

Lebanon is facing ethnic and religious tensions. Its neighbors are on the verge of war. The arrival of Western military powers creates new complexities. My great-grandfather, a young Maronite named Melhem Chameli fears the worst. Like many other Lebanese Christians, he flees to Latin America.

Around that same time, a family of Jews from Eastern Europe doesn't feel safe. Between widespread anti-Semitism and an aggressive Russian Empire, they decide to move to America. When they arrive, their name is changed to Altman and they start a new life.

This is how my ancestors' stories begin. Yet reading current news headlines seems to suggest that these stories, which occurred in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, are repeating themselves today.

After falling in love with the culture of his new home, Puerto Rico, my great-grandfather Melhem fell in love with Maria Garcia Lopez Quinones, my great-grandmother. However, the Great Depression eventually forced the growing Chameli family, which now included my grandfather, Carlos, to move to the U.S.

After a few generations in America, the Jewish family produced David Altman, my father. He married the daughter of Carlos Chameli, my mother, Susan, who proceeded to give birth to three cultural kaleidoscopes—my two siblings and myself.

People are often confused as to how my siblings and I were raised with what they see as clashing cultures.

It's actually quite simple. My parents never chose one heritage over another and never forced us to choose either.

Participating in and learning about Jewish and Christian traditions taught me the importance of acceptance and diversity because ancestors from both sides of my family have endured hardships throughout history.

But it's not all about hardship. In fact, it can be quite fun.

When I asked my grandpa Carlos for a drum lesson, he didn't start with the basics. He immediately thrust claves into my hands and taught me syncopated Latin rhythms.

I dare you to find another fridge that holds homemade latkes, tabouleh, and arroz con pollo at the same time.

My love of music has been influenced by everything from Jewish folk songs to Latin jazz.

Family members are quick to point out the similarities between various cultural practices and I've learned to see the humor in our hodgepodge of traditions.

However, these cultural differences came to a head this past January when I went on a heritage trip to Israel. While I was hesitant to go due to my fears of not being "fully" Jewish, I qualified and ultimately decided to go.

From the Golan Heights in Israel's northeast tip I was able to see its border with Lebanon. Seeing one ancestral homeland alongside another suddenly raised a series of questions.

I knew about the wars between Israel and the Arab countries, including Lebanon. However, that's Israel—an American ally—versus terrorist organizations, like Hezbollah, right? But...my great-grandfather lived in Lebanon 100 years ago. The last time my Jewish ancestors lived in Palestine was 2000 years ago. But that's because the Romans forced them out. But

strangely, it was the Lebanese aspects of my culture that made Israel's Middle Eastern culture seem familiar. Yet, despite this cultural overlap, why is there pressure to pick a side?

My search for a cultural identity resulted in a crisis. Just two aspects of my multifaceted culture were raising impossible questions. Was my multicultural upbringing wrong?

No.

My Jewish ancestors didn't flee Europe so that I would have to worry about being Jewish. Melhem Chameli didn't leave Lebanon so that I would face religious strife. My existential panic only served to continue the same cycle of conflict. I looked into the past and saw tragedy. My ancestors looked to the future and triumphed. They moved forward while preserving their heritage. That is their legacy.

I am free to choose my own cultural destiny. Identity is not a label. It's a process that we must approach with an open mind.

Of course, it's not easy. It hurts to see that the conflicts and hardships my ancestors faced 100 years ago are still affecting people today.

Taking an active role in our own cultural narratives is key to breaking the cycles of conflict. I don't see my kaleidoscopic culture as a haphazard set of traditions. It is a set of tools for constructing a better future.

Carrying out the legacy of my ancestors doesn't mean I must adopt an ethnic or religious identity. It means continuing their culture of progress, remembrance and acceptance.