

Embarking on an Adventure

One day in seven, for twenty-five hours, my wife and I do not operate any electrical equipment. We don't drive, answer our phone, use an elevator, watch television, listen to the radio, or switch lights on or off. If it's cold, we don't adjust the thermostat. We don't boil water, knead, or cook. Nor do we write, tear paper, or discuss personal finances. My wife and I are observant Jews. Our religion teaches that this is what the Creator commands. It's part of our prescribed role. And the sole reason God wants this from us is for our benefit and that of humankind.

Does God Care if I Marry a Gentile?

Even as I started dating a Chinese girl, I knew I was embarking on a remarkable adventure. I just had no idea where and how far the adventure would take me. The more events unfolded, the more I realized that my view of the world and how I lived in it were being profoundly and permanently altered.

Chicken Soup with Chopsticks

Relationships often end because of boredom, infidelity, lack of mutual attraction, diverging interests, selfishness, or countless other “valid” reasons. I felt that if my relationship with this Asian girl were to end, the reason would be nobler, one, in fact, that I had been grappling with for years and was unable to resolve: Is it wrong for a Jew to date and marry a gentile?

The arguments were basically as follows: Suppose I met a girl who is beautiful in my eyes, is of good character, and has the same values as I—in other words, someone who is decent, kind, charitable, environmentally concerned, someone who has a strong love of life, honours her parents, and so on—why should I not marry her?

Then again, if she were Christian, there would be an emotional shadow hovering over our relationship, a shadow cast by centuries of persecution of Jews, expulsions, and pogroms; the historical experience of enforced conversions, such as during the Crusades, with countless Jews choosing to give up their lives rather than bow down to another deity; and more recently, the Holocaust and the supporting role of those Christians who kept silent while knowing that millions of Jews were being systematically slaughtered—all of this in the name of “Christ.” And residual feelings of anti-Semitism might, perhaps unknowingly, linger in her family.

If the girl I met were Muslim, there would be the issue of the protracted Middle East conflict and the seemingly irreconcilable hatred between Arabs² and Jews.

2. Although only a minority of Muslims are Arabs, the distinction did not figure prominently in my mind.

If she were Hindu or Buddhist, her religion would be so foreign to me, with its many gods and rituals of worship, that I might never feel totally comfortable even though I might become familiar with the religion.

Thus, if I *were* to date a non-Jewish girl, the best option, it seemed, would be to find an atheist, particularly one whose family would tolerate intermarriage.

A close friend dated such a girl. The relationship went smoothly for a few years. As it turned out, they broke up for other reasons. Soon he found a Christian girl, and they went to church on Sundays and synagogue on Saturdays. Eventually she adopted Reform Judaism.³ Another close friend found a Catholic girl who eventually converted to Orthodox Judaism after claiming to discover truth and beauty in the religion. He himself was inspired to grow in his Jewish knowledge and became Orthodox as well, a turn of events that baffled me. They were married soon after.

So, I surmised, anything could happen. If the problem with marrying a gentile was that my religion prohibited intermarriage, why should that bother me? Perhaps not everything in Judaism made sense, and as an intelligent and thinking individual I could take from my heritage what I felt was meaningful and disregard the rest. Besides, to the extent that

3. There are three main denominations of Judaism in North America: Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform. Orthodox Judaism is the strictest in adherence to observance. Reform Judaism is the most liberal in interpretation of the Hebrew Bible and observance of its laws. Conservative Judaism lies between the two. A fourth denomination, Reconstructionism, has emerged in the past several decades.

Judaism is a beautiful and worthwhile religion, why would she not *want* to convert?

I had eleven years of formal Jewish education: the primary and secondary schools that I attended were Jewish. We studied Jewish history, Jewish traditions, Jewish languages (Hebrew and Yiddish), Jewish literature and culture, as well as the *Torah*. We celebrated the holidays. Because it was a secular school system, most of the students did not observe the kosher dietary laws or keep *Shabbos*. Girls and boys wore jeans; flirting was widespread; and the caressing and kissing in the open made me uneasy, as if I were intruding on other people's private affairs. It was a liberal school system where Jewish culture and tradition, love of the State of Israel, and Jewish pride were stressed, but belief in God was not. That the Hebrew Bible is the true, immutable word of God was presented as an opinion and generally not taken seriously by students or faculty.

In high school we dreamed of becoming doctors, lawyers, or engineers, or perhaps politicians or architects. I was less pragmatically minded. I wanted to become a theoretical physicist and dreamed of unravelling the mystery of the origin of the universe. There was the perception that the Judaic studies component would not assist us in meeting our career goals. Judaism had its place: Israel, the Holocaust, Jewish culture, Jewish wisdom, and Jewish literature linked us to our ancestors, and identified us as a distinct people. However, the Judaic subjects were considered less important than mathematics or world history. Like many of my peers, I often wondered of what use all this Jewish immersion would be in the long run.

Although we lived in a heavily Jewish area of Montreal, the broader society was predominantly Catholic. Not surprisingly, the question of intermarriage sometimes surfaced, inside and outside the classroom. I sensed that intermarriage, though not condemned, was frowned upon by the school administration.

The possibility that *God Himself*⁴ does not want a Jew to marry a gentile is not something I recall being taught explicitly. This may be because, even though I believed in God in my own nebulous way, I didn't take seriously the proposition that God authored the Torah. For one thing, I considered many claims in the Torah absurd: that the world is less than 6,000 years old, that Noah lived more than 900 years and built an ark to house the planet's animals, and that a sea parted miraculously to enable the Hebrews to escape their Egyptian pursuers. As far as I was concerned, these were stories with possible moral messages but not actual facts. *If the Bible were true, then the theory of evolution, and much of science, must be wrong.* In a world where humans went to the moon, performed brain surgery, and saw and talked to people on the other side of the planet, I had far more trust in what modern science presumed than in what the Bible stated.

Furthermore, I believed that religion was a crutch that societies invented to help them cope with life's uncertainties and challenges. Nor could I fathom that of all the different

4. According to Jewish teachings, God has both female and male attributes. For simplicity, this narrative follows the convention of using the masculine pronoun in reference to God.

religions in the world, it just so happened that Judaism — *my* religion — was “the Truth.”

But the issue of intermarriage became more relevant in college. There I was exposed to many gentile women while my interest in having a girlfriend intensified. I frequented the Jewish students’ association. One time it organized an interesting event on intermarriage, where participants were invited to choose sides and the two teams debated. Attendance was overflowing and the evening turned out to be very lively. I found myself shifting position several times during the debate, only to end up on the fence.

“I think love and mutual commitment are the two most important things in a relationship,” said one student. “Being Jewish is not that important. Just because you’re Jewish doesn’t mean you’re better or part of an elite group.”

“What about Jewish continuity?” argued another. “Does four thousand years of a civilization that has given the world the Bible, humane values, a sophisticated legal system, and so much more, mean nothing to us? Do we want to be the generation that breaks that chain? I wouldn’t want to be responsible for that. I wouldn’t be able to live with myself.”

“Why must we let the past dictate our lives and limit our choices? We all take from our heritage what we find relevant and meaningful, and incorporate other beautiful and positive values that come our way. I believe in changing, evolving, growing.”

“Wake up, guys!” chimed someone else. “Hitler tried to exterminate our people, and almost succeeded. Now we are doing it to ourselves!”

“Hitler was a madman,” retorted another student. “He wanted to annihilate everyone, not just Jews. I am a Canadian. I am a woman. I am a law student. I also happen to be Jewish. So what? I shouldn’t marry an American just because I am a proud Canadian? If most people hate lawyers, I should therefore only date lawyers?”

And so the exchanges went. Although both sides made good points, one of the boldest arguments against intermarriage that surfaced was, “God said so.” That, to me, sounded arrogant and narrow-minded and, if anything, served to discredit the anti-intermarriage position.

Ideological Immersion

My relationship with Judaism was greatly influenced by my deep connection to the Yiddish language and culture. Yiddish was, until the Holocaust, the most commonly spoken language among European Jews. Most post-Holocaust European immigrants to North America chose to speak to their children and grandchildren in broken English rather than their native tongue. There was little desire to transmit the thousand-year-old language to future generations. It is as if they wanted to keep the treasures of Yiddish for themselves, while protecting their children from the burden of learning a foreign and “archaic” language.

Chicken Soup with Chopsticks

An entire generation of *Ashkenazi* Jews grew up with Yiddish spoken at home around them, but not *to* them. This was particularly the case in Montreal, where most young Jews were children or grandchildren of immigrants. By adulthood they understood Yiddish but had trouble speaking it. Many recollected that Yiddish felt like a secret language, spoken between parents when they didn't want the children to understand.

Not surprisingly, many of my peers developed a negative attitude, if not utter disdain, toward the language. Yiddish was associated with the Old World, the ghettos, the anti-Semitism of Eastern Europe. It was useless at best, and regressive at worst. Perhaps the language also sounded too much like German.

My father went against the grain and fought what he called "discrimination" against the language, the perceived attempt by many within the Jewish cultural elite to hasten its demise. He published a magazine in which, through story, song, art, and humour, he sought to promote Yiddish as a living, breathing language, especially among youth. He also incessantly berated the leaders of Jewish schools, synagogues, Jewish cultural establishments, and institutions for deliberately omitting the use of the language in their events, literature, communiqués, and so on. Whether through sending letters to the editor, handing out leaflets near the entrances to Jewish literary events, or refusing to attend funeral services of native Yiddish speakers when the eulogies were to be delivered solely in English, my father sought to press his case.

My older siblings and I were recruited in the campaign. Over a number of years, particularly during high school and college, I felt that we were more than a family: we were an ideological movement. My father tried to impress upon me the belief that Yiddish was an important means of stemming the rapid slide to assimilation that was occurring in Jewish communities the world over, the effects of which were evident in the rise of interdating, intermarriage, drug use, promiscuity, family breakdown, and all the ills of secular society. Yiddish was the natural antidote: an immediate and powerful link to the idealized pre-Holocaust world of Eastern Europe where Jewish culture flourished and healthy ideals and values guided human behaviour. (Indeed, in Yiddish the very word for “a human being”—a *mentsh*—reflects these positive humanistic values and has seeped into the diction of English-speaking Jews and a fair number of non-Jews too.)

Religion wasn't sufficient. Language, because we use it and think in it all the time, is a very effective means of identifying with a people and its experiences. Many Jews, my father would say, were campaigning to promote the Hebrew language, others were fighting for the religion, still others were activists for Zionist ideals—all worthy causes that prevented Hitler from achieving a posthumous victory of obliterating Judaism. But no one—or hardly anyone—was doing anything to stop the rapid decline of the Yiddish language. The Botwiniks were the mavericks, standing out in the secular Jewish community, ridiculed by some, admired by others, and not afraid to speak out for a noble and righteous cause.

During these formative years, I vacillated between feeling proud to be part of a Yiddishist family and harbouring ambivalence, both with respect to the mission and its prospect for success. Nonetheless, my father inculcated within me the following ideals: pride in my heritage; a disdain for following popular trends without independent critical assessment; and the virtue of working diligently and persistently for an idealistic cause.

Quest for a Life Partner

In this strong Jewish cultural environment in which I was raised, I was expected to marry one of my people. Not to do so would be a shocking betrayal of my family. The prohibition against intermarriage was so ingrained that it was hardly an appropriate subject to bring up for a family discussion.

Under the caring and watchful eyes of my parents while I lived at home in the quiet, middle-class suburb of Côte Saint-Luc, I dated many Jewish women and found the vast majority of them materialistic. They didn't seem to harbour the strong family values, desire to have children, and appreciation of culture and language that were particularly pronounced in my family. It was especially important that I find a girl who didn't blindly follow the ways of the masses, viewed life positively, respected her Jewish heritage, and would be supportive of my speaking Yiddish with our children. Was this too much to ask? Apparently, in the assimilating Jewish environs in which I grew up, it was. I really was not brought up to appreciate the virtues of a girl whose focus was on the

kind of car I drove, what my father did for a living, or how often I vacationed in Florida.

Deep down, I wanted to marry someone spiritual. Notwithstanding problems with incompatible ethnic associations, if she were Christian she should be a devout Christian; if Muslim, a religious Muslim. Better yet, she could be an environmentalist or perhaps dedicated to the cause of the homeless. Basically, I longed to meet a woman who was focused on making the world a better place. I was dedicated to being a good person, and I sought a compatible soul mate who would appreciate this more than how much money I made.

One time I did meet a woman with whom I really connected. She was Jewish and religious. After dating for a month or two, she initiated our break-up. Her family was not content with my level of religious observance or that of my family.

Whereas my siblings sought only Jewish spouses, I kept my options open. I was not convinced of the necessity to restrict my search for a mate to those of my religion, especially as we constituted a tiny minority (a fraction of one percent) of the human population. Moreover, I encountered females, from various religions and backgrounds, who were extremely nice, good-natured, and attractive. My motto about intermarriage, as in other areas of life, was "I'll cross that bridge when I come to it."

Sino-Attraction

In the summer of 1994, three years after I left my parents' home in Montreal and was living on my own in Toronto, I met Belinda. I was twenty-nine; she was twenty-five. We quickly became friends.

"Would you like to see my snake?" Belinda asked, as I dropped her off in front of her building.

My heart pounded and raced.

"Okay," I heard myself saying. I knew that sooner or later she would show me her pet. I hadn't reckoned it would be *so soon*.

Belinda ran inside and returned shortly with a tiny corn snake tucked into her sleeve. Once in the car, she let me hold it. It was the first time I had held a snake. Instinctively, I applied my peripheral vision to the clammy, slender creature in my palm, imagining it was some inanimate object.

Belinda reached for my other hand. "What do you think about our relationship?" she asked.

It was the first time we had held hands. Thoughts of the biblical symbolism of the serpent and the fact that she was Chinese pulsated through my mind. At the same time, I was taken aback by her forthrightness. It was only our second date.

I took a slow, deep breath.

“As you know, Belinda, I’m marriage-minded. You told me you were too. But, I’m not interested in just getting married, having children, and leading a *normal* life. That’s the *minimum* of what I would expect. I want to reach for the moon, grow together with a life-long partner, embark on an adventure with this person that would make a difference in the world.”

The snake began to slither its way up my sleeve, and I pleaded for help. I don’t recall anything else we talked about that evening.



When I met Belinda, I had little interest in religious Judaism. I was unaware of its unique spiritual treasures and their relevance to today’s world. In fact, like many of my peers, I had an affinity for secular Jewish culture, and that is where it stopped.

My father was raised in an observant family. He fled his native Poland on the eve of the Second World War. His entire family was murdered in the Holocaust, and he became a “worldly” Jew and Yiddishist. My mother, an Italian Jew, was raised with little knowledge and practice of Judaism. She always believed in God, however, and has stood firmly committed to whatever Jewish observances she was raised with.

In the world of postmodernism, where the whole idea of Truth with a capital T has fallen into disrepute among many

intellectuals, I was not disposed to think differently. I did not particularly believe that there must be a Truth, but I did not rule it out either. Initially, my concern was not with intellectual truth (Is Jesus the son of God? Did God author the Bible?), as much as with a practical formula for improving the world. The formula had to be grounded in reality, or it would not work. Perhaps there were multiple formulas, and I was looking for the one that most suited *me*.

In college and university I took courses in political philosophy and became interested in Marxism, Platonism, socialism, humanism, feminism, and any other “ism” that was popular in academia. I wondered if any of them was the key to fixing the world and ushering in a utopia. I delved into the teachings of Christianity and Buddhism. I traveled to the Arctic for a month, hoping to taste native spirituality. I joined the army and sought, but did not find, patriotic pride. I spent two summers in Israel working on a kibbutz and interviewing the *vatikim*, or elders, those idealists who left the relative comfort of their European homes in the '30s and '40s to go to a harsh and barren land and pioneer a new experiment in socialism. At one point I seriously considered moving to a kibbutz and dedicating my life to the principle “from each according to his ability, to each according to his need.” Later, when I moved to Toronto, I toyed with New Age ideas and started frequenting an ashram.

Belinda lived in a very different reality. Her upbringing was not politically and ideologically charged like mine. She was much more focused on academic achievement and team sports than on philosophy and the need to change the world. She

grew up in a touristy section of the Kowloon peninsula, just off Hong Kong Island, a cosmopolitan area teeming with hotels, shops, temples, markets, and restaurants; a unique blend of Eastern and Western culture. There were remnants of Buddhist practice in her home. Her grandmother, during the years she shared the cramped seventh-floor flat with Belinda's family, maintained an altar with burning incense, and there were always a few oranges laid out for the gods. Belinda recalls visiting a Buddhist Temple during Chinese New Year and hating it because of the crowd and commotion. Each year the family and numerous relatives would assemble, rent a tour bus, and drive to a hilly cemetery. After exiting the vehicle, they would trek up the steep slope in the chilly winter air, venerate their ancestors, and leave flowers or food behind as gifts. Belinda enjoyed these gatherings and hikes with her relatives. But the reasons behind the worship rituals were never explained to her. From her perspective, they just happened to be part of an ever-changing tradition. They were to be performed to please the elders, who considered such practices important.

Belinda was sent to a Catholic primary school because it had a good reputation academically. She recalls a discouraging experience with her religion teacher when she was eight. The teacher was unable to provide logically satisfying responses to many of her questions. She concluded that he plucked answers out of thin air and that the stories about the Hebrews, Egypt, and the Red Sea were fabricated. She formed an impression that all religions are just hoaxes. Before she came to Canada, at the age of seventeen, Belinda didn't know that Jesus was Jewish or that Jews still existed. She figured the Jews must have

long ago disappeared like the Greeks, Romans, Babylonians, and other ancient peoples.

In her early twenties Belinda started to wonder about the real meaning of life. She had been approached many times in malls by Christian evangelists, and invited to attend church services or free Bible classes; she consistently declined. Then, when she was twenty-five, a few weeks before I met her, she acceded. She figured she had nothing to lose.

After attending a few of these classes and reading the Bible (which they gave her as a gift) on her own, Belinda inquired if I would be interested in joining her.

“Sure,” I said composedly, as my mouth suddenly became dry. She was looking for God. I felt I needed to show my support, notwithstanding my ethnic biases and strong sentiments against Christian dogma.

“Great! The next session is at Helen’s—she’s one of the members. She invited me for dinner on Tuesday at six-thirty. That’s in three weeks. I just need to find out her address and confirm that I can invite you along. Although I’m sure she won’t mind.”

Not only will she not mind, I thought, she will probably be *ecstatic*, especially once she finds out I’m Jewish.

I feared Belinda was being indoctrinated in ideas I couldn’t accept, such as “turning the other cheek,” that we are all innate sinners, and that we are damned to the fires of hell unless

we accept Jesus as our god and saviour. Moreover, although I was cognizant that “born-again” Christians were generally sensitive and good-natured people (such as one particular college friend I had; I never passed an opportunity to engage him in conversation about his beliefs), I also knew that for centuries the Catholic Church had promulgated hatred of Jews and associated Jews with the devil.

I recalled a documentary I had seen as a child, in which Galileo tries to defend himself against accusations of heresy by inviting the heads of the Church to peer through his telescope. The latter emphatically refuse, stating that there is no point in doing so as their theology informs them that the earth is at the centre of the universe. Despite repeated pleading from Galileo, they stubbornly refuse to be challenged by any evidence to the contrary. Their reasoning is that if, by looking through Galileo’s invention, they were to observe that the earth was *not* at the centre of the universe, then it would mean one of two things: trickery or the work of Satan.

I refused to emulate the manner of those Church leaders by drawing on pre-conceived notions to rationalize not attending a free Bible class. I prided myself on being open-minded and was willing to face ideas with which I didn’t necessarily agree or feel comfortable — especially if I could challenge them in front of Belinda!

As it turned out, Belinda invited me at a point when she was getting increasingly frustrated with that Bible study group. On more than one occasion she was rebuked for her questions. Very soon — before I was scheduled to go with

her — she dropped out of the church, and I breathed a deep sigh of relief.



Apart from Belinda's nascent interest in discovering ultimate Truth (which stemmed from a longing to know God and connect to Him), I was drawn to her because Chinese was exotic and interesting. Also, different languages and cultures had always intrigued me. I grew up speaking Yiddish and Italian at home while living in a French-speaking province (Quebec), which itself was nestled within a predominantly English-speaking country, Canada.

Belinda and I began to explore different religions together, and we frequently talked about spiritual matters. We also talked about Disney, travel, computers, and Indian food. We were amazed at how much we had in common. Like typical romantic couples, we spent most of our free time with each other, sometimes engaging in juvenile activities. One of our favourite pastimes was to go to parks and look for trees to climb. Once we played an entire game of Chinese checkers seated high up on tree branches, with a bag of snacks hanging beside us.

I knew that when my parents found out about my latest girlfriend they would vehemently oppose the relationship unless, perhaps, Belinda were to convert to Judaism. I feared being ostracized by my immediate family. Perhaps on a deeper level, I feared cutting *myself* off from my ethnic roots. As

Embarking on an Adventure

painful as these thoughts were, they did not deter me from pursuing the course on which I had already embarked.

Safe Haven

While most countries in the world closed their borders or had severely restrictive quotas for Jewish refugees fleeing the fire and ashes of the Holocaust, all the faculty and students of the renowned *Mir Yeshiva* of Poland found safe haven in Shanghai, China. There, they formed a community and were allowed to study and worship freely. In a few short years, they produced many important scholarly works. By 1945, the entire Jewish community in Shanghai numbered 30,000. After the war, all the rabbis and students of the yeshiva left China and founded the Mir Yeshiva in New York as well as the Mir Yeshiva in Jerusalem.