

The incident took me to my emotional low point. Being publicly berated by someone who did not know the facts was one of the most demoralizing experiences. What I did not know at the time was that this experience would prove to be one of the most valuable lessons I ever learned.

As someone that had enjoyed gossiping with friends, I never took much stock in the idiom: “Don’t judge a book by its cover.” When a friend observed, while sharing some “juicy news,” “I know we shouldn’t judge, but life is so much more fun when you do,” I agreed.

Standing as the one being judged, and in public no less, I rethought my judgmental nature. Having learned firsthand what it feels like to be on the other side of others’ judgments, I decided to retire to a more boring position. In the years that have followed, I have often found myself saying, “There are two sides to every story,” or encouraging others to try to see other possibilities. That does not mean that I am a saint—far from it—but I have taken the experience to heart and have tried not to do to others what was done to me. Divorce can make you angry, bitter, and sad. It can also make you a better person.

I saw Tate one last time on New Year’s Day 2001, when she made it clear that she did not approve of Cameron not being Jewish. Twelve years later, I still regret that our friendship died, but I recognize that I am as much responsible for its death as Tate. Wanting to leave my old life behind as quickly as possible, along with any painful feelings associated with it, I turned away rather than force a discussion. Five years ago, in an effort to extend an olive branch, I admitted my responsibility and apologized for the rift, doing so in a letter that I hoped would encourage Tate to make amends also. I know a letter was not the most courageous way to ask for forgiveness, but based on what had transpired, I feared hearing rejection over the phone. I received no response, but I feel better knowing that I tried.

Mike and I stopped counseling sessions after four weeks, when the therapist said she felt I had no interest in resolving our issues and did not believe that it

was worthwhile to continue. At the same time, I was spending more and more time with Cameron, even missing Yom Kippur services that October to go to Vermont for a long weekend. The trip was fun, but I could not help but think that if there were ever a year that I might not be inscribed in the Book of Life, it was this one. Sensing that I was at risk of exclusion, I made a promise to work extra hard to do the right thing the rest of the year in order to absolve my holiday sins. As I thought about the year ahead, I started to realize that as Cameron and I became more serious, I was going to have to confront the fact that he was not Jewish—something I was conveniently ignoring.

Often, Cameron and I would engage in discussions that would challenge me to think differently—whether it was about books, politics, or business. Our conversations about religion were no different, with the exception that they often took place on long runs in Central Park. There is nothing like a fifteen- or twenty-mile run to get you in the mood to talk about God. Cameron would present his argument that to maintain order in ancient times, men created religion. The concept of an omnipotent being that could levy harsh punishments over individuals and entire nations was smart politics. Once the idea of an all-powerful, omnipresent, omniscient God was established, laymen could write a code of laws and ethics and say that they were the word of God, which made getting acceptance from the public easier. Cameron often held up the laws of kashrut as an example. He would share his view at the time that the dietary restrictions were really about public health.

“When people mixed milk and meat or ate pork or shellfish, they got sick, and the lay leaders needed a way to prevent disease,” he said. “After they established the idea of God, they just said, ‘God said, “no can do.””

“Do you believe in God?” I would ask, sometimes during and sometimes after these discussions.

“I believe there is something else, but I’m not sure what that something else is,” he would reply.

Cameron's views were not new to me. I had heard Jews and non-Jews rationalize religion before, and it could be a very logical and appealing argument, especially when you were trying to find a way to make religion a nonissue in order to make an interfaith relationship work. My head agreed with Cameron. The Torah is a political document, but as someone who was not Jewish, there was something he was missing. He did not understand my emotional and cultural connection to Judaism. Torah as a blueprint for civil society was not enough for me to disregard the history and culture I share with other Jews. At the same time, I was not confident in my opinions because I did not feel I had studied the Torah or other Jewish texts enough to make a strong counterargument. Actually, to be honest, it was not that I had not studied enough. I had not studied at all. My knowledge consisted of a few highlights remembered from religious school, including the creation story, the Ten Commandments, and the stories of Passover and Hanukkah. Cameron often remarked that his father, who went to theology school and was a layman at his Episcopal church, knew more than I did about Judaism. It was understandable that I did not feel like I came to this discussion from a position of strength.

While Cameron and I were starting to discuss religion, I was reading *The Red Tent*, the book of historical fiction by Anita Diamant in which she tells the story of Jacob's daughter Dinah, found in Genesis chapter 34. In the Bible, her brothers tell her story; in the book, her story is told from her own perspective. I was tearing through the book and discussing it with a friend, who also read it on the train to work. I was in the thick of it on Valentine's Day, my first with Cameron. After work, Cameron and I headed to a cozy French bistro in the East Village to celebrate. During dinner, I started talking about the book, even taking it out of my bag to show him the family tree page. At some point, the conversation moved from the book to our ongoing discussion about religion and then into an argument. By the time we left the restaurant, we did not speak and rode silently back uptown in a taxi—not the Valentine's Day either of us had imagined.

I was frustrated that we were not getting anywhere in our religion discussion, and I realized that I needed to do a better job of articulating why it

was important to me to have a Jewish home and children without sounding as if I were succumbing to family pressure. While my family was glad that I was out of an unhappy marriage and dating, they were concerned that I was getting serious with someone so quickly, especially someone who was not Jewish. Do not get me wrong—they liked Cameron; they just would have been more comfortable if he were a Jew. I understood their fear of this just being a rebound relationship. After I had experienced firsthand the difficulties of marriage to someone from a similar background, I appreciated that it was a good idea to minimize differences as my mother had suggested. On the other hand, I felt I had already fulfilled my role as the good girl: I had married the person who met my family's Jewish criteria. Now I wanted to pursue a relationship with someone I felt brought more to the table than the right religion.

To understand better what I believed, I decided to read the Torah. Since I had never read it from cover to cover, I figured it was a good idea to get more comfortable with my own religion before I investigated a different one. It was far more interesting than I thought—even racy in parts. But other than reaffirming my belief in one God, it did not help me clarify my position.

So, I went into research mode. As background, I am kind of a geek. I love learning. I love reading. And when a subject directly affects my life, I tend to scour the Internet and library for books and information so that I can become better informed and make knowledge-based decisions. This is probably why my actions with regard to leaving Mike and getting involved with Cameron were so surprising to some people. It just was not my typical pattern of behavior. I did no research and read no books before I plunged myself into the throes of divorce.

I read several books on interfaith relationships, Jewish family life, and Christian symbols. The interfaith books shared the different ways that couples resolved the religion issue from pursuing one faith to conversion to raising children in two religions. It even discussed how some families felt that joining the Unitarian

church was a good compromise because of its liberal theology. The options that were presented were interesting, but the only one that appealed to me was a Jewish home. The problem was that I felt that by insisting on Judaism as the only religion that I was digging my heels in and not showing the ability to compromise, which at the time, I thought was more important. I was not making much progress. I cracked the book about Christian symbols, hoping that by being better informed about the other side, I could find areas where I could give. It did not work.

Part of me wanted to scream, “*Ugh! This is too hard!*” and call it quits. But I believed in Cameron and me, and I was not ready to give up. Not to mention, the idea of failing at another relationship was not so appealing either. If I had been in the practice of talking to God (I was not), now would have been a good time to appeal for some help. But since I felt that the combination of questioning my faith and my other transgressions over the past year had already earned me a black mark next to my name, I assumed that divine intervention would be asking for too much. I know now that God would not have been appalled at all since I was engaging in a very Jewish act. Since Jacob wrestled with God and man in chapter 32 of Genesis, wrestling with the idea of God has been at the core of Jewish identity.

Determined to find a solution, I began to look inward to try to define my beliefs. I realized that as convenient as it would be to disregard a belief in a higher power, I could not. As the Monkees said, “I’m a believer.” I also knew that while I accepted that Jesus was an important historical figure, I did not believe that he was divine. He also scared the bejesus out of me (an issue it took me another seven years to work out—see chapter 4). Most importantly, I could not shake my Jewish peoplehood, that underlying bond that unites an individual Jew with the entire Jewish community. *Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh*<sup>2</sup> (all Jews are responsible for one another). With that realization, I found the reason why I wanted a Jewish home: my people were counting on me. I felt that I could not let them down.

As Cameron and I continued to try to find a solution to religion in a future home with children, I finally explained myself one night at our kitchen table. As tears streamed down my face, I articulated the guilt that I felt for considering intermarriage. “After all the things the Jewish people have endured, how can I turn my back?” I said.

“I don’t think anyone is asking you to turn *your* back,” responded Cameron.

“Six million Jews died in the Holocaust, and we’re losing more because people are marrying outside the faith and choosing not to raise their children as Jews. How can I do the same? If I don’t help to carry on the religion, who will?” I continued.

Cameron did not respond as I sat in the chair crying, finally releasing all my frustration, confusion, guilt, and pressure. I never thought that I would have this conversation with a potential (not Jewish) mate, but here I was. I clearly saw that, rather than being part of the solution, I was now part of the problem I just described.

I am not sure how I knew that intermarriage and Jewish continuity were concerns of the Jewish community. I was not, as a young adult, engaged in Jewish life outside of the observance of holidays with my family. I did not read the Jewish press. Maybe I heard the disappointment and concern in the voices of the adults in my family when they spoke about my uncle and cousins who had married out. Maybe it was a friend’s comment or a topic of a High Holiday sermon at my parent’s synagogue. Whatever the source, I knew that intermarrying was considered wrong and bad for the Jews. Given my predilection for pleasing others, I did not want to be one of those “bad Jews” who were willing to let the future of the faith be someone else’s problem. I cared too deeply about my connection to the Jewish people and my Jewish family to do that.

Now that I am actively engaged in passing on Judaism to my son and watch other interfaith parents nurture their children’s Jewish identity, I see that my

beliefs about intermarriage were misguided. I accepted as true what vocal Jewish leaders and academics said about intermarrieds—they lose belief, and their children are less likely to associate themselves with a religion—because I did not see any Jewishly engaged interfaith families that countered this perception. I did not know that intermarriage did not always equal abandonment of faith, but that might have turned out to be a good thing. Looking back, I think that this idea of giving up my Jewish identity and my children not having a connection to Judaism because Cameron was not Jewish subconsciously ignited my fight response, which created a determination to beat the odds. If things worked out with Cameron, my interfaith family would be different; we would prove the intermarriage naysayers wrong.

After the conversation, we again tabled the discussion of religion in the home. Then, as if God really had been watching, a brochure arrived in the mail from the Center for Religious Inquiry (CRI), an interfaith program based at St. Bartholomew's (St. Bart's) Church on Park Avenue in Midtown and directed by a rabbi. I opened it and noticed that one of the offerings was a month-long course for people in interfaith relationships, comparing and contrasting Christianity and Judaism, taught by St. Bart's rector and a rabbi. As my face lit up, my first thought was that this may be the only time in my life that I was happy my name was on a direct mail list; my second thought was that I could not wait to tell Cameron about it when he got home. When Cameron arrived, I excitedly showed him the CRI catalog. Knowing that we were approaching the one-year anniversary of our first date and discussing marriage, we agreed that this program might be just what we needed to resolve our problem of religion in our future home. I went online and registered us both for the class that summer.

The night of our first session, Cameron had something come up at work that made it difficult for him to leave, so, with a brand new spiral notebook in hand, I went to class alone. After introductions, the rector and the rabbi dove into the material. As I sat and listened, I looked at the participants. I was the youngest person in the room and the only one in an interfaith relationship. With the exception of one woman who was there just because the subject was of interest

to her, all of the other people in the room were in their fifties and sixties, and they were taking the course because they had a child who was dating or married to someone of a different faith. I was both impressed and surprised: impressed that these parents would seek out something like this in order to bridge a gap or improve their relationship with their child, surprised that there were parents that actually did this kind of stuff. I do not remember either of my own parents ever pursuing any kind of adult education, and I felt quite certain that it never crossed their mind to take a course such as this one to gain some insight that might help them have a better connection with one of their children. While my parents have always been well-read, well-traveled, and engaged in many cultural activities, up to this point in time, they just were not that intellectually curious when it came to religion. I wanted to tell my classmates how amazing I thought they were just for being there and how their children were lucky to have parents that cared to do something like this.

Throughout class, I diligently took notes so that I could go over them with Cameron at dinner. I came home gushing about the class and looked forward to Cameron joining me the following week. But the second week played out like the first, with Cameron at work and me at class alone. This was not working out as I had hoped. I enjoyed the course and was learning a lot, but this was something we were supposed to be doing together so that we could learn in order to make a more informed decision about our religious home. I was disappointed and felt that time was running out. We only had two more sessions left. Cameron promised to make it to the third one. As it turns out, that was the only meeting he really needed to attend.

Call it fate, destiny, or divine intervention, but it is funny how, sometimes, things just have a way of working out. Cameron did come to the third class, and from the moment it started, it seemed like that night's discussion was tailored just to us. The rabbi told the story of his own daughter, who married a non-Jew who chose to convert before the wedding. He used the story to illustrate how choosing one faith did not prevent a family from still participating in rituals or celebrations of the other faith family, and that sometimes what we perceive as