

Interfaith Issues

Jack Botwinik bases his new book on his personal experience.

Joel N. Shurkin
Special to the Jewish Times

So, what happens when a nice Jewish boy from a passionately secular family meets a lovely Chinese girl and they fall in love? There are several possibilities, the least likely being she converts and both go frum.

Of course, that's what happened to Jack Botwinik and Belinda Cheung in Toronto, Canada.

The couple, on the way to figuring out what to do about their dilemma, find that the wisest advice they get came from a Conservative rabbi who told them not to judge Judaism by the Jews they will meet.

The issue in Mr. Botwinik's book, "Chicken Soup with Chopsticks," in which he recounts their experience and offers advice to others, is not so much

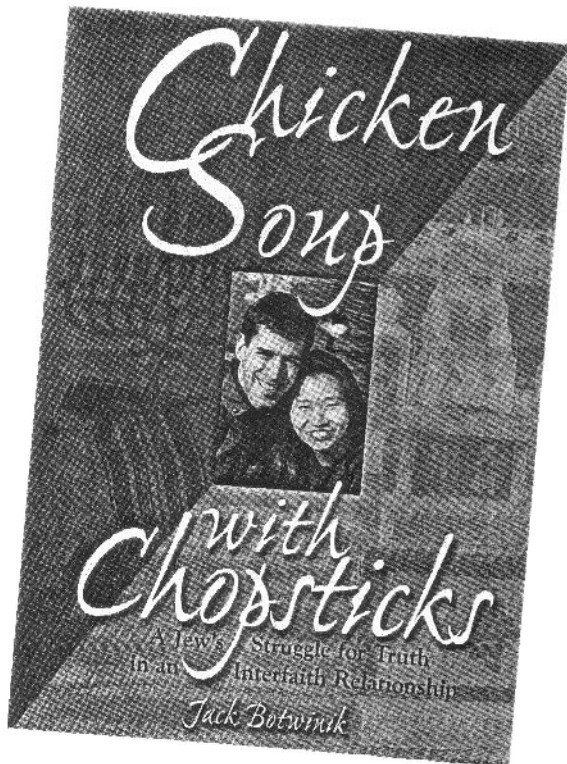
intermarriage — she converted before the wedding so it wasn't an issue in the end — but interdating.

What happens when your beshert isn't Jewish? Moreover, what happens when she certainly doesn't even look Jewish and has absolutely no idea what being Jewish means? Do you keep going or do you break it off? The book tells how they decide to continue their relationship and why.

Mr. Botwinik's dilemma is that as he and Belinda become more serious in their relationship, he begins to take more seriously the Orthodox view that the Torah is the word of God, and God clearly says intermarriage is forbidden.

When asked why he should not consider marrying Belinda, the answer is

see *Interfaith Issues* on page 32



Interfaith Issues from page 31

"because God said so." That should end the conversation, and that's what several Orthodox rabbis tell him, but it doesn't, as he learns.

He has fallen in love. And so, he and Belinda go through a passage of exploration and self-examination. He examines his Jewishness while she decides whether to convert.

Should he pressure her? Should there be a time definite when they call it off if she has not decided? How should he handle his family, which is very unhappy about the situation, and hers, which must have been totally clueless?

They run into the obstacles all conversions run into in Orthodox conversions - the deliberate practice of discouraging conversions - plus some serious bad manners, like the people who are happy to have him come to Shabbat lunch as long as he doesn't bring Belinda along.

Fortunately, most everyone else has a good heart. She converts; they get married. They now have two gorgeous children who show their heritages in their faces, and are expecting a third.

The book was self-published. In a telephone interview from Ottawa, Belinda Cheung, now Bina Esta, said that she and her husband have formed a publishing company, Paper Spider Productions, and will publish other books by other authors.

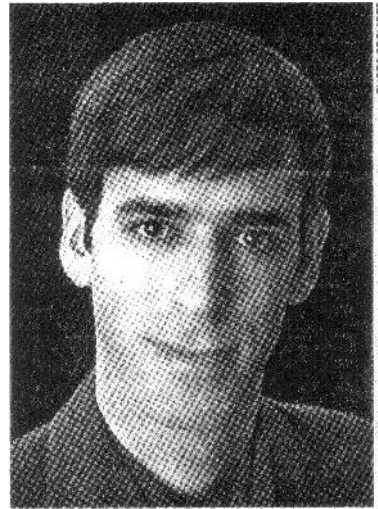
The book has minor problems. The Botwiniks apparently are doomed to a world in which no rabbi has a first name. They are "Rabbi Silver" and "Rabbi Zimmerman," nothing more.

The most serious criticism is that it lacks her voice.

"We meant it to be his story," she says. "You'll have to wait for the sequel," he says.

Mr. Botwinik was raised in the vibrant Jewish section of Montreal, the son of a secular family with strong Jewish identity. His mother came from Italian-Jewish stock; the father was a passionate believer in the joys of Yiddish. What they weren't was religious.

She was born near Hong Kong and came to Canada as a child. The family had no particular religion. She is clearly a decent, lovely, very bright and sensitive woman, the kind of woman most Jewish mothers would wish to have as a daughter-in-law, which of course made things harder.



Canadian author Jack Botwinik was raised in the Jewish section of Montreal. His then-fiancee, Belinda Cheung, had no particular religion.

Why did she convert? What were her fears? What finally convinced her?

While Mr. Botwinik's journey toward observance is interesting, it is her exploration of Judaism that one would love to know more about. He had a foundation for making his transition; she came from a blank slate.

"It was a gradual process of exploration," he says. "We both came to the conclusion it was Orthodoxy or nothing. It seems to make more sense."

In the end, Mr. Botwinik concludes, in a statement with which many Jews would disagree, that his book "speaks to the potential for Jewish growth" through interdating. "To suggest that I could not have come to discover the beauty of Torah except through interdating would be overstating the case," he acknowledges.

"I knew I was playing with fire," he says. But in his case, it seems to have worked out alright.

For information on the book, "Chicken Soup with Chopsticks: A Jew's Struggle for Truth in an Interfaith Relationship," call 1-888-BOOKS-88 or visit the Web site, www.PaperSpider.Net. □

Joel N. Shurkin is a local freelance writer