

# Who Am I?

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After almost 16 years of living in the U.S., I received my citizenship. Then I discovered

that when someone asks me who I am, I hesitate, not knowing how to answer. Am I an American Jew, Israeli-American, Israeli-Sephardi... and in what order?

Identity confusion is very common with many immigrants and specifically Israelis. This is regardless of someone's reasons for leaving Israel. Israelis tend to create their own "mini Israel." We work very hard to surround ourselves with Israeli friends who speak the same language, without worrying about the accent or being misunderstood. We listen to Israeli songs, stay up-to-date about the news in Israel, and learn how to cook authentic Israeli recipes.

There are two questions here: Is this enough to strengthen our identity and pass it on to the second

generation born here, who sees itself as American first? Are we ever going to be part of American society and adopt it as our own?

To be able to share my own twist on these questions, I will use my personal story.

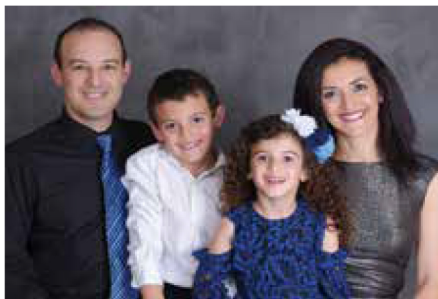
I moved here a year after my father passed away. I was a Hebrew and Judaic studies teacher in Boston with the plan to save some money for one year and travel to South America, my dream trip.

I quickly realized that it is so easy to get lost here if you don't belong to a Jewish community that accepts you the way you are with your heavy accent.

After three years, I moved to Miami to pursue my Master's Degree in Jewish Education and Jewish Studies in English. While working in another Jewish School, I realized that I was about to lose the Israeli in me -- the sense of humor, the warmth, the passion and free-spirit and everything else that distinguishes us from others. So I surrounded myself with

Israeli friends only. It was so easy to celebrate holidays together even though we used different traditions. You learn to accommodate them all. I still thought that I was going back home, to Israel.

Only when I moved to California to be closer to my sister, my only sibling here, then got married to an American Jew, and had my own kids, did I realize that it's time



to admit that my life is here. As an ambassador of Israelis and a Zionist, I have a big responsibility -- to strengthen the connection between Americans and Israelis.

But there was something else that changed in me -- I realized that I took for granted being Jewish and growing up

surrounded by Jewish buzz. Now I have to be the role model for my children and bring all this Jewish pride into my own home - and not just for the High Holidays and Chanukah, but Shabbat, Independence Day, Memorial Day, and more.

When my kids come home from the Hebrew Academy singing the same songs that I grew up with, they have more information and facts about Judaism, but I realize it's not enough. As a family, we decided to get more involved with the local community, Israeli community, and the American community by recruiting the entire family to volunteer at the Israeli American Council Orange County's celebration for Yom Ha-Azma'ut, or taking classes from the Israeli-American Council on how to become a better leader, while my kids are watching me and participating in the class.

Volunteering in the Jewish Israeli communities only helped me see the beauty and the richness of both cultures. My message is this: Israelis, as

long as you live in America, give it a chance. Americans, don't judge us too quickly. We might still have a heavy accent, and we might sometimes be too loud, but we know how to hug, and step up to help when you need us, without the need to schedule a month away. We are decision-makers (Israeli Defense Forces Training -- we are all "commanders").

For my fellow Israelis, open up to the community around you, volunteer, and donate when you can. Google can teach our kids the definition of kindness, but only we can model it. Speak in English when you are around non-Hebrew speakers, be more sensitive to them and don't criticize them because you have to schedule with them in advance for a cup of coffee. It is a good thing: you will never be double-booked this way. And to all the Jewish organizations we have around us, you are the core of keeping us as one nation. Make sure you listen to the Israelis. They want to be part of you. We are one.

