was now an Orthodox Jew who followed the Sabbath, kept kosher, and faithfully practiced all the laws of Judaism. For some reason, and Jacob cannot explain why, his friend influenced him to follow even more faithfully his religion. He began to attend synagogue service regularly, something he had never done before. He kept the Sabbath by refraining from any type of work on that day; he just spent time with his family. He also began attending Bible lectures and began wearing the Tallith, a shawl used during prayer. He also prayed twice daily in accordance to the laws of Judaism, once in the morning and again in the evening. He was extremely proud when his sons had their bar-mitzvah when they became thirteen, becoming Jewish men in accordance with the religion. Fully understanding the religious significance, Jacob felt his own spiritual growth through his sons’ celebration and transition. He remembers holding a huge party where family and friends came and shared in the celebration. He was happy his sons had their faith and continued the family’s Jewish heritage. He was happy they understood the significance of the bar-mitzvah, and he attempted to explain to his sons’ the importance of the Bar- mitzvah, so it may possibly have the same affect on them has it had on him as a child. This intense feeling of religiosity “lasted for quite some time.” But they came to an end about ten years later when his mother became ill which was later found to be ovarian cancer. He was about to visit his mother in Israel but two days before he was scheduled to fly to Israel, his mother died. At about the same time, the intifadah arose in Israel and he vividly remembers a news-story of a specific bombing,; a number of children were killed by a bomb planted on a bus. He began to question God’s existence. He thought, “How could God allow these things to happen. Why couldn’t I be allowed to see my dying mother. Why did God allow innocent, young children to die.” He no longer practices Jewish traditions as intensely, goes to the synagogue or prays regularly. He still observes high holidays and believes in God, although much less devoutly. He never “recovered” from those tragic events less than a decade ago.Jacob no longer considers himself a religious person although he does consider himself a Jewish person. Jacob said, “I may not be as religious as I once was, but I recognize Judaism has had an enormous effect on my life. From the way I raised my kids, to the way I dealt with the passing of my parents, Judaism has assisted me in the tough times, and elevated me in times of Joy, it truly has been there every step of the way.”