



Staff photo by Bill Green

Brielle Kaplan, 20, spends many hours each week reading the Torah in her Urbana home. Since graduating from Urbana High School in 2015, after which she spent a year and a half studying in Israel, Kaplan has kept strictly kosher, using separate cookware and dishes to prepare specific foods according to Jewish law.

# Finding freedom in the boundaries

Local young adults turn to Jewish laws for guidance

By NANCY LAVIN | NLAVIN@NEWSPOST.COM

It started with cheeseburgers. Or rather, without them. Giving up fast food, including cheeseburgers, was what Brielle Kaplan considered the first in a series of lifestyle changes she made as part of her deepening Jewish faith and identity.

Brielle, 20, recalled the pride with which her then-9-year-old self decided to abstain from the non-kosher fast-food items.

Her dietary restrictions now extend far beyond cheeseburgers. Since graduating from Urbana High School in 2015, after which she spent a year and a half studying in Israel, Kaplan has kept strictly kosher, using separate cookware and dishes to prepare specific foods allowed under Jewish law. For a 25-hour period each week beginning Friday at sundown, she doesn't drive, talk on the phone or use electricity as part of her observance of the Jewish Sabbath known as Shabbat.

She dresses only in skirts that fall below the knee and tops that reach her elbows, keeping with the Jewish ideals of modesty outlined in the Torah. She plans to eventually marry a Jewish man and raise a family in the faith together, but she doesn't plan to so much as hold hands with a prospective partner before marriage.

Brielle observes "negiah," the Hebrew word for touch. The laws of negiah, based on the Torah, forbid physical contact with the opposite sex, except for family members.

"I think there is nothing in my life that doesn't involve my faith," Kaplan said in a recent interview. "Every minute decision, from what I eat, to how I eat, to what I wear and how I wear it ... is based on my beliefs."

That she has become increasingly devout in her beliefs when her peers are increasingly turning away from organized religion doesn't escape her. But just as they choose to seek independence from faith, Brielle chooses to see faith as the source of her independence.

"I think a lot of millennials of my generation would find it restricting," she said of her beliefs. "For me, that freedom to live

lies within the boundaries [of my faith]."

## FINDING FREEDOM

Brielle was raised in what she described as a "traditional" Jewish family: attending services and Hebrew school at Beth Shalom Congregation, a Frederick synagogue affiliated with the Conservative movement

in Frederick. They always observed high holidays, but didn't necessarily attend services every week, nor did they keep strictly kosher and stop driving during Shabbat.

Brielle, a self-described "rule follower," struggled to reconcile the long list of rules laid out in the Torah with her family's lifestyle, which seemed to fly in the face of the long list of commandments about how to live a Jewish life. Even from an early age, she asked a lot of questions, she said.

The answers to these questions came, in part, through the leaders of a Jewish camp she attended throughout summers. In the counselors and organizers of Camp Shoresh, an Orthodox-influenced camp for Jewish children across the state, she found examples of those whose lifestyles seemed to align with what the Torah said.

That influence, combined with her own sense of independence and autonomy, led to her increasingly solidified conviction in a lifestyle rooted in faith.

Juliana Lynch, a fellow Urbana High alumna, also credited Camp Shoresh as the inspiration for her own decision to follow a stricter interpretation of Judaism. She aspired to be like the camp counselors, Jewish teenagers from across the state who came to lead the group of elementary- and middle-school-aged campers.



(See FREEDOM B2)

**Freedom**

(Continued from B1)

"They were all really different, but I realized what they had in common was that they were living these really observant, faithful Jewish lives," Juliana, now 19, recalled.

Max Cantor also attended Camp Shores, but it wasn't until later, in college at Towson University, that his faith became a focus of his identity. The timing was in part a function of his increasing maturity, but also because of the much larger Jewish community he found in college compared with Frederick's.

"There are more Jews on campus than I've ever known in my entire life [in Frederick]," Cantor said.

In Frederick, even the small lifestyle differences that separated his family from his non-Jewish classmates — observing high holidays, attending Hebrew school and not mixing meat with dairy, although they didn't use separate dishes or kitchens — earned him the label of the "Jewish kid" at Oakdale High School, he said.

In Towson Hill, the Jewish student organization, he found a community who understood him. In turn, that community helped him find meaning in the beliefs and practices of his faith.

"I think it's given me a very positive look on life in general," he said. "It can be hard, but I appreciate the challenge it offers. It's something to work at, something with a lot of spiritual meaning and history."

**DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS**

While Juliana and Brielle both consider themselves Orthodox Jews, Cantor es-



News-Post file photo

Juliana Lynch and Julius Isaac perform "Zog Nit Keynmal (Never Say This Is the End)" during a Holocaust memorial ceremony at Beth Sholom Community Center in 2015.

chewed a traditional label for his beliefs.

"I'm just a Jewish guy, more on the religious side, I guess," he said.

He keeps kosher, for example, and observes a "full" Shabbat, meaning no electronics or even carrying his room key and ID card from his dorm to his rabbi's house, because Jewish law says not to carry items from private to public places during the Sabbath.

But he hasn't, for example, become "shomer negilah," one who abides by the no-touch principle.

Beliefs within Judaism are generally split into three main categories, or movements: Orthodox, which offers a strict interpretation of the Torah;

Conservative, which preserves many Jewish traditions and rituals but with a more flexible interpretation of the Torah; and Reform, a more liberal interpretation of Jewish law that stresses personal interpretation.

Frederick, which has a relatively small Jewish population relative to nearby cities such as Baltimore and Washington, D.C., has three synagogues, each affiliated with one of the major movements.

But not all of Beth Sholom's members, for example, consider themselves part of the Conservative movement, said Rabbi Jordan Hersh, the congregation's leader. And though the leaders of Chabad Lubavitch of Frederick fol-

low an Orthodox lifestyle, they stress that services and events are open to people of all beliefs, said Rabbi Boruch Labkowski.

Both rabbis emphasized the importance of recognizing that faithfulness also doesn't always mean regular attendance at services, either, particularly for Jewish millennials. With that in mind, Hersh started some alternative programs at Beth Sholom designed specifically for the congregation's young adult community.

Through Torah on Tap, for example, he's held religious education and Torah discussions in bars. He and his wife have also hosted gatherings at their home, offering similarly informal religious conversa-

**Editor's note**

This is the second in a monthly series about Frederick millennials who actively participate in organized religion. The series will explore the challenges and benefits experienced by local young adult followers of various faiths at a time when their generation is characterized by declining interest and attendance in religion nationwide.

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tion round their backyard fire pit.

That Hersh, at 36, is himself within the age range considered part of the millennial generation, is also a plus, according to Forrest Popkin. Popkin, 31, started attending services at Beth Sholom after moving to Frederick a few years ago, but it wasn't until last year that he really became involved, he said.

Popkin was also raised in a Jewish home, but he framed his early faith experience as more of a familial one, rather than one tied to a congregation. In Hersh and in Beth Sholom, he found that community.

His belief system has also been strengthened through his experience teaching Hebrew school and the rabbinical counseling Hersh has offered as he and his fiancée prepare for their upcoming nuptials, including her decision to convert.

**FAMILY MATTERS**

For each of these young adults, autonomy in their decision to pursue faith makes their conviction all the more steadfast. But living a life different from the rest of their families has, at times, created challenges.

From a practical standpoint, it's hard to keep kosher when the rest of your family does not and there's no separate kitchen, as Juliana found in her family's former Urbana home. Though she doesn't live at home anymore, as she is now a freshman at New York University, the second-in-law-style kitchen in her family's new house in Middletown was a major selling point for accommodating their separate dietary practices, said her mom, Alison Lynch.

Walking to synagogue was also out of the question for both Juliana and Brielle during Shabbat. Often, the girls would spend week-

ends with other families in Baltimore or Silver Spring, where there is a strong Jewish presence in neighborhoods intentionally built within walking distance of the synagogues.

Juliana considered herself lucky that her parents supported her decisions, though she added that they have offered some "interesting" comments. For example, she recalled when her mom told her, "you look like a normal teenager for once," after spotting her lounging around the house in a T-shirt and leggings, rather than the long skirts she usually wears in public.

Alison Lynch confirmed that she was, indeed, supportive, adding that Juliana has inspired her to become more religious and active in her congregation.

"I always thought it was interesting she was influenced from outside the family," Alison Lynch said. "I think it made it more her choice, that way."

Noting Juliana's involvement in interfaith communities, including a class she's auditing at NYU jointly taught by a rabbi and a Muslim imam, Alison Lynch continued, "It's very unique that she can be strong in her religion but still want to be around people of other religions who are strong in their faith as well."

At times differing views about what it means to be an "observant" Jew have strained relationships in the Kaplan family.

When Brielle first decided in high school to "unplug" for Shabbat, her parents were "adamantly opposed," she said. They feared her grades would suffer because she wouldn't be able to complete schoolwork during that time, she said.

move back to Israel permanently and attend a local college or university, said she decided to wait until summer for the move-in part, to reconnect with her parents and brother.

"I couldn't leave without feeling at peace with my family," she said. "I really needed that family time first."

Janet Kaplan, Brielle's mom, said she supports her daughter's faith, even though she doesn't share the same practices. She can't help but wonder, though, if Brielle's beliefs have made her miss out on key coming-of-age experiences.

"She never drank, never smoked, never cursed," Janet Kaplan said. "Not that I really want her doing some of those things. But would rather her go to [an American] college and graduate in four years. I would rather she dated normally, and just go out and have fun. Right now she says she doesn't feel like she missed out on anything, but when she turns 50, what is she going to say?"

**LIVED EXPERIENCES**

Where Janet Kaplan fears her daughter's regret later on, Brielle maintained that her choices were her own, including times when she has strayed from the strictest interpretation of Torah law.

Brielle hasn't kissed a boy since ninth grade. But she has dated, including what she characterized as a "pretty serious relationship" with a Jewish boy in her junior and senior years of high school.

They tried not to touch during that time at all because Brielle wanted to keep negiah. That meant no hugging, either, although, "we cheated a lot on that," Brielle admitted with a laugh.

Sex was not even a consideration, but Brielle never felt like she was missing out. The lack of physical intimacy made them grow closer, she said.

"I got to know him on a much deeper level because there wasn't the physical stuff," she said. "He would come over and we would stay up talking until 4 a.m. and our parents would leave us alone because they trusted us."

"She didn't feel tempted to experiment, to test the waters of life outside Judaism. Even during the year and a half she spent studying in Israel after graduating high school, she saw her newfound independence as a chance to explore and deepen her existing beliefs rather than take a break."

She struggled to understand the sentiment of some of her classmates, girls raised in strict Jewish communities who saw attending the Jewish seminary as a place of refuge from the strict regimens of their home lives.

"They were looking to get away, as this chance to just chill," she said. "To see that in them, it hurt me. I had never met anybody [who followed Judaism] who didn't want to be part of it. I didn't understand."

Asked if she thought she might feel differently if, like her peers, she were forced to follow a strict code of Jewish commandments as a child, Brielle answered "absolutely."

Cantor, however, came to a more observant lifestyle after some experimentation. Last year, as a college freshman, he went to parties, and even joined one of the college's social fraternities, though he has since dropped out.

He had sex, too, something he now reflects on as "a big mistake."

Brielle, who plans to

(See **FREEDOM** B3)

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There's a whole new world to explore outside the window. It's a bright, wonderful day of promise and there's a pal to share it with. In every life the future holds a world of promise. Whether it lives up to our expectations depends less on what is outside than on how we feel on the inside. Our attitude can influence how we perceive the events and experiences of life. How do we develop a positive attitude? Just as a window lets light shine in, the teaching of moral and religious truths lets faith enter into every heart. With faith we can grow up with an attitude of gratitude. To discover all the promise in this world, begin by learning the promises of God. Visit your local house of worship this week.

**Daily Devotional Reading**

1 Peter 1:1-25	1 Peter 2:1-25	1 Peter 3:1-22	1 Peter 4:1-19	1 Peter 5:1-14	2 Peter 1:1-21	2 Peter 2:1-22
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Scriptures Selected by the American Bible Society

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## Freedom

(Continued from B2)

But it was from those experiences, partying, having sex and eating bacon — a pork product strictly forbidden under Jewish law — that he realized that was not the life he wanted.

“By doing those things, I was able to find out, that wasn’t for me,” he explained.

Juliana has also said yes to things she knew were against her beliefs, naming as an example a time when she attended a friend’s Friday night birthday party rather than observe Shabbat. She regretted the decision almost immediately after.

“It’s not like God sends down this lightning bolt as punishment,” Juliana said, “but you have this disappointment in yourself. I didn’t live up to the standards I held for myself.”

The struggle between faith and other interests has continued as she pursues a degree in music education, with a vocal concentration at New York University. For example, Orthodox Jews believe women shouldn’t perform in front of mixed-gender audiences for reasons of modesty, although Juliana has continued to sing solos and sing along with several choirs.

“When I consider the world at large, I know who I am and how I’m supposed to be, how to represent my people and my faith.

### BRIELLE KAPLAN

“For now, I feel that it’s my way to bring spirituality to people; inspiring people is my job,” she said explaining her reasoning. “I consider leading a Friday night service [by singing] to be a separate thing than going up onstage and singing Beyonce.”

In that way, Juliana has found the gray area in what would otherwise appear to be a black-and-white, do-or-don’t set of rules. Brielle also stressed that individual laws about what to eat or how to dress were far less important than the broader purpose of following the Torah, which is to live a moral life.

It is that higher purpose with which Brielle framed as a guiding force in her life.

“When I consider the world at large, I know who I am and how I’m supposed to be, how to represent my people and my faith,” she said.

*Follow Nancy Lavin on Twitter: @NancyKLavin.*