

My Jesus Year

*A Rabbi's Son Wanders the
Bible Belt in Search of
His Own Faith*

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Son of a Preacher Man

The boys grew up, and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was a quiet man, staying among the tents.

—Genesis 25:27

THERE'S A STORY about my birth, and I'm told it's not an apocryphal one. Eight days after I entered this world, the morning of my circumcision, my father and I had our very first bonding experience. Just me and him in the back room of a butcher shop. Allow me to explain. Please.

I was a tiny baby, and our rabbi was unsure if I weighed enough to medically handle a circumcision. My dad, a man who holds multiple graduate degrees, was getting medical advice from our rabbi. That's like getting a chef's opinion on Middle Eastern politics. Or Paris Hilton's thoughts on anything.

Nobody in our neighborhood, the story goes, had a proper scale to weigh a baby. So my dad took me to the butcher.

Early on the morning of my circumcision, in the dark stillness before daybreak, my dad drove me in our family's brown Plymouth Volare to Sam's Kosher Meats and Deli. This was a depressing place. Sam was a cantankerous old man, always yelling at his wife in his thick eastern European accent. The place was in a constant state of disarray. Bad vibes abounded. Don't bring babies here. This is not a manger.

In the back room, deep inside the frigid meat locker, my dad took my little baby body and placed it on the ice-cold metal meat scale. The scale read 5.2 pounds. At least that's what he thought it read. It was 1975, and digital scales wouldn't appear on the scene for years.

For years afterward, members of our tight-knit Jewish community would come up to me, pinch my cheek, and call me “Butcher Boy.” At my bar mitzvah, the Jewish rite of passage into manhood, someone brought a rubber chicken to the party thinking it was funny. It wasn’t.

My dad called the rabbi and woke him up.

“Five point two pounds,” he said. “Will that work?”

“Yep,” said the rabbi, in a bleary daze. He was surely still half asleep and completely oblivious to what he was agreeing to. And in that moment, my fate was sealed. There was no turning back.

Circumcision is more than just a minor surgical procedure. It is what ties a Jew to his ancestors. It’s a remembrance of the covenant between Abraham and God made back in Genesis. The only difference between Abraham and me is that he had a choice. I didn’t. At eight days old, I wasn’t given a vote. And now I’m stuck with this religion for life.

Hours later, in the company of a couple hundred of our closest friends and family, I officially became a member of my people. The ceremony involved a scalpel, a lot of pain, and an emotional dent that would leave me reeling for years to come.

This was how I was introduced to religion. It was forced upon me, beginning in the frigid meat locker of a kosher butcher.

THE COHENS ARE a clan of rabbinic rock stars. My dad’s a rabbi, and from the very beginning we were brought up to join him in the family business. Of us six kids only my younger sister and I didn’t either become a rabbi or marry one (although, for the record, she does work in Jewish education).

Religion was served to us on a silver platter—whether we wanted it or not. We kept kosher, we observed the Sabbath, we prayed three times a day. No questions asked. These were all givens. I went to a preschool called the Garden of Eden. Except in this kindergarten, sin was not an option.

What’s more, as religious as we were growing up, I never actually understood Judaism’s fundamentals. After I was circumcised, like a prepackaged product coming off an assembly line, I felt haphazardly heaved into the deep end of the Jewish religious pool with the rest of them.

I tried to rebel at every turn. In preschool, I’ll now finally admit, I tasted the sweet nectar of forbidden indulgence by gobbling up nonkosher Nerds

candy behind my school building, crumpling its sin-soaked box back into my knapsack just before my carpool ride arrived. My dad once caught me yanking my *tzitzit* off one hot summer morning when I was about ten. What are *tzitzit*? you ask. The term literally means “fringes” and refers to the heavy wool garment with string and fringes on its corners that Jewish males are supposed to wear under their clothing at all times. Yes, let’s say it together, *that’s crazy*. I know.

In my childish eyes, my dad was someone who treated my siblings and me all the same, trying to raise us all in the same mold—with what appeared to me to be an ironclad fist of religion. With clenched teeth, he told us not to overdose on television, not to talk a lot with those of the opposite sex, and to avoid just about anything else that sounded like fun to a pre-pubescent kid. My brothers and sisters seemed to be fine with the religion we were born into. I, on the other hand, felt it as an unbearable weight upon my shoulders.

The fundamental basis of Judaism is that we’re the chosen people. But what if we didn’t choose to be chosen?

Don’t get me wrong. I still did everything I was told (well, except for the now infamous Nerds candy incident of 1980). To the outside world, I was the rabbi’s son, and no one would think otherwise. But a look inside my psyche yielded a different picture—one glossed with a gnawing sense of envy of those who could have what I couldn’t. No bacon cheeseburgers. No girlfriends. No *Cosby* show.

Alas, these were the halcyon days of my childhood. And yet, I wondered: Why was I being denied a typical American upbringing? What had I done to deserve this?

My mom played good cop to my dad’s Dirty Harry. She let me watch television. She didn’t make a big deal when she found out about the crush I had on a girl at school. She treated me and my siblings more like individuals, encouraging each of us to embrace our strengths, whatever those may have been.

Unfortunately, this loving maternal parenting philosophy didn’t gain much traction, as my mother collapsed suddenly and died on a bleak January morning when I was only thirteen years old. I had just come off the religious high of celebrating my bar mitzvah, yet with her sudden passing I instinctively reverted to an emotional fetal position. I felt crippled and woefully unprepared for the adulthood that lay before me.



WHILE I WAS growing up, my dad served as the principal of a Jewish high school in Atlanta. He felt bad that, come Saturday morning, the students went their separate ways to their individual synagogues. He longed for a place where the students and teachers could pray together on the Sabbath. So just before my mother's death, he decided to build an addition onto our home—a thousand-square-foot synagogue for them to pray in, with my dad leading the services. The construction contractor, a shady Israeli businessman, asked my dad for all the money up front. Apparently they don't teach Business 101 in rabbinical seminary, because my dad gave him the money. All of it.

Not surprisingly, the contractor fled the country with my college nest egg. My mom had a massive brain aneurism shortly after the incident. She was pronounced dead two days later. I guess you could say that even as a kid I never really had a positive association with synagogues.

Don't get me wrong. I indeed had moments of true religious verve and vigor as a child. I did in fact have genuine moments of spiritual inspiration. I remember fondly the day the synagogue attached to our home was finally completed nearly three years after the original contractor broke ground. It was a Friday afternoon. In a few hours, with the setting of the sun, we would usher in our Sabbath and inaugurate the sanctuary with its very first prayer service.

I entered the large room, alone for a moment, and took it all in. It was magnificent, a sight to behold. The new contractor, this one more honest than the first, had capped off the ceiling with a window-filled dome that allowed rays of sunlight to beam down into the sanctuary. They were like rays from heaven, perhaps my mother smiling down upon us. The room's construction may have contributed to her untimely death, but I was sure her spirit in heaven was full of joy now that it was finally complete.

I closed my eyes and pictured being the first to give my mother the grand tour of the new edifice. My father was an avid book collector and had lined nearly every wall of the sanctuary with bookcases as high as the eye could see. The hundreds of Jewish books, neatly stacked on each shelf, infused the room with intellectual warmth. In the front of the room, on a raised dais, stood the ark protecting two Torah scrolls inside. I almost wished that we didn't have to "open for business" in a few hours and that the room could remain in this virgin state forever.

Judaism didn't always suffocate me; there were periods of my life when my faith made me feel whole. Growing up in that synagogue, in the confines of those walls, I actually felt God's presence. Spirituality was *real* for me. It was tangible—in my prayers, in my thoughts, and in my daily life. I felt I could ask God, I could supplicate, I could cry, whether it was asking for divine assistance with getting a girl to like me, praying for an "A" on the next day's math test, or wondering why God had decided to rob me of a mother during my adolescence. Entering my teens without the aid of a mother would be the foundation of an eventual psychic distance between myself and God, one that would later blossom into full-blown cynicism.

The synagogue, with all it represented, brought some stability into my young psyche. The pain that its construction wrought on our family dynamic eventually gave way to a peaceful plateau, a place where I could feel close to my mother's long lost spirit and heal my wounds ever so slowly. But right before my eyes, whatever little stability my life had was about to be yanked from under me.

Less than two years after my mom's passing my dad remarried, this time to an artist from San Diego whom he didn't bother to introduce me to until they were practically engaged. I immediately assigned her the role of the proverbial evil stepmother, even though I hardly knew her. I met my future stepbrothers when my dad was showing them around our home shortly before they were to move in. The younger brother took up residence in the bedroom built underneath the synagogue and lined the walls with his Tony Gwynn posters and other sports paraphernalia.

After my mom died, even though I wasn't the oldest child, I had taken over many of the household duties. I had gotten into a comfortable routine that was shaken up by my new stepmother. She brought new rules and a new set of systems into the house. This was not the blessedly, blissfully blended family of *The Brady Bunch*.

I blamed my dad for all of this disruption. I despised him for doing this to me. I didn't care about his feelings or his need to move on after my mom died. I was an angry teenager who had lost his mother, and I blamed my dad for giving me this lot in life. After all, if he hadn't been an overly enthusiastic rabbi, I never would've been brought up in a wacky family that builds a synagogue next to their dining room. If it wasn't for him, I could lead a *normal* life, one free of all these ridiculous religious strictures.

No longer was it enough to just be mad at my dad; I also began to resent everything he stood for (Judaism) and everything that I believed had sent my mother to her early grave (the pressures of being a rabbi's wife).

It's true what they say about Jewish guilt. It's intoxicating and all-encompassing. As much as I thought I wanted to, I couldn't just stop doing the Jewish commandments cold turkey. No, that wasn't going to work. Ironically, I knew enough not to do that. I had been taught that, despite what we may be feeling inside, we are commanded to do these things. Judaism had my hands tied.

So in lieu of actual heresy, my spirit began to ebb and flow. My emotional connection to my religion began to vacillate. Prayers, the Sabbath, and a myriad of other Jewish commandments became less important. And, ever so slowly, my spiritual connection to God began to fade.

My growing religious apathy soon became coupled with an even greater vice: envy. Envy of those with things I couldn't have.

For years I had looked longingly at the church across the street from my house, its pristine landscape looming just outside my bedroom window. I watched, with transfixed eyes, each Sunday morning as the khaki-clad parishioners and their always smiling progeny emerged from their shiny minivans and walked into the sun-dappled, stained-glass sanctuary.

Pastor Duffey, the minister of the church, was my sole tangible entrée into this mysterious world of Christianity. During the few occasions he came over to our home—to shut off our oven, for example, after we had forgot to turn it off before the onset of the Sabbath, when Jews are prohibited from using electricity—I tried desperately to get a glimpse of who this man was. What was his life like? How did it feel to not be strangled by the myriad rules of an Orthodox Jewish lifestyle? How did it feel to flick on the light switch on the Sabbath? Where was he going after he left our house? To a football game? To eat pork?

While my upbringing was defined by what I couldn't do, it seemed to me that Christian kids had it all. In my eyes, they were wealthy, happy, and able to watch TV whenever they wanted. They had a choice. Should we watch *Transformers* or *He-Man*? Should we watch anything at all?

It was as if I had left the uterus with a yarmulke on my head and a Talmud already in my hand. All I was missing was a beard. A certain prescribed lifestyle was all I knew. I was brought up with certain expectations of who I was and who I should become.

Average Christian children seemed to just have it easier, unencumbered by the history of persecution we felt as Jews. In my eyes, they seemed to go through life with a laissez-faire attitude I could only dream about. They didn't have to worry how long their sideburns were (another Jewish law). They didn't have to wear *tzitzit*. They could eat at any restaurant, no matter how unkosher.

I felt lost, a traveler without a compass. I didn't feel a connection to my own religion. What's worse, the religion of others was tempting me, so close and yet so far away.

AS I ENTERED my college years and moved away from my dad's house and his overbearing ways, I felt an uncontrollable sense of freedom. Probably the same way Ben Franklin would have felt if he'd had the opportunity to shop at Circuit City. Forget the kite. This hi-tech wonderland would have been too much for colonial Franklin to grasp. He wouldn't have known where to begin.

I considered McDonald's, it's famed Big Mac and cheese the sheer embodiment of all that's unkosher, but it's utter and unbelievable unkosherness enveloped me in guilt. I thought about something less dramatic, perhaps a visit to a seedy bar. But after five minutes in the smoky joint, I gasped for some fresh air. Apparently, my feeble Jewish body wasn't built for blaring music coupled with an unhealthy dose of carbon monoxide. (Indeed, years later, a doctor confirmed what every Jewish male already knows—we're allergic to everything.)

This reminded me of a reality show I watched called *Amish in the City*. As a rite of passage the Amish send their teenagers on *Rumspringa*, a vacation from religion lasting several months to many years. During this time the kids are supposed to decide if they indeed want to lead an Amish life. The producers took five Amish teens and plopped them into a Hollywood home with five mainstream teenagers, including a stereotypical jock, a vegan, and a gay guy. They spent that summer dancing at rock concerts, getting their GEDs, and attending red-carpet events—you know, the usual stuff non-Amish kids do in their spare time. At the conclusion of the show, not one of the teenagers wanted to go back to an Amish lifestyle. I could relate to that.

As for me, I wanted to date a *shiksa*, a gentile girl, wrapped in bacon, but all I could do was order cable. My big defiant act was watching the Cartoon

Network, something that had been denied to me as a kid. We didn't have cable when I was growing up, so I was oblivious to miraculous inventions like its twenty-four/seven lineup of animation. What kind of heretic was I when I was in my midtwenties and my biggest vice was watching *The Smurfs*?

What's more, all of this freedom (while initially enjoyable) was in fact very limiting. The ease of a lifestyle free of religious strictures was tempting, but I had been taught otherwise. I knew this would be an unsatisfying way for me to go about my life. I knew I needed more. I yearned for a closer connection to something deeper, something more meaningful.

Again, I found myself looking to the Christians across the street. Not only did they have a life that was more fun and exciting than mine, but they seemed to be enjoying—nay, embracing—their religion all at the same time. It was a paradigm shift for me. Religion equals happiness. How could that be? I had to sit down.

We all, by nature, are riddled with personal uncertainties. They surround us on a daily basis. Our country is at war. Terrorism is a real threat. Our nation's political philosophies are divided. People are looking for certainty, some kind of stabilizing factor they can grasp onto. They want to have a concrete basis to build their lives upon. Enter religion.

For most Americans, church serves as that stabilizing factor. The sacred congregational community serves as a foundation on which they can rely upon in troubled times and a welcome place where they can feel they belong. And clergy is their bedrock, an unshakable force from which they gain strength, confidence, and fortitude.

To many, that's what religion is *supposed* to be. The irony was that, for me, religion was anything but. My religion was what was making me feel less certain about the world around me. Yes, I believed in God. But the conduit through which I connected to Him—my faith, my Judaism—wasn't resonating with me. And that troubled me even more. I felt that the religion I was given wasn't allowing me to access God the way I wanted. Maybe God made a mistake when He made me a Jew. Was I supposed to be a Mormon instead? Maybe a Baptist or a Pentecostal? I don't know. I just know this didn't feel right. Instead of being a stabilizing force in my life, my religion was what was shaking me to the core.

Was I alone in these thoughts? I certainly couldn't be the only Jew to have negative feelings toward my religion. America is replete with Jews who are apathetic at best. Indeed, I'm sure people from all walks of life,

from all religions, have the very same issues at one point or another during their lives. After all, we are all pilgrims on our own individual journeys toward faith.

This realization—that I was not alone—was a start. Misery, as the saying goes, loves company. Now what?

Using my new cable TV service, I flipped on a Sunday morning church service. Christians were already cooler than us. They had televised prayers. The pastor, a tall black man in a shiny gray suit with an inordinate number of buttons, was rousing. The audience was enraptured. But I didn't get it. All he was doing was shouting aphorisms. Basic ones, too. "God loves you!" "Be good!" "Don't lie, cheat, and steal!" How could such fundamental tenets be inspiring to people? It boggled my mind.

It almost seemed shallow. Wasn't religion supposed to be this deeply fulfilling experience between us humans and a Higher Power? In college I had minored in religious studies and had learned of the Tao of the Eastern religions, of the deeply philosophical nature of humankind's place on this planet. How could this be transmitted by a slickly dressed showman shouting rudimentary one-liners?

AFTER THREE DECADES in Atlanta, my dad had found employment elsewhere and packed up our home. He sold it to a real estate developer who turned around and rented it to a bunch of college coeds. It has since become a frat house; the synagogue room now hosts keg parties.

As happens with most families, my siblings all left the nest and moved to other cities for college and to start families of their own. I was the only one who stayed.

So this is where I found myself. I felt abandoned by my family. And, even more, I felt abandoned by God.

This was not the way I wanted to lead my life. My actions were being fueled by anger and resentment. My decisions—to not visit family, to gain little from religion—were being dictated by years of friction and ill will. I so wanted something positive to live for. I needed some compelling, proactive reason to move forward on all fronts. This spiritual stagnation was eating me up inside, and I had to do something to fix it.

At the time, I was twenty-six, an age at which most of my Orthodox friends were already married. Some even had kids. They were starting

their own lives and, I assumed, creating their own new connections to Judaism through the support system of spouse and children.

Thoughts of marriage became my cure-all. Surely, a nice wife I could bring home to my dad would show him I wasn't a completely lost cause. Wistfully putting all my hopes in the dream that getting married would solve all my problems—with my family and my religion—I began to think about it constantly. It became all-consuming. It was what got me through the day.

Mission Impossible

God said to Abram, "Go for yourself from your land, from your relatives, and from your father's house to the land that I will show you."

—Genesis 12:1

LET'S SAY, FOR argument's sake, you're in a college philosophy class. Your professor has been on a kick lately about the concept of "what if" to get you and your classmates to start thinking outside the box. Stuff like what our world would be like had Al Gore become president in 2000. What it would be like to fly. What it would be like if you were a cartoon. You know, normal stuff like that.

Now, clearly delusional, he's given you an assignment that opens up the Pandora's box of all Pandora's boxes and asks you what it would be like if you started your own religion. What would your theology be? What laws would you mandate of your followers?

Ideas begin to bounce around the classroom. Someone gets the ball rolling and starts off with the basic monotheistic mantra—an invisible God, one who's all-knowing, all-powerful. Yada, yada, yada. We've heard this all before. Nothing new here. So much for this classroom discussion.

But then your classmate, the really sinister one, gets it going. Let's force our people to be really obsessive-compulsive. Make them tie their left shoelace before their right one. Make them wash their hands twice on the right and twice on the left anytime they eat a piece of bread. But not cookies. Or fruit. Just bread. Oh, and make them recite a specific blessing—in a foreign language—before they eat anything. And also when they're finished eating. And speaking of blessings, let's make them say one every time they

see lightning. Hear thunder. Glimpse a rainbow. See a dwarf. Put on new clothing. Smell a spice. Cross a river. Yeah, and make them say a blessing every time they go to the bathroom.

This is getting interesting now.

Okay, enough with the blessings. How about for one day each week they can't shower. Or use any hot water. And for nine consecutive days each summer they can't do laundry. And one day a year they can't sit on a chair.

How about a Sabbath. Anyone got some ideas to throw around about their day of rest? Yeah, forget rest. Let's create so many intricate laws regarding the Sabbath that they'll just feel as if they're walking on eggshells the whole time. For starters, they can't use cars on their Sabbath. For twenty-four hours they just have to walk everywhere. And if it's raining, they can't carry umbrellas. Forget umbrellas. They can't carry *anything*. No umbrellas, no purses, no books, no strollers, nothing. Not even a key to their house. It'll be like they're homeless.

Okay, there's not much time left in class. Let's move on to prayers. Prayers can't be in English. How about ancient Hebrew? Sure, sounds good. Hey, can we throw some Aramaic in there too? Don't see why not.

Anyone else? In a moment of utter genius, you decide to make your people pray the exact same words each day of their entire life. No room for change. Every day, every week, every month, the prayers won't change. Same words. All the time.

Class is dismissed. You and your classmates do not, thank the Lord Almighty, possess special powers that allow you to create a bizarre "choose your own adventure" religion. But what if you did? What if it were all true? What if I told you this fake religion you just created, this faith-based *Dungeons and Dragons* alternate universe—it actually exists.

Look back at the last couple pages. Everything your philosophy class came up with? All Jewish laws. Let that sink in for a moment. Seriously. I know. It's scary. The thing about saying a blessing after going to the restroom? True. Oh, and that thing about tying your left shoe before your right one? Sadly, also true.

This is how Judaism appeared to me growing up. Just swap your philosophy classmates for a cadre of rabbis, my father being one of them. But everything else matches the doomsday scenario described above. All the myriad mind-numbing laws. A bunch of dos and don'ts. To be exact, 613. That's how many laws are delineated in the Five Books of Moses. There are

248 positive (do this) and 365 negative (don't do that) ones. And don't even get me started on the oral laws. Jewish tradition teaches us that in addition to the Old Testament God gave oral laws to Moses. These laws were eventually written down. The result? Twenty tractates of the Talmud with thousands of pages of esoteric discussions on laws relating to everything from menstrual blood to cattle ranching. In Aramaic.

Before we take this discussion any further, I should point out that not all Jews are crazy and law-obsessed. We don't all tie our left shoe before the right one. The worldwide Jewish community can basically be divided into three groups (they can obviously be subdivided into many more and entire books can be written about each one, but for the purposes of our conversation, three shall suffice). The strictest group, the ones who adhere to all of these laws, are known as Orthodox Jews. I had the good fortune of growing up in this denomination. Then there are the Conservative Jews, who follow some but not all of these laws. And, finally, there are Reform Jews, who consider themselves culturally Jewish but follow very few of the laws listed in this chapter. And then, of course, there are the majority of American Jews—those who are unaffiliated with any of these groups.

Everything we do in Judaism is ensconced in a long litany of laws. My childhood friend Chaim, now a Villanova law professor, is an expert on the intersection of law and religion. He recently published a paper that, among other things, compares theological and legal differences between Christianity and Judaism. At one point he compares baptism to the Jewish *mikvah*, a ritual bath we use for things like conversions, married women, and—I kid you not—new dishes.

In discussing baptisms he writes that Christian scholars mostly agree that “ritual technicalities should not interfere with the process of spiritual conversion; it's the conversion of the heart that matters most.” But when it comes to talking about a *mikvah*, the rabbinic sages “address nearly every question that an imaginative lawyer might direct at a rule requiring immersion in a pool of water (what counts as *immersion*, what defines *in*, what qualifies as a *pool*, and what constitutes *water*).”

Read that last sentence again. Nowhere are the theological issues mentioned. Where's the spirituality?

Just for kicks, here's another example Chaim gives. When discussing the prohibition against cooking on the Sabbath, he explains: “What constitutes cooking? What is the minimum heat (of either the dish or the

water) required for something to cook? How long must something be on the fire before it is considered ‘cooked’? Is direct heat even needed? What about leaving an egg near a bubbling kettle or in the hot sun? Is defrosting something equivalent to cooking it? Is salting vegetables equivalent to preserving them and thus too similar to ‘cooking’? And what is the scope of the prohibition? If A brings the fire, B brings the wood, C brings a pot, D fills it with water, E adds spices to the water, and F stirs the pot, are they all liable? (Yes.) Would the answer be different if the fire came at the end rather than the beginning? (Yes.) Does it matter if one is unaware that cooking is prohibited on the Sabbath? Or if the cooking is an inevitable, potential, or incidental by-product of some other action?” It’s like one of those Russian nesting dolls, but this is worse. Every time you open one, there are *two* others inside. They metastasize in an absurd geometric progression.

Are you starting to get the idea? The Talmud is not discussing how to make the day of rest a more spiritually uplifting experience. On the contrary; its meandering questions instead ask us to compulsively obsess over every bit of minutiae. Ironically, figuring out what work we can and cannot do takes a lot of work, rendering this period of time anything but a day of rest. Of course, I’m not the first to make this connection. Freud, a Jew, who as a child regularly attended Catholic Mass with his Czech nanny, believed that religion was the “universal obsessional neurosis of humanity.”

This is exactly how I felt growing up. As if I was in jail, imprisoned by a faith that favors deed over creed. Judaism is a religion in which actions trump faith. Checking lettuce for bugs (another weird Jewish law and a real party favorite) is just as important as belief in God. This type of religious conviction is completely anathema to most Christians. They *merely* want you to accept Christ. They don’t care if you examine your salad before you eat it. (But it wouldn’t hurt, since we actually do sometimes end up finding microscopic bugs in store-bought lettuce. Just an FYI.)

This conceit is evident in a Hebrew concept known as a *shayla*. The term is basically translated as “question,” but it refers to a more specific type of question. When we ask a rabbi a question about Judaism, more often than not it’s a legal question, not a theological one. For example, we’re not allowed to mix meat and dairy food. To be extra careful, we keep two sets of dishes. Let’s say I used a dairy spoon with a meat pot by accident. I need to ask the rabbi what to do with that spoon. Do I throw it away? Is there a

way to make it “kosher” again? Most likely, he’ll respond with a litany of follow-up questions. What was in the pot? How hot was it? When was the last time the spoon had been used? And so on. Compounding this problem is that asking a different rabbi will often garner you a different answer.

I’m not asking the rabbi, as a Catholic parishioner would a priest, how many Hail Marys I need to say in order to be forgiven for this transgression. That’s not the point here. I’m asking a practical question. What the hell do I do with this spoon? I’ll ask the obvious. What does this have to do with spirituality? Because once we go down this road, there’s no natural place to stop. Forget the spoon. What about the pot? What about the food that was in the pot? What about the stove this tragic episode happened on?

In many ways, it’s like trying to measure ever smaller units of distance. First you start in miles, then you go down to feet, then you go down to inches, then to centimeters and on to millimeters. There’s no stopping. You can always divide something up one more time. There’s always another layer of precision. So too there are volumes of Jewish case law, each one more refracted than the one before. Before you know it, you’re talking about the social behavior and disposition of a theoretical ox.

Allow me to explain. Please.

Imagine this. I’m a kid playing ball with my friends, and I’m called inside to study the Talmud. It’s a dense section about the laws of damaged property. If I had an ox (which I don’t) and if I lent it to you (which I wouldn’t) and during that time my ox gored you (which I don’t think he would since he’s such a fun-loving animal), am I liable for the damages? The Talmud dives into a difficult discussion on such a case. Has this ox ever gored before? If so, when? How often? What type of damages occurred? I didn’t get it. Why would an eight-year-old boy have to learn about oxen? After a few hours of this, I was the one who wanted to damage some property.

Yet we were taught that studying this was the most important part of our religion. But this back-and-forth exercise in intellectual gymnastics seemed more like a law-school class than a theological discourse. And those who master the Talmud, out of all the other texts in the Jewish pantheon, are considered the most brilliant. I didn’t understand how this had become the barometer of saintliness in my religion.

Maybe I’m crazy, but I thought religion had something to do with belief in God and being nice to your neighbor. I wasn’t aware it had anything to

do with oxen or pots or spoons, and even if it did, that those things would be of paramount import.

Why was this educational activity of studying an arcane Aramaic text like the Talmud so critical to being a good Jew? What kind of religion was this that worshiped minutiae over meaning?

Don't get me wrong. There are brilliance and beauty in this faith. I just haven't found them yet.

THERE IS ONE area of Judaism that is particularly troubling. Yes, the oxen rank up there, but they're not my ultimate summit. For me, that would be prayer.

Our sterile prayer services have literally hundreds of laws surrounding them—exactly when they can be said, when to sit, when to stand, what you need to be thinking about, what can be in the room with you, which direction to face, what to wear during prayers . . . and the list goes on. Not following just one of these laws can negate the entire prayer you just recited—which means you've got to say it all over again. It takes years to learn all the laws. I should know. After a lifetime of saying these prayers, I've spent the last four years *relearning* them with my friend Joel during weekly study sessions. It's this nearly scientific approach that basically sucks all the spirituality and joy right out of conversing with God.

All of this perhaps explains why synagogue attendance is at an all-time low. There is nothing outwardly exciting or even enjoyable about this experience. Many Jews pay their synagogue dues, but only attend a few times a year. Merely paying for membership makes people feel good about themselves. In his book *Bowling Alone*, political scientist Robert Putnam makes note of this trend, decrying the decline of what he calls "social capital" in America. He writes, for example, of how senior citizens join the AARP but don't actually attend meetings; they merely pay a membership fee. To stem the tide, he suggests it's high time we reassert the human connections between us.

Nowhere is this more apparent to me than in houses of worship. Most American Jews only attend services twice a year, on Rosh Hashanah (the Day of Judgment) and Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), which are collectively referred to as the High Holidays. Meanwhile, church parking lots are filled to capacity every Sunday morning. I begin to wonder: What

are they doing in there that's so much fun it's bringing people back week in and week out?

Instead of lifting my spirit up, instead of inspiring me to feel a closer connection to the divine, instead of making me feel that being a member of the chosen people is the ultimate blessing, my religion has been smothering me. Instead of Jewish pride, the cloistered environment I grew up in bred envy of those of other religions for what was being denied to me. How come they got to have it easy? How come they could eat at McDonald's and I was forced to eat *matzah*, the proverbial bread of affliction? Indeed, ever since I was a child, I've found that my eyes and spirit have been wandering across the street from my childhood home, to the packed parking lot of the Cokesbury Methodist Church—my snake, my apple, my Garden of Eden all wrapped into one.

But I never dared enter to see what actually went on in this Wonka factory of faith. Perhaps too scared or too guilt-ridden, I remain, as my religion has for millennia, the outsider.

My New York speed-dating spree, which lasted through most of my twenties, was a low point in reconciling my faith, but the real challenge was coming to terms with my future. I now had seemingly everything an Orthodox Jew like me covets. I had married Elizabeth, the beautiful blond daughter of a minister. She gave me unique first-class access to this Christian world I felt so deprived of. She even came with a doting evangelical grandmother who wanted to pay for my ticket to Israel for the Second Coming of Christ. By marrying Elizabeth I had hoped to quash the envy that had gnawed at me as a kid. But, alas, something was still missing. I needed to actually pry open the doors to the Wonka factory and go inside.

Recent polls show that 40 percent of Americans, more than in any other country, attend church regularly. In the United States more people pray to Jesus on Sunday than attend all the weekend sporting events combined. And here in the Bible Belt, where I've lived my entire life, a street corner is more likely to have a place of Christian worship than a Starbucks. In Atlanta, there are no fewer than fifteen megachurches with more than ten thousand congregants each, the most in the entire country. Go figure. Nationwide, congregations are ballooning, and pastors take over football stadiums to spread their message weekly, in multiple services, to as many as forty thousand in a weekend.

Meanwhile, synagogue attendance is flagging; for that matter, Judaism as a whole is struggling just to keep its followers interested. Studies indicate that Jewish philanthropists in this country spend more money on what's called "inreach" than any other cause—including that catchall cause, support for Israel. Fueling all of this is an alarming fact: 50 percent of Jews in America are now intermarrying into other faiths. The Jewish community in America is hemorrhaging; we're a dying breed. And, even though I had not intermarried, I wasn't doing much to help either. My spiritual malaise was not allowing me to embrace Judaism the way I knew I should.

So this is where I find myself: an Orthodox Jew looking for spiritual meaning in the American Bible Belt. If only I could spend a year immersing myself in Christianity. I would pray with a whole host of churches, celebrate their holidays, and enjoy their culture. I don't merely want to be the Jack Kerouac of religion, traversing the vast Bible Belt landscape in search of wild spiritual experiences. I'll embark on this journey because I want to know the true appeal of Christianity to Christians. What are they doing so right that we Jews are doing so wrong? Is their church experience simply more fun? Do they just have better PR? Or, as I suspect, is there something deeper going on? Mind you, I'm not looking to convert. I'm just in search of universal answers and common truths about the way we all experience faith in America.

And, as crazy as this sounds, I'm looking to Jesus to make me a better Jew. I want to reconnect to my Judaism. Throughout my childhood and even into early adulthood, I honestly did have moments of true spirituality. Like the day of my bar mitzvah. Graduating into Jewish manhood gave me a sense of pride and purpose that I didn't have the day before. Or my experiences in my dad's synagogue attached to our home. The prayers I prayed in that room were some of the most meaningful ones I've recited my entire life. I was always the last one finished. Nowadays, I can barely sit through the whole service. Back then, I actually felt as if I were talking to God—and He was listening.

But time has distanced me from those rare moments. As well, even as a child, I don't think I was ever taught the true meaning of being Jewish, and of religion in general. Yeah, I was taught to wear a skullcap and to follow the thousands of rules of being a good Jew. But I never understood my religion on a deeper level. This immaturity, this lack of understanding, led to a spiritual apathy that was troubling to me. All of my brothers had become rabbis. My older sister married one. I knew there was wisdom to

all of this (after all, I was still a practicing Jew); I just needed to find a way to appreciate it.

I want to be a good Jew, but I fear I lack the necessary tools. And rather than go down the normal path—study the Torah, speak to a rabbi, watch a Mel Brooks movie—I will seek to find a renewed appreciation for my Judaism in the last place anyone would look: the hallowed halls of a church.

So I tell my new bride, still dripping from the conversion waters, that I want to go on a religious road trip through local churches of different denominations to finally see what is going on in them. I guess I half thought she would find the idea charming. After all, she had explored a religion outside the one she was born into. What would be so bad if I did the same? And another thing: She needn't worry that I might leave Judaism. I had no intention of doing any such thing. It had nothing to do with a newfound fondness for Christ, but as a means to an end. I know it sounds crazy, but it's true. I'm hoping to find something in a church that will reconnect me with my Judaism. Common sense be damned.

Well, this doesn't go as well as planned. I broach the subject with her, and she thinks I'm certifiably insane. Who would blame her? Here she had just spent half a dozen years working to convert to Judaism and now her dear husband wants to go to church.

I want to experience synagogue specifically and Judaism as a whole with the same virgin eyes that attracted Elizabeth to my religion. The only way for me to do this is to go to church, to taste the forbidden fruit. As the artist M. C. Escher once said, "Only those who attempt the absurd will achieve the impossible."

"Church is not as exciting as you think it's going to be," she tells me one night. "It can be just as boring as synagogue. I'm telling you, but if you want to see it for yourself, go right ahead. Knock yourself out." She says I can go on two conditions: I can't tell anyone I'm doing this and she won't go with me. It may not be a ringing endorsement, but it's the best I'm going to get from her.

But Elizabeth is only half the problem. Technically, Jews aren't allowed anywhere near a church, let alone inside during Sunday services. It's yet another Jewish law, one that I was taught over and over again as a child who lived across the street from a church. "Don't go over there. It's dangerous," I was told, as if Cokesbury Methodist was the home of a child predator or the haunted house of the neighborhood witch.

So I open my Rolodex and start calling all the rabbis I know. This is how my mind works. I am so frustrated with Judaism that I want to spend a year gallivanting through Jesus' house. Yet the one thing that's now stopping me from doing so is a seal of rabbinic approval. The irony of this doesn't faze me, and I keep dialing. Rabbi after lenient rabbi gives me the no-go, saying this is strictly prohibited. I want to grow spiritually, and here my religion is holding me back. This feeling is all too familiar.

I'm about to give up on my planned mission, my big out-of-the-box idea to reconnect with my Judaism by stepping foot in church. With nowhere else to turn, I ask a rabbi whom Elizabeth is close to and has known for many years. Surely he, of all people, will understand where I'm coming from. After all, he had helped Elizabeth understand Judaism when she was still a Christian.

Barely hesitating, the Orthodox rabbi surprises me and gives me his blessing. He lauds the idea and encourages me to go to as many churches as I can. As Jews we need to look beyond our peripheral vision, he tells me. There's much we can learn from other religions. As well, he says, I can help explain Judaism to and break down the myths and preconceived notions of those I meet along the way.

Like my wife, this rabbi also gives me two caveats. One, I must wear my press pass so that everyone who sees me knows that I am there to observe and not to pray. I'm a journalist for a Jewish publication, so that shouldn't be too hard. Second, he says, I must wear my skullcap so that people know I am Jewish. He wants me to stand out and not blend in with my fellow faith-based compatriots.

Armed with his rabbinic approval and riddled with Jewish guilt, I start to map out which churches I'm going to visit first. There are so many to choose from—Episcopalian, Baptist, Catholic, Pentecostal, and on and on. It's July now, and I'm going to give myself an entire year, a complete cycle of seasons and holidays, for this adventure. I not only want to finally see what has been denied to me all these years, but deep inside me I so want to feel spiritual again. I want to find God all over again. I want to own my religion and get out of this fog of faith.

As excited as I am to get started on this quest, I've got to admit that there's a part of me that's not itching to go. I'm scared. Growing up in a cloistered Jewish neighborhood and going to private Jewish schools, I always encountered Christians as the minority—the occasional science teacher, the teller

at the bank, maybe a family friend. My parents had created an odd environment for me. In America, where Jews make up less than 2 percent of the entire population, I had been raised in a subculture that showed just the opposite—Jews were the majority and non-Jews were the minority. I didn't realize it at the time, but I was living in a *Twilight Zone* episode.

I was scared to venture out into this unknown territory. What if I wasn't welcomed at these churches? If centuries of Jewish persecution had taught me anything, it was that I should be wary when cavorting with Christians. I try to think of some common ground and the only thing I come up with is Jesus. They seem to like him, and he was once Jewish. So maybe I have a fighting chance.

Another scary thought: Religion has bred some pretty nasty folk over the years. Forget about Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, and other villains throughout biblical history. I'm talking about modern-day whackos. Like David Koresh going down in a blaze of glory with his fellow Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas. Or the Jonestown cult members who gulped cyanide-laced Kool-Aid in a mass suicide. Come to think of it, people have done some pretty odd things in the name of religion. Maybe I'd have trouble coming out of this alive.

The bottom line is that I have no idea what to expect, and I don't like walking into places where I have no idea what to expect. It's like a perpetual first date. And nobody I know likes first dates. To be perfectly honest, I was kind of hoping no rabbi would even allow this venture to take place, thereby giving me the best excuse not to go church hopping.

But a rabbi did approve this pilgrimage. He may be punished in the afterlife for giving me the go-ahead, but I have no justification for dragging my feet any longer. My soul is yearning for something deeper, and I owe it to myself to start the process. Like the wide-eyed Don Quixote in search of adventure, I will leave my comfort zone and enter into uncharted territory.

My religion has come, some say tumbled, a long way from the Judaism of yesteryear. The Garden of Eden is overgrown with weeds and bitter fruit, its pristine paths trampled by decades of religious persecution and plain old-fashioned apathy. We no longer live in a Polish village, and we certainly don't live in biblical times. Fiddler is no longer on the roof, and Moses has long since left the mountaintop. Even God, some say, has left the building.

Which is why the rabbi also said, "Come back and tell us what we can all learn from going to church, so we can make synagogue life better. It's

important for Jews to know.” He wanted me to be the skullcapped guinea pig, learning from the ways of our Christian neighbors. He recognized the usefulness of this journey for myself and others like me. As if my personal quest wasn’t enough, here I am saddled with an extra burden—that of my entire people. Leave it to Judaism to pile on the extra work. But the rabbi was persistent. “Our people, they need you,” he said in his best Jedi master impersonation.

So now it is my leap of faith into the unknown abyss of Christian life that will help bring my people back. At least that’s what the rabbi wants. As for me, I just hope it will function as the antidote to my own spiritual ills.

So with my doubts, fears, and Orthodox Judaism in tow, off I go to church.