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Sinai Scholars Final Essay

On Jewish Identity

I find myself more than a little surprised even to be writing this paper at the conclusion of the Sinai Scholars course, a feeling I get now mostly because I never thought I would ever have such an experience. I'll get into the reasons later, but the ultimate conclusion is this: that the Sinai Scholars course has given me both theoretical and practical insight into the origins and modern-day implications of Jewish law, with the result that I have developed as much as a person as I have as a Jew.

If you had asked me, say a year ago, if I would have taken a class, more or less equivalent with a standard Princeton seminar, that dealt with Jewish teaching and offered no University credit, I would have, in my kinder moments, been skeptical. The reasons are not those that one would most commonly consider. I don't consider myself a part of that category of Jews on this campus who either a) engages with my Jewish identity regularly, making such external study unnecessary, or b) rejects my heritage entirely. Rather, I thought myself rather comfortable with my Jewish identity, confident in where I stood with respect to Jewish history and culture, and uninterested in any more rigorous analysis of my place in the Jewish tradition.

Enter Rabbi Webb, with whom my first real interaction was a meeting at Frist about Sinai Scholars. Although he allayed whatever fears I had at the time, I went into the course skeptical, as I would have been about any such program, and uneasy that, for the first time in some years, my Judaic complacency might be shaken. Indeed, my complacency was shaken, although, as before, not for the reasons one would usually think. For to me, the value of the Sinai Scholars class lay primarily not in the classes themselves – indeed, I had been exposed to much of the laws and commentary at various points in my life – but rather in their byproduct: the rekindling of my critical interest in my Jewish identity.

The time surrounding the beginning of the course presented a confluence of circumstances that primed me to appreciate the course all the more. My father's mother, who was not Jewish, was in the last stages of her battle with stomach and esophageal cancer, and in fact passed away one week to the day before our first class. In the weeks that followed, I found myself doing what so many do when life presents hardships of one kind or another: by turning to religion. I began celebrating Shabbat at the Center for Jewish Life, something I had not done even once in my first three semesters here. Then began our classes, where we explored a new topic from the Ten Commandments every week.

As I said, though, the effect of the Sinai Scholars class had less to do with the actual content than with its inspiration to me to think Jewishly again. For example, it was the mere fact of discussing the laws of Kashrut that compelled me to become more observant on that level. While my family has never eaten pork, we would occasionally

combine milk and meat or eat shellfish. Now, though, I make efforts to follow the laws more closely, and when I visit home, I try to steer us away from such fare.

I should note here that it is, perhaps, a strange set of considerations that led me to a stricter insertion of Kashrut into my life. Mine is not the belief that, for better or for worse, the law is the law and ipso facto it must be accepted and followed. There are, I suppose, some cases where that kind of faith, for lack of a better word, is the only possible compulsion, but behind Kashrut there are certainly others. The most significant such reason, in my mind, stems from the fact that keeping kosher is one of the most visibly observed mitzvot. In that sense, then, following the laws of Kashrut is as much a symbolic way of identifying oneself as a Jew, and as such, keeping kosher can be a means of promote Jewish continuity. Ultimately, it seems to me not to matter whether or not I keep kosher for the laws' own sake. The fact of doing it is what connects me both to my fellow Jews today and to the long history of the Jewish people. By the same token, while I may not keep kosher for the rest of my life, I can certainly see myself having a kosher home. Again, it would not be as much for myself as for the sake of other Jews and the Jewish tradition; I want my Jewish friends, no matter how observant, to be able to eat at my home.

Besides compelling me to a greater level of Kashrut observance, Sinai Scholars has inspired me to think more generally about why I take part in ritual observance. In the past I never really saw the connection between the commandments themselves and the actions I took to make manifest my adherence to them. Why did I go to Tashlich every year as a child? Why, for that matter, am I Jewish today at all? What are the odds that, given the whole world of religious possibilities, I would choose to hold the same set of

beliefs as my parents and their parents (well, at least my mom's parents) before them? These were questions I never really asked myself as I went through the motions of "being Jewish" in my younger years. Fundamentally, though, if I was to engage in any meaningful way with the material we covered in Sinai Scholars, these were the questions I would have to address.

I won't here get into whether or not I believe in G-d, or whether or not I believe the events recounted in the Torah occurred as they are written; as interesting as debates about such issues might be, they really don't reflect the value, to me, of the Sinai Scholars course. As Rabbi Webb was engaging us in conversation about the week's topic, I was (and Rabbi Webb, I know this might come as something of a surprise to you) not always paying full attention. Rather, in the process of discussing the particulars of any given commandment, I saw a wider opportunity, one that encouraged me to see myself as the heir to thousands of years of meaningful tradition.

It is for this reason, as I've told Rabbi Webb before, that I considered Sinai Scholars to be a sort of Hebrew school for adults; that is, I felt I was being exposed to a variety of information I had seen before, but in this case it was at a time in my life when I was better able to rationally consider it. In that way Sinai Scholars did the job that Hebrew school never could, for it spurred me to think about my Jewishness in a new, more mature way. Along the way, I've become somewhat more observant, but I consider that just a happy byproduct of the internal maturation I've experienced. For that, I thank the Sinai Scholars Foundation and Rabbi Webb; this class really has had a lasting effect on me.