

The Choice That Brings Us Here

For Louis D. Brandeis, life at Harvard Law School was not easy, although it wasn't the curriculum that made his journey so difficult. For three years, students sat next to him uninvited at lunch each day. They said things like, "Brandeis, you're brilliant. You could end up on the Supreme Court if only you weren't a Jew. Why don't you convert? Then all your problems would be solved." Brandeis listened but never responded.

By his final year of law school, Brandeis's preeminence could no longer be denied. Jewish or not, he was invited to join the honor society. It was an electric moment—the first time that the exclusive society had accepted a Jew. On the evening of the official induction, the room was hushed; the atmosphere was thick. All eyes were on Brandeis as he walked to the lectern. Slowly he looked around the room.

"I am sorry," he said, "that I was born a Jew."

With that, the room erupted in applause. There was an explosion of shouting and cheers.

"We have convinced him," the members of the audience thought. "Finally, finally, he has seen our point!"

Brandeis waited for the excitement to abate. When silence was reestablished, he began again. "I am sorry," he said, "that I was born a Jew, but only because I wish I had the privilege of choosing Judaism on my own."

This time there was no applause, no explosion of shouting or cheers. This time there was only silence. When the quiet had grown uncomfortable, members of the exclusive Harvard honor society began to stand. However, they didn't walk out. Instead, awed by Brandeis's conviction and strength of character, and his unequivocal choice, the members of the society gave the honoree a standing ovation. ✨

Rabbi Jeffrey A. Wohlberg

of Adas Israel Congregation, a Conservative shul in Washington, D.C., chose this favorite story because it reminds us that we live in a world of choices, and there is a difference between being a Jew and being Jewish. This story emphasizes that for all of us—those who come to Judaism from another religion or with no religion, as well as those who are born of Jewish parents—being Jewish is a choice that requires a conscious commitment. “Mature Judaism is the recognition that being a Jew by choice is the most fulfilling kind of Judaism,” Rabbi Wohlberg concludes.