

Upon first learning about the Transformation Contest, my life was vastly different. I was still in my first long term relationship and very much in love. Now, my heart is in the process of healing and coping with the loss of the relationship and the world it opened my eyes to.

My former partner and I came from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Although his relationship to his Israeli Jewish culture was stronger than my relationship to my Trinidadian and Islamic culture, we complimented each other just as much as we challenged one another.

During these last two years, rising tensions between Israel and Palestine have bled over into growing animosity between both ethnic groups in other countries and Jews and Muslims as well. The conflict between the two countries oftentimes led us to disagreements on political and militaristic actions and proposed solutions by either side. The personalness he had felt to his Jewish Israeli culture and the connection I had to my Islamic one felt like a diving factor at times. At least, this is what most people think when they learn of our backgrounds. We'd often face questions like "isn't that awkward?" or "how does that work?"

My former partner deeply valued community and its eventual transition into who is a part of your chosen family. This was primarily due to most of his family residing in Israel and no longer being able to spend religious holidays with them such as Sukkot and Passover as the demand of his American life outweighed his family's ability to travel for the holidays. With this, his family had found community within his school friends and their parents. Their chosen family with whom they could their culture and celebrate the holidays with, in a new country away from their family in Israel.

When we started dating, his family welcomed me with open arms. I met them for the first time for Passover dinner as well as his friends and their parents. It was a rather intimidating experience to meet so many important people to him for the first time, at a religious dinner I had yet to understand the significance of.

We sat outside in their backyard underneath a structure made of wood. Between each piece of wood, a white sheet tied them together. The seating area was decorated with paper décor made by his two younger siblings and the top of it was covered by large leaves taken off of trees. The structure was very similar to the one created during Sukkot, which usually occurs around October every year. A long table seated what must have been over 30 people who were eager to eat the food handmade by his parents.

I sat nervously as his parents read off the history of Passover and prayed in Hebrew. My hands shook as we passed around pieces of Challah (*braided bread*), and trays of food whose aromas are forever engrained in my mind. His mother's shitnzel (*thinly fried chicken*), matboucha (*a spicy tomato spread*), hummus (*a dip made with chickpeas*), and Moroccan fish were only a few of my favorite dishes. They were always present at every holiday meal and Shabbat dinner. Shabbat, I had come to learn was usually on Friday and it was such a large feast because the food from Friday was supposed to last all weekend as the time served as an opportunity for rest and reflection for Jews.

For four years, I thought I was simply falling in love with a person. But for four years, I was also learning the ins and outs of Judaism, his family, and his friends. I was falling in love with a culture that wasn't mine. A culture and people that the world told me was against me just because they were Israeli Jews, and I was Muslim. That these two factors would inevitably lead to the end of us. But it was untrue. If anything, it proved to us and the people around us that taking the time to get to know people for who they are and not what they are encourages transformative intercultural experiences. It is the steppingstone into promoting and ensuring an acceptance of other cultures, diversity, understanding, and love.

Although he may no longer be in my life, I have a deep appreciation for the Jewish holidays of Passover, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Hanukkah, and Shabbat. It is these holidays especially because I was able to celebrate them firsthand alongside him and his family. People I grew to love and still love. Despite our cultural differences and at times political ones, I was never turned away. I was invited to learn and understand perspectives and stories other than my own to diversify my perspective rather than limit it.

I have learned about the persecution of Jews throughout history, the resilience embedded within their people, and the hope they all carry within them as they continue to celebrate and invite others to learn their culture.

In a time where I felt angry with the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) for their military campaigns in Gaza, Palestine, I had an opportunity not many people have to speak to people who did serve in the IDF. I learned about Israeli citizens being required to serve, the opportunities they have after their served time, how not every person agrees with how the military has been conducting their operations, and the traumas those who survived must now live with every day.

My time in this relationship wasn't simply about being in love. It taught me empathy I didn't have before. It taught me to be open to cultures and religions that are not my own. It showed me political and social divisions are much bigger and more complex than each of us can understand, but if you open yourself to learning, you are one step closer to understanding.

Despite the heartbreak I feel now, I know the love I have for this culture, this religion, and its people will never leave me. I have forever been changed by the incredible opportunity to experience another culture in such a personal and loving way. It has given me skills not to just transform as a person, but as someone who one day aspires to create an environment of acceptance, diversity, equality, and justice in her future career. Although the relationship was not forever, the experiences it gave me and the memories they have become are. I will undoubtedly carry them with me every day as I continue to explore new cultures and religions knowing it transforms you for the better.