

PESACH SHENI
Episodes in a Jewish Life

Pete Wolf Smith

My father liked to take long walks around Manhattan. When I was old enough to keep up, he started taking me along. He liked cool, brisk weather; mostly we walked in the Fall and Spring. He liked strolling down Fifth Avenue on Easter Sunday; he enjoyed the well-dressed crowds.

We were leaving Central Park at 59th and Fifth and this guy in black pants and a black coat came up to us and started talking. My father wore suits –three-piece, from Brooks Brothers – and I could see that what this guy had on wasn't exactly a suit. For one thing, the jacket was too long. My father wore fedoras, brown or gray – sharp. This guy's hat looked like a piece of my mother's fur coat. He had a long beard, bushing down past his collar to the middle of his shirt. My cousin Mark had a beard, but he was in his twenties, was even taller than my father or my uncle, and had long hair and a beautiful girlfriend who bestowed dazzling smiles on me at family gatherings. George Harrison had a beard, but he was a Beatle. And what was up with those threads hanging out of the pants, so long you could see them under the hem of the coat? When I had loose threads on my clothes, my mother cut them off with a pair of shears.

"Excuse me," he said – to me, not my father. "Are you Jewish?"

"Yes," said my father. He put a hand on my shoulder. "We are."

It wasn't a question to which I had ever given much thought. We were Jewish, right?

"Wonderful." From the look on the guy's face, you would have thought my father had given him a million dollars. "Perhaps the young man would like to come inside –" he indicated a trailer parked at the curb -- "and put on to fill in." And put on to fill in what?

"No," said my father. "He won't do that."

"Why not?" A smile, a shrug: "What could be so bad?"

"I'm a fabrente midnaged," said my father.

A what?

The guy laughed. "There are no more fabrente midnagdim."

No more what?

My father took his hand off my shoulder. He leaned in towards the guy and held up a finger. "I'm the last one."

The guy's jaw dropped. His beard fell all the way down to his belt. My father tapped me on the shoulder as a signal that it was time to move on.

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We never had seders at our house. When I was five, six, seven, my father, my sister and I would drive up to Massachusetts for the big family seder at my Cousin Israel's house. Israel Kazis was a Conservative rabbi in Brookline. Mom stayed home; and after a while, I lost interest, too. My father, rather than force the issue – rarely, if ever, his style – took my sister along with him from then on, and left me at home with Mom.

In an effort to provide me with a Jewish education, and possibly prepare me for a bar mitzvah, or at least a confirmation, my parents sent me to Sunday school at a Reform temple in our neighborhood. I remember taking some books about Israel out of

the temple library, and a class play in which I played the part of a soldier, so the play might have been about Hanukkah; but of Shabbat, the Torah, the meaning of the Jewish holidays, I recall no discussion at all. Who knows? Maybe they did teach us all of that and I wasn't paying attention. They must have said something about Purim, because according to my mother I came home one Sunday and said, "All we do is make papier-mâché hamentashen." She took this to mean that I was bored, and that was the end of my childhood Jewish education.

On another long walk, I asked my father why we didn't do more "Jewish stuff," whatever that was, at our house. My father replied with a Big Historical Explanation: he was something called an epikoros.

"You mean you like to eat gourmet food?"

"You're thinking of 'epicure.' But you're close – both words come from the Greek." He went on to explain that an epikoros was someone who understood Judaism (that would leave me out) but chose not to practice it – or as my father put it, to be more involved with other things – "you know, politics, science, stuff like that."

"You know a lot about science?"

"I know something about science. "

"If you know a lot about science, how come you're not a scientist?"

"Come on, sport, you know the kind of work I do. The point, old man, is that if you're Jewish and you're religious – you remember that guy? The one who wanted you to go in his trailer with him?"

"The guy with the beard?"

"Yes. The guy with the beard. He doesn't care about politics or science. He's isolated from those things. From those kinds of ideas. You know what 'isolated' means, don't you?"

"Isolated means – OK, like – it means you're by yourself."

"Yeah, OK. That's a petty good answer. And if you say someone is 'isolated,' that's the –"

"Adjective?"

"Very good. So 'isolate' is the –"

"Noun?"

"No, it's the verb. 'Isolation' is the noun. Anyway. The point is, Jewish people who are religious isolate themselves from other things and other people. "

"What about Cousin Iz?"

"He's different. Think you'd like to be like that?"

"I don't know."

"I don't think you would. Want some hot chocolate, old sport?"

"Uh huh."

It would be many years before I learned that in some circles epikoros is a grave insult. Fightin' words.

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By the time I was fourteen or fifteen, the idea of "being Jewish" wasn't sticking with me at all. My father wasn't much on particulars, but he enjoyed talking about Judaism in a general way. One night he was holding forth at the kitchen table, with my sister for audience. He attempted to draw me into the conversation by asking what I thought about something. I don't remember what it was.

"I don't know," I said. "I don't care. I'm not Jewish, so it doesn't matter to me."

"What did you say?"

"Of course you are, Pete. We all are." That was my sister, trying to jump in and make a little peace.

My father had a long, slow fuse; he seldom got angry, or at any rate nowhere near as often as my Mom. But he was angry now.

"Listen to me," he said. "If you'd been alive thirty years ago, and you lived anywhere in Europe, you'd have been Jewish whether you wanted to be or not. Believe you me, old man."

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When I was eleven, my parents sent me to a summer camp on an island in the middle of Lake Winnepesaukee, in New Hampshire. I was assigned to a cabin with a counselor named Ron Brown. Ron was a college gymnast, not much taller than I was but amazingly agile and strong. He played guitar and sang. Ron Brown didn't tolerate anything beyond the mildest forms of teasing in his cabin; he stuck up for kids who were being picked on. I thought Ron Brown was Superman. He wasn't; but he was a devout and vocal Evangelical Christian, and soon I was going to Bible study groups and prayer meetings with Ron and a couple of other counselors and some of the other kids at the camp. One of the counselors was named Jim Klein. He was small and tightly muscled, like Ron, only with black hair and olive skin. He called himself a Jew for Jesus and I started calling myself one, too.

Ron used to pass around little pamphlets, in comic book form, the points of which were that evolution was bunk (carbon-14 tests that were way off, etc.), and that the purpose of the Bible, Old and New Testament alike, was to teach you that Jesus was the Messiah. Ron told us about the clown troupe that he and some of his fellow Christian gymnasts had formed, about the tumbling act that was the big finale of their show, about the song they sang at the end:

*My name is Jesus, the son of God
and I have come to save the world
I've come to save you and heal your bod
and I have come to save the world
I walk on water, my special trick
and I have come to save the world
and for an encore, I heal the sick
and I have come to save the world
JESUS! JESUS! J-E-S-U-S!
Yaaaaay, MESSIAH!*

My conversion to Christianity evaporated within an hour of my getting off the bus that brought me home, that August, from camp.

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My sister came home from college after her sophomore year with a kitten, which she would no longer be allowed to keep in her dorm room, and startling news: she had become "religious." I had no context for this information, and no idea what it meant. To the extent that I was paying attention, it seemed to involve no longer being able to eat the same food as we did, or eat off our plates or silverware, or eat anything cooked in our oven with our pots and pans or utensils. That, and spending a lot of time with Rabbi So-and-So and his family in Brooklyn. My mother, a woman of strong opinions and forthright speech, was

appalled; and for my sister to come home from college aflame with the conviction that God wanted us all to emigrate to Israel as soon as possible, and was passionately invested in the question of whether or not you ate a cheeseburger – well, it made no sense to me. My adolescent preoccupations – primarily, girls and rock'n'roll – may not have been pointing me in the direction of Harvard, but they struck my mother as a lot more "normal" than my sister's embrace of Judaism.

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I left for college in the fall of 1977. I met Valerie. She lived in my dorm. A dancer with long, softly wavy red hair, blue eyes, pale freckled skin – you get the idea. Also a born-again Christian. She and a few other girls in the dorm held prayer-and-Bible-study sessions in somebody's room every week. After I had gone about three times, and we had prayed and talked about different passages in the Bible, Valerie looked at me and said, "Peter, it sounds as if you really love the Lord. Are you ready to ask Jesus to come into your life?" I was.

It's very easy to become a born-again Christian. All you have to is pray to Jesus to be your personal savior, and be real sincere about it, and poof! Welcome to the club. All your sins are washed away. Valerie and I and the others held hands in a circle. We prayed. I felt – something. Some momentary elation, an hour's peace and joy. Valerie hugged me. We all went for a walk around the lake – it was more of a large pond -- across the road from the dorm. It was February, there was snow on the ground and the sun was glinting on the water's frozen surface. We threw some snowballs. And that was it.

I talked to my parents a few times on the phone, hinting that a major change, something big, had happened to me. Then I wrote to them, which I rarely did, and told them what was going on. My father wrote a gracious letter in return. He had seen that I needed something; if that something was going to be Jesus, then he gave thanks to Jesus. He had hoped I would find what I was looking for in Judaism. He wished me luck. My mother was relieved. She had thought I was going to tell them I was gay.

A couple of months later, there was a Wednesday night service at Love Inn, an Evangelical church near campus, at which all those who wished to do so could come forward to be baptized. I signed up.

"Come on up here, Peter," the pastor said when my turn came. In swim trunks, towel over my shoulder, I made my way to the front of the room. Prayers and Hallelujahs were bouncing off my head. "A young man of Hebrew stock..." I got into the pool. He dunked my head under a few times. On the second or third go, I came up babbling nonsense syllables. Ululation, they call it – speaking in tongues. The preacher dunked me under again and I came up spouting water and yet more hullabaloo. And I felt some exaltation, and saw a flash of red light, though that might have been the EXIT sign, through waterfogged eyes.

(A woman goes to a revival service and wades into the water to get baptized. The preacher holds her head under the water, and when he pulls her up, she shouts, "I BELIEVE!" "What do you believe, sister?" He dunks her again. "I BELIEVE!" "What do you believe, sister?" He dunks her a third time, and when he brings her up she shouts, "I BELIEVE YOU JOKERS IS TRYIN' TO DROWN ME!")

I believed – I believed that I was supposed to believe – that being "saved" imposed a neat, before-and-after separation between who I had been up to that point, and who I was now. Turned out it didn't work that way. For one thing, my interest in Valerie was not entirely spiritual. I could listen to her talk about the difference Jesus had made in her life all day; but she could have been talking about trigonometry and it wouldn't have made any difference to me.

"Well," a friend of mine observed, "if you been diggn' on Valerie, Pete, it just means that you're straight, and maybe you wear glasses but you're not blind, and you're not dead yet either. But converting to Christianity to get next to her, man – don't you think that's a little extreme?"

It didn't stick. Deep down, I knew that Christianity wasn't for me; it just took me several months to admit it to myself. A month or two into the Fall semester, my Christianity was a dead letter.

My Judaism was even deader, though. There were people I knew in my twenties -- friends, girlfriends -- who had no idea I was Jewish. My last name was Smith. The subject never came up.

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Something changed when my father died. I hadn't thought of myself, particularly, as "a Jew" for years. Now, however, that consciousness stirred in me, if only a little. I came across an anthology, *Exiled in the Word*, compiled by a poet named Jerome Rothenberg. *Exiled in the Word* brought together Jewish writing from every corner of the Jewish tradition – everything from the Torah to medieval cabbalists to Allen Ginsberg. It showed me, in translation, what a page of Talmud looked like. I was fascinated. It wasn't a door, but at least it was a window.

In the Fall of 1991 I went to a Grateful Dead concert on Yom Kippur. In the spring of 1992, for the first time in years, I went to a seder – the community seder of a congregation which met in the basement of a church in the East Twenties. The seder was held in the church's social hall. I listened to the reading of the haggadah, shared a meal with the people at my table, drank some wine. For the first that I could remember, I experienced Judaism as something I might actually want more of.

That summer, I was on an island in the Atlantic, off the coast of Maine. Except for yours truly, not a Jew in sight. A woman I became friendly with there told me: "You should check out the Rowe Conference Center. In Massachusetts? I think you'd enjoy it. They have a lot of really great workshops and classes and stuff like that."

I called the Rowe Conference Center when I got back to Manhattan and they sent me a catalogue. Most of the descriptions of the classes, workshops, retreats, and so on employed a New Age vocabulary of which I was pretty skeptical – "explorations of personal space," re-learning the Body as a Conduit to the Soul," and the like. One of the items, however, described a Rosh Hashanah retreat, led by Rabbi Zalman Schachter.

Rosh Hashanah, I thought. I know what that is. It's a Jewish holiday. I'm Jewish. Maybe I should go.

I sent the Rowe Conference Center a check – and immediately felt misgivings. Who was Rabbi Zalman Schachter? Sun Myung Moon in a fuzzy hat? Was he going to tell me to Put On To Fill In?

Take it easy. Just go. Give it a shot. It was a different, calmer voice than the one I was accustomed to listening to.

The Conference Center was in a beautiful stretch of the Berkshires. There were cabins with wooden shutters instead of windows and trails for walking in the woods and a basketball court and a lake. It was summer camp without the jerks. I checked in and put my stuff away and went to the mess hall. A bearded, white-haired man was singing into a microphone – Reb Zalman, I thought immediately. Most of the people in the room were singing along with him. I had no idea what they were singing. But the melody, and not only the melody but the sounds, the consonants, these words of which I understood not one, turned me inside out.

I know now that they were singing *Luley he-emanti*, from the twenty-seventh Psalm, which is sung in the Days of Awe:

*Mine is the faith that I shall surely see
God's goodness in the land of the living.
Hope in the Lord and be strong.
Take courage, hope in the Lord.*

I had completely discarded the idea that "religion" or "faith" were things that could make a difference in my life. Now I was having an experience for which I had no words or context – an experience which I had not known it was possible to have.

But what about all that Christianity?

I knew, almost immediately, that this was different. During the two brief periods of my life – comprising a period of no more than eight or nine months – when I had thought of myself as a Christian, I had always been aware of trying to become something that I was not. The goal for which I was striving stood outside me, and I outside of it. "It's like you're trying to pledge a spiritual fraternity," a friend had observed. When I heard Reb Zalman and the others singing, it woke something up inside me. Something that was already there.

After those two days with Reb Zalman and the others, I came back to New York and thought: Wow. This is great. I'm Jewish.

So what do Jews do?

* * *

I could tell you about the moment, listening to a discussion of one of the weekly parshayot which address the laws of kashrut, when it occurred to me that if you were a Jew maybe God cared about what you ate, after all, that refraining from certain foods, however delicious, was part of the deal. I could tell you about meeting a guy at B'nai Jeshurun eleven years ago who said it would be a mitzvah if I told my story. I could tell you about going to Israel for the first time in 1997. I could tell you about learning to chant Torah, which I did, for the first time, at the age of thirty-nine. I could tell you about meeting a woman named Claire at a concert – all right, a Jewish singles event -- at HUC on West 4th Street. I could tell you that Claire and I were married by Rabbi Serge Lippe at the Brooklyn Heights Synagogue in January, 2001. I could tell you that on September 11th, 2001, we were both a lot closer to the action than we would have liked to have been. I could tell you that a year to the day after the towers fell our son, Nathan Mark, Natan Zalman ben Pesakh Yakov v'Liorah Shoshanah, was entered into the covenant of Abraham. That Zalman was my father's Hebrew name.

But who has time for all that? Nathan will be four in a couple of days. We belong to a fine congregation, with a rabbi who teaches a clear, consistent, uncompromising vision of what it takes to live a Jewish life: show up. Make the minyan. Learn Torah, and apply it to your life. Support Israel. Do mitzvot.

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Parshah Be-alotekha tells a story of men who were unclean by reason of a corpse and could not offer the Passover sacrifice on the appointed day. They went to Moses and Aaron and said: Nu? Everybody else gets to offer the sacrifice, and we get shut out?

Wait here, said Moses. I'll go ask God. I'll let you know what He says.

So Moses went to ask God what to do. And God told Moses that there was another time the sacrifice could be offered: in the second month, on the fourteenth day of the month, at twilight, they were to offer the Passover sacrifice in exactly the same manner as the rest of the community had done at the regular time. Moses returned to the men.

It's all right, he said. You have a second chance.

When our rabbi talked about this parshah a few months ago, the lesson he drew from the story of Pesach Sheni, the Second Passover, was this: if you find you're not ready to do something at one point in your life, wait. It doesn't mean you'll never be ready to do it. You'll be ready another time. You'll get another chance.

So here we are. Claire's Reform. I'm Conservative. There are three mincha minyans a day in my office building. It's pretty tough for me to say I don't have time. I go to an Orthodox shul in the neighborhood sometimes, too. The guys are pretty loose - they crack jokes, sing Simon and Garfunkel. They don't take themselves too seriously. At our house, Judaism is a patchwork of agreements, compromises, a little bit of this, a little bit of that. We're Orthoformaservative, Conservaformodox Jews. I guess you could say that –

I have to break off here. It's 7a.m. Nathan has woken up, and he wants me to help him write his name.

Excuse me.

TO BE CONTINUED.