

00:00 Narrator: When I arrived at the kibbutz where I spent my early years, kibbutz Ein Dor, the first thing I noticed was a luscious pomegranate tree with ripe juicy fruit hanging off almost every branch. That was my first moment of connection upon returning to Israel, the country where my dad was born and where my family of birth and my own family and kids spent their formative years. I now live in Souk, British Columbia on Vancouver Island, where I can count almost every Jewish person on both hands. There is no synagogue, no Jewish community centre, no kosher for Passover section in the grocery store. It might sound silly that I'm going to be interviewing myself, but it's the best way I can think of to ask myself some fundamental questions about my religion of birth, Judaism, and also to get an idea of how rural Jews like me keep the faith.

01:08 Rebecca Levant: Noches Noches

01:37 Narrator/Interviewer: That was my mother singing. She was born in Regina, Saskatchewan, a first generation Jewish girl, the daughter of parents from Russia and Spain, escaping the horrors of war by moving to Canada. Here she sings in Ladino, the language of Spanish Jews. Here I go interviewing myself. So Jessica, tell me, what were your early years like?

02:05 Jessica: Well, I don't have a great memory for my past history so well. My first memory is actually kindergarten in Canada. But after being born in Montreal, we were whisked off to Israel, where my dad was born, in Jerusalem. And we moved straight to this kibbutz, Eindoor. At that time, in the early 70s, people had to commit to five years on the kibbutz because they were trying to rebuild the country after all the wars of independence and the the war of the the six-day war. So after we returned to Canada, which was long story short, my older brother needed a bit more of a Canadian education. I went to a Hebrew school, so the school was all in Hebrew, went to a conservative synagogue, and then as I grew up, teenager, young adulthood, I normally started questioning my religion. So I actually didn't practice Judaism until I became a mother again. And by that time we were living in the city so we had lots of access to synagogues and community centers and I was able to raise my own kids Jewish.

03:21 Interviewer: So Jessica, tell me about living in Israel. You moved there with your own family and your own kids, correct?

03:21 Jessica: Yes, we moved there when my son was six and he was going into grade one and our youngest was just one. The amazing thing that I loved about Israel besides the people and the architecture and the history is that weirdly enough most people who live in Israel are not observant Jews. So actually more people in North America and Europe practice the faith or the religion of Judaism. So you could walk outside and just be Jewish without having to practice Jewish.

03:23 Interviewer: And did you raise your own kids Jewish? Yes, I did. So in the city, we grew up, they grew up mostly in Victoria. They went to a Jewish preschool. They had Sunday Hebrew school lessons. Both my kids had bar mitzvahs.

04:20 Interviewer: So why did you move to Souk? I believe it's a rural town with a population of 8,000 and as you mentioned a very small handful of Jews.

04:20 Jessica: It was of course after the pandemic we were looking for more of a quiet environment somewhere that was a lot closer to nature and I wanted to kind of really get into gardening so we found a beautiful house with a large garden plot but no Jews.

04:21 Interviewer: So how did you maintain your Jewish connections in Sooke?

04:50 Jessica: Well, I did slowly meet one other family who was Jewish and the odd kind of single person here and there who was Jewish. But luckily, there was a woman here who was part of the Vancouver Island and Victoria Federation for Jews. And she started a group of Jewish people, specifically Jewish women, who would meet. I was also able to participate in some of the different synagogue services via Zoom, which was also a post-pandemic thing. I dug up all the books that my mom had passed on to me, all the music, all her records. And I also found in my mom's old house a lot of the old prayer books. Her grandfather was a rabbi, and of course she was very much involved in the synagogue herself. So I really surrounded myself with things in the home. And for Judaism, especially for women, that is the most important thing is how you make your home. So I felt very comfortable and very natural, you know, practicing Judaism or being a part of a community, which essentially was me and my family.

06:13 Interviewer: Do you have any advice for people for live rurally?

06:13 Jessica: Well, it's interesting that nowadays, and maybe again, because of the pandemic, that so much is available online. There's groups that you can meet with, there's websites, there's, you know, you can zoom any service or Jewish poetry writing groups. And I didn't get into that too, too much, but I think that I would have liked to. Ironically enough, we are actually moving back to the city and I look forward to once again, becoming part of the community there.