

ASPIRING CATHOLIC PRIEST TRANSFORMED AT HARVARD INTO ORTHODOX JEW
by Harpaul Alberto Kohli

available at <http://hcs.harvard.edu/~harpaul/>

Names have been changed to protect people's privacy.

Written for a Keshet Israel membership application question.

Written at the end of 2005, except the story of my apparent death, © 2006.

My dad is a Sikh from India. My mom is a Catholic from Ecuador. To get my name, "Harpaul", they mixed theirs. Take the "Har" from Harinder and the "Paul" from Paulina & you get "Harpaul": me.

When they met, they were not religious: My dad had grown up after partition, where religious fighting had killed up to a million; outward proclamation of religious connoted a violent history. Ethics took the place of religion.

In addition, my dad's culture viewed Christians as imperialistic, intolerant people who went around the world imposing their religion. Such was my dad's view of Christianity.

My mom, despite being raised in a quite-religious Catholic home, turned out a free-thinking, questioning anthropologist. Being forced to go to mass every day at 6 am turned her off. So when my parents met in an elevator in the World Bank, religion did not constitute a barrier between them. So unimportant was their personal religious practice that even some time after they had been married, they had never discussed the religion of their children.

But in my birth, my mom found religious awakening. It delighted her that "Harpal" (no "u") means "follower of God". She, the scientist, enthusiastically named me "Alberto", patron saint of scientists and Doctor of the Church. The birth-process had made her spiritual, so she returned to her family's traditions. As I was the immediate cause of her newfound religiosity, she wanted me baptized. But my father would not allow it.

Meanwhile, as I grew up, our live-in nanny/housekeeper would take me to mass, as sometimes would my mom. I grew up attending Catholic services, without being Catholic. In the car, our housekeeper would have me pray prayers. So without being Catholic, I had a Catholic formation.

My dad's attitude still influenced me, making me wary of intolerant and exclusivistic interpretations of Christianity. I hated Christian theology that claimed that only those who believed in Jesus could be saved. Most of my friends were atheist or of other religions, and they were good people. I refused to believe that my dad would go to hell because he'd been raised rightfully prejudiced against Christianity. So I had no patience for evangelical theology. Modern Catholic theology and the theory of the "anonymous Christian" suited me better. And at times I was most comfortable with Catholic theology that focused on God rather than Christ, Deo/Theocentric theology over the Christocentric.

In seventh grade, I'd had enough. *I want to be Catholic now.*

I asked priests to baptize me, but they said no: As I was not yet an adult, they said, both my parents would have to consent. And as my dad still objected to my baptism, I could not become Catholic.

I did my best to be as Catholic as I could, but I always ended up apart from the rest, for better or for worse. I went to Sunday school one year, and I knew more Catholic theology and ritual than anyone else in the class; but when they went off for their confirmation preparation, I was left behind alone and lonely, excluded.

At my ecumenical high school, where one year we elected a Muslim to run chapel services, I bonded with some Jesuit-educated teachers. Meanwhile, I started attending Jesuit parishes with my mom. I fell in love with the Jesuits: Their love of learning and questioning, their intellectual rigor, their finding God in all things, their optimistic theology of creation, their quest for social justice, their liberal politics, their finding a way to offer anything we may do to God, finding a potential for holiness in every part of every life.

I soon decided I wanted to be a Jesuit priest.

-----skippable digression that's not directly relevant to my story—but I'll include in case you want to read --

I disagreed with some Church teachings, in particular regarding contraception and the ordination of women. *So how can I be a good Catholic?*

I found satisfaction in Catholic theology: Cardinal John Henry Newman wrote, "I have always held that obedience to one's conscience, even if the conscience is erroneous, is the best way to the light." And the "Dutch Catechism" writes, "Whatever does not proceed from conscience is sin", so that if one's conscience disagreed with the Church, one's obligation was to one's conscience. As Rahner describes above, following one's conscience is always the right thing to do. The book *Principles for a Catholic Morality* offers a good treatment of the three different definitions of conscience and how they relate to what one should do when they disagree with the Church. Relativism poses a danger here: As there are objective rights and wrongs, one is obligated to have a well-informed conscience.

But there was one influential Catholic in my life who rejected my theological sensibilities: The bishop of Arlington, Va, Bishop Keating, made my mom's and my life difficult as Catholics. We hated his governance: an ultra-right wing bishop, he remained one of the only two bishops in the US who refused to allow altar girls. Worsening the situation, it appears he ordered the Bible readings removed from the pews, so that people couldn't read along but would have to listen to the public readings. My mom is hard of hearing, so she opposed this policy, which prevented her from understanding the scriptures during mass.

My mom and I hated Bishop Keating's authority, so we migrated to the more progressive and intellectual Jesuit parishes in Washington, DC: Holy Trinity, St. Aloysius, and Georgetown University. At Georgetown, a ten-minute drive from our house, there were countless services every Sunday, including 5 pm, 7 pm, 8:30 pm, 10 pm, and 11:15 pm. And there was an 11:15 pm mass every weekday.

The result: I didn't go to Church with any Catholics who lived around me, so I didn't get to know Catholics other than the Jesuit priests, with whom I'd talk after mass. But I loved the Jesuit masses, especially the singing and spirit of the 8:30 pm Georgetown student mass, led by Fr. Pat Conroy. So at least my mom and I found a place where we could enjoy going to mass, just a 10-min drive away.

But even here, Bishop Keating pissed us off: Other Northern Virginians also preferred going to mass in DC rather than in NoVa. We heard a rumor that Bishop Keating issued a ruling instructing those who lived on our side of the Potomac River to not cross the river to go to Sunday mass. *It's mostly his fault we've grown disillusioned with the parishes he supervises, and now, the rumors say, he cares more about where we go to church than whether we go at all.*

For my mom and I, this absurdity was the last straw. Too bad Keating was so young and would be around to screw things up for decades to come. This dislike of him became fairly ingrained in me, but little did I expect how the diocese would have a new leader.

In what initially seemed utterly disconnected from Bishop Keating, my senior year of high school, the Latin department organized a school trip through Italy for spring break, focusing

on Naples and Rome. Twenty girls and five guys. Not surprisingly, given my circle of friends, I was the only person interested in going to Church while we were in Rome. I'd miss part of the itinerary, including lunch, but it was more important to me, given that I'd come all the way to Rome, to make a religious pilgrimage to mass, in English, even if all by myself.

That Sunday morning, I awoke before everyone else so that I, alone, could go to mass. Because I have phase delay, my body has difficulty waking up early, so it required a great sacrifice. But this was the only English mass that did not disrupt my already-planned schedule.

I got there and there were only 4 other people in the pews, even though it was Sunday morning.

At the entrance was an information sheet. Lo and behold, the celebrant was a special guest, one of ~2800 bishops in the world and ~281 in the United States, the Bishop of the Arlington Diocese, the young & upstart Bishop Keating!

I've traveled all the way to Rome, made such an effort to go to mass this Sunday morning, separated myself from the rest of the group, but, just my bad luck, the bishop I hate so much happens to be in town and happens to be the very special guest celebrant I'd made such an effort to attend.

Resigned to this ridiculous coincidence, I sat in the empty pews, awaiting this hated bishop's arrival. But the start time came and went—and no bishop arrived, and mass didn't start. Finally, quite late, a priest started the mass, but he was not Bishop Keating. A day or two later, I found out from my mom that Bishop Keating, even though only forty-something years old, had died of a heart attack that morning, just before the mass.

This seemed a weird coincidence: As I'd said, I'd traveled all the way to Rome, made such an effort to go to mass that Sunday morning, separated myself from the rest of the group, and, just my bad luck, the bishop I hated so much happened to be in town and happened to be the very special guest celebrant I'd made such an effort to go to. And as I was walking there, this super-young forty-something-yr-old bishop died of a heart attack.

Bishop Keating and I had both crossed the ocean to Rome, and less than two hours before we would have met, he died. Those are the kinds of patterns and meanings the human mind imposes where it is possible none may exist.

-----end of skippable digression-----

People would ask me why I wanted to become Catholic, besides the cultural aspects inherited from my mom. Well, the only other viable choice was Protestantism or Anglicanism, and to decide I considered their theologies. I fell in love with Catholic theology, and, eventually I would learn, what I loved about Catholic theology was shared by Jewish theology too.

In his classic book *Catholicism*, which has sold hundreds of thousands of copies, Fr. Richard McBrien begins his 1,287-word treatise with a chapter asking "What is Catholicism?" He notes, "Difference between Catholic and non-Catholic . . . approaches become clearer when measured according to these three principles": "Sacramentality, Mediation, and Communion". He also identifies four other, less overarching, principles: Tradition, Reason, Analogy, and Universality. (The main three, and three of the other four, could all be used to describe Orthodox Judaism too.)

[You can skip the following Catholic-theology section. Quotations and categories from Richard McBrien's *Catholicism*.]

Sacramentality: "A sacramental perspective is one that "sees" . . . the infinite in the finite, the

spiritual in the material, the transcendent in the immanent, the eternal in the historical.

Human existence in its natural, historical condition is radically oriented toward God. The history of the world is, at the same time, the history of salvation.

This means that, for Catholicism, authentic human progress and the struggle for justice and peace is an integral part of the movement toward the final reign of God (see Vatican II . . .). The Catholic tradition, unlike the Lutheran, for example, has espoused no doctrine of the Two Kingdoms. The vast body of Catholic social teachings, from Pope Leo XIII in 1891 to the present, is as characteristic of Catholic Christianity as any element can be. In virtue of the sacramental principle, Catholicism affirms that God is indeed present to all human life and history.

To be engaged in the transformation of the world is to be collaboratively engaged in God's own transforming activity. Our human work becomes a form of collaboration with God's creative work, as Pope John Paul II put it in his 1981 encyclical, *Laborem Exercens*.

For Catholicism, the world is essentially good, though fallen, because it comes from the creative hand of God, is redeemed, sustained, and nurtured by God, and is destined for the final perfection of the reign of God at history's end.

Mediation: "A sacrament not only signifies (as Protestants have historically emphasized); it also causes what it signifies. . . Encounter with God does not occur solely in the inwardness of conscience or in the inner recesses of consciousness. Catholicism holds, on the contrary, that the encounter with God is a mediated experience rooted in the historical. . . .

Again, the Protestant raises a word of caution. . . . the principle of mediation moves one along the path toward magic. . . . Some Catholics have assumed, for example, that if a certain practice were performed a given number of times or on a given number of days in an unbroken sequence (like the nine First Fridays), their salvation would be guaranteed. A magical view, of course, is not a solely Catholic problem, but it is an inherent risk in Catholicism's constant stress on the principle of mediation.

God is present to all and works on the behalf of all, but there are also moments and actions wherein God's presence is specially focused. The function of the priest as mediator is not only to limit the encounter between God and the human person, but to focus it more clearly for the sake of the person and ultimately for sake of the community of faith.

This is the principle of mediation in its classic expression. Catholicism understands that the invisible, spiritual God is present and active on our spiritual behalf through the visible and the material, and that these are made . . . spiritually effective by reason of that divine presence.

Communion/Community: Richard McBrien defines it as "Even when the divine-human encounter is most personal and individual, it is still communal, in that the encounter is made possible by the mediation of a community of faith. For Catholicism, there is no relationship with God, however profound or intense, that dispenses entirely with the communal context of every relationship with God.... Catholicism has always emphasized the place of the Church as the sacrament of Christ, mediating salvation through sacraments, ministries, and other institutional elements, and as the Communion of Saints and the People of God. It is here, at the point of Catholicism's understanding of itself as Church, that we come to the heart of the distinctively Catholic understanding and practice of Christian faith. For it is here, in Catholic ecclesiology, that we find the most vivid convergence of the three principles of sacramentality, mediation, and communion.....

"... stress upon the individual also has its inherent weakness, just as there are inherent weaknesses in the historic Protestant insistences on the otherness of God (over and against the Catholic sacramental principle) and on the immediacy of the divine-human encounter (over against the Catholic principle of mediation)."

Tradition: "Before there were texts the faith was handed on through proclamation, catechesis, worship, and personal example. For Catholicism, God speaks through means such as these, not only through words but through deeds as well. History in general and the history of the Church in particular are carriers of this divine revelation. Catholicism, therefore, not only reads its Sacred Scripture, but also its own corporate life and experience. As Pope John XXIII once said, history itself is a teacher." (McBrien)

Reason: "Catholicism also respects and emphasizes the role of reason in the understanding and expression of Christian faith. For Catholics, all reality is graced, including the intellect. . . . That is why philosophy, apologetics, and so-called natural theology have occupied so important a place in Catholic thought. For Catholicism it is never sufficient merely to repeat the words of Sacred Scripture or even of official doctrinal pronouncements. The critical faculties must also be applied to the data of faith if we are to understand it and appropriate it and then put it into practice. Accordingly, the First Vatican Council (1869-1870) not only rejected rationalism (the belief that reason alone could grasp the mysteries of faith), but also Fideism (the belief that an uncritical faith, apart from reason, is sufficient to grasp God's revelation).

Analogy: "Catholicism's use of reason is analogical. Indeed, some have spoken of a "Catholic imagination" as distinctly analogical. . . . For Catholicism, we come to a knowledge of God through our knowledge of the created world. . . . The Catholic analogical imagination is essentially sacramental."

Universality: "Catholicism is characterized, finally, by its universality, that is, a radical openness to all truth and to every value. Catholicism is, in principle, as Asian as it is European, as Slavic as it is Latin, as Mexican or Nigerian as it is Irish or Polish."

The philosophies of all of these would later fit with Orthodox Judaism, except for Universality.

Also, I did not like the individualism of Protestantism. On principle, based on the Prisoner's Dilemma and modern economics, I found individualism destructive, and to miss the point of existence. Catholics and Jews believe that the community as a whole has a relationship/covenant with God, and one's own individual relationship with God is part of the community's relationship/covenant with God.

Once 18, in 1998, I could start the conversion process—the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults. But then I moved to college, so I had to restart. I sought a Jesuit church, for there was a Jesuit seminary a few blocks away. I switched churches again, but no Jesuits here did RCIA. I knew more than enough to convert, but I kept having to jump through hoops, slowing me down.

I started RCIA at St. Paul's, then halfway through restarted at St. Peter's, and then switched back to and restarted again at St. Paul's.

Two years passed.

As I prepared to finally become sacramentally Catholic, my involvement with Judaism flourished. By chance, the group of friends with whom I'd live in college from 1999 until 2002 included plenty of Jews, eight of the sixteen blockmates: Eli, a Sephardi, shomer-negia (no physical contact with members of opposite gender) gabbai of the Orthodox minyan; the director of the Jewish a cappella group and gabbai of the Conservative minyan; and others. So, already in my freshman year, I went to Harvard Hillel for shabbat dinner. I lived with these friends for years, so I'd often spend long nights of conversations with my Sephardi friend Eli, learning about Jewish law.

I had a large group of high school friends a year younger than me who followed me to Harvard. One was Jewish, but, more important, their roommates were leaders of Hillel, one the president and another the Education director. So to hang out with my high school friends, I started frequently attending Hillel shabbat dinners my sophomore year (1999 -2000).

Meanwhile, the math and physics community got me involved in the Jewish a cappella group.

Most important was my godfather: To be baptized and become Catholic, you need a godparent. Most baptisms are for infants, so most godparents are chosen by parents. But as I was converting as an adult, I chose my own: a professor at Harvard, a Hispanic like me, and a Franciscan. He had once, like me, lived in Currier House and been a Math and Philosophy major. So we had taken mostly the same classes. We bonded quickly and deeply, and he became a great godfather.

But his academic work led me in a different religious direction, not into his Catholic religious order. He happened to be a scholar of medieval Spain, and above all, of medieval Hispano-Jewish literature. He has just finished a book on the *Coplas de Yosef*, a poem about Joseph, written in Spanish with Hebrew characters, a precursor to Ladino. And his next book will likely be called *The Hawk is Not Worth Less: Jews and Jewish Characters in Medieval Spanish Literature*. He's your typical sworn Franciscan who studies medieval Spanish Jews. I learned much about Judaism from him.

Finally, in April 2001, I was baptized, fulfilling my and my mom's hopes.

But the same exact month, I emceed the spring Jewish a cappella concert at Harvard Hillel, in front of hundreds of people. This made me an instant celebrity at Hillel, and Hillel grew to be even more my social home.

The Catholic Students Association made me interfaith director, and my first job was to organize a joint Catholic-Jewish Bible Study (on Psalms) at Hillel; even my Catholic influences were weaving me into the Hillel scene.

At the start of my senior year (2002), my friend Ben, president of Hillel, was to give the Rosh HaShanah dvar Torah, so I went to services to support him. I then started attending services regularly.

Earlier in the year, I'd gone on a Ignatian 5-day silent retreat. These silent retreats are central to the Jesuit life. They focus on discerning God in your life through your emotions. This was a critical skill for me to develop. It was not about your mood; it was about unusual and unexpected emotional responses that seemed to transcend one's conscious. Emotional changes that came from your unconscious and maybe also from God.

All my life my religious life had been based on studying theology and on ethics. There had never been much inward spiritual component. One cause was that Catholic spirituality re-

volves around the sacraments, which had been denied me most of my life. That avenue closed, to satisfy my religious urgings I turned to 1. studying theology, and 2. practicing ethics. (And, to a lesser degree, my name “Alberto” had always inspired me to follow Saint Albert’s example, to 3. see studying science as a religious activity.)

But even after I sacramentally joined the Church, I still had trouble connecting emotionally. I wholeheartedly believed progressive Catholic theology. But the liturgy is based on much older thinking, and elements of that Christological exclusivism still influence the mass. A little something blocked my emotions from connecting w/ those sections. I remained wary of Christ-centric devotions.

On the other hand, I got very excited about the elements of the mass which spoke of all who believed in God and spoke of all humanity, removing the need for Christ.

On this retreat, I still planned to become a Jesuit priest, for I sensed a religious calling, and I loved the Church and modern Catholic theology, a love cemented in a grad-level Catholic theology class I took. Now I just had to figure out what was meant by discerning God through one’s emotions.

About two weeks before the retreat, a priest pointed me in the right direction: The brilliant and charismatic English professor Father Carroll, SJ, had begun a conversation with me: We discussed my potential future as a priest. He identified me as a prime candidate, so he wanted to guide me.

One day, he said to himself, “the Jesuits require 5 years.”

What does he mean?

He responded: “You cannot join the Jesuit order [to become a priest] until you’ve been a Catholic for 5 years.” He added, “In the meantime, get a spiritual director.” Fittingly, he offered a recommendation: his former student finishing his priestly studies in Cambridge, Bob Walsh. The Jesuits have two seminaries in the US, in two of the most liberal places in the country: Berkeley, CA, & Cambridge, MA; Walsh was at the one right next to Harvard. Fr. Carroll gave me Walsh’s contact info. So to help me grow spiritually and lead me towards the priesthood, upon returning to Harvard in early 2002, I asked Bob Walsh to be my spiritual director. Following Fr. Carroll’s recommendation, he agreed.

Meanwhile, the day I returned home from the retreat happened to be my parents’ 25th anniversary. That same day, my grandfather, a judge who’d settled Tibetan refugees with the Dalai Lama and twice been called out of retirement to adjudicate sensitive cases, was murdered—to reiterate, on my parents’ 25th anniversary—in a botched robbery by two men in monkey masks who beat him to death while trying to steal jewelry. My mom had considered my father’s father a saint. Both my parents were devastated. After my dad recovered a year later, he became the best possible dad, using all his connections, resources, and energy to help me achieve my goals.

On October 4, 2002, I davened kabbalat shabbat at Hillel after a good week, and I was about to be named a class vice-president for life. In an exuberant and bubbly mood I enjoyed dinner and eventually launched into Birkat Hamazon, the grace after meals. Caught up in the singing, I remained exuberant, full of positive emotion.

All of a sudden, I went numb, paralyzed: I couldn’t talk, I couldn’t sing, I couldn’t think. My emotional energy had vanished. All this accompanied by the idea to learn Hebrew. *Maybe this was a case of discernment through one’s emotions?*

Minutes later, I asked a friend when Hillel’s Hebrew classes were.

The next day I went to talk with Fr. Tom about this. He said maybe God wanted me to

learn Hebrew, maybe not. But I shouldn't rush into things: I was way too busy, overcommitted with so many activities. If God wanted me to learn Hebrew, I could always do so in the future, when I had more time.

He went on, "Harpaul, you're like Elijah: You're looking for God in the splitting mountains and shattering rocks. But God is to be found in silence. You need to clear your mind of all thoughts, and seek God in the quiet stillness around you."

He briefly explained the Biblical reference; I felt overwhelmed, needing to leave and think. My room was a mile away, so too exhausted and overwhelmed to make the trek, I went to my high school friends' room. There, I found only their fourth roommate Ben, president of Hillel, reading the Gospel of John for class. Ben invited me in, and I plopped on the couch.

I asked to borrow his Bible. I wanted to find this passage about the splitting mountains and shattering rocks. I knew I should have just gone to the computer and done a search, but I was too out-of-it to get up. So I decided to find it myself.

But I had no idea where Elijah was. I asked Ben where that splitting mountains and shattering rocks passage was.

"I have no idea; are you sure that's in the Bible?"

"Ben, you're president of Hillel; you should know these things... Do you know where Elijah is?"

I started to flip through, and just as I said "Maybe Kings", to a "yes" from Ben, I randomly opened to Kings. I told Ben I'd now look for Elijah. "Good luck."

Until this point I had not looked at a single word of the text of the Bible. I looked down, and the very first words of the text of the Bible my eyes fell on were "Why are you here Elijah?"

"Ben, I've found Elijah! It says 'Why are you here Elijah?' Now let's see if I can find the splitting mountains and shattering rocks."

I looked down again, and the very next words my eye fell on were "splitting mountains and shattering rocks." I laughed.

"Life is absurd."

I had no idea where Elijah or this passage was. And the very first words of the whole Bible that my eye fell on were "Why are you here Elijah?" and the very next were "splitting mountains and shattering rocks."

I grew up trained as a skeptical mathematician and scientist. At the time, I was president of the Society of Physics Students and also of the Math Club. Obviously, the "human mind imposes patterns and meanings where none may exist" argument did not apply here. At first glance, this seemed hashgacha pratit. But I'd always doubted stuff like this could happen. So I sought rational explanations.

The first thought: Over time and use, some pages in a book have a propensity to be randomly opened to. Usually, pages looked at most often are the ones to which a book "randomly" opens. Wear creases the bindings at those pages.

But this was Ben's personal Tanakh: Many other pages had seen use, but he insisted he'd never seen this famous passage before. So the creased bindings explanation wouldn't help here.

Given low probabilities & a dearth of possible rational explanations, this seemed beyond coincidence, a "splitting mountain and shattering rock." I was irrationally carried away.

Maybe it was just a random tiny coincidence, but in my state of mind, I interpreted it differently.

Just my luck that I had an appointment with my spiritual director, whom I'd not seen in

many months, for later that week. But even before I saw him, more serendipity kept surrounding me. I'll give one more example.

Monday, in a common area of campus, I was writing a letter about this to a friend. The letter was four pages long. I had not seen my godfather in 5 days. At the bottom of the second page I was to write "My godfather says that the gender-inclusivity of language exposes the community's attitude towards the relationship between women and men". This was the only part of the whole letter where I mentioned my godfather. The moment I wrote, "My godfather", someone put a hand on my shoulder. It was my godfather!

I discussed these happenings with my spiritual director. He told me, "'Emotion is the barometer for God in our lives."

"This is one of those privileged moments where there is a parting of the veil and you're able to see God's providential love and care. And it is moderated by the mundane."

He found it beautiful that my experiences stemmed from "the Hebrew scriptures and tradition: In those scriptures we have the God who puts dewdrops on rose petals: the God revealed through the mundane." He emphasized the common pattern here: Most events where I seemed to discern "the God who puts dewdrops on rose petals" involved a connection with the Hebrew language. He said that in the Hebrew scriptures do we best learn about "the God who puts dewdrops on rose petals". He thus fully applauded my starting to learn Hebrew.

He must be right: Many of my first-in-a-lifetime experiences of grace were intricately tied to the Hebrew language. That's enough reason to learn Hebrew. No one can now convince me otherwise.

He continued, "In data of mundane we see signs of the divine." The only way to proceed is to "stop and take a moment to review the day—the daily examen of conscience." "You can have emotional swings but can't lie about data of our life." He said one should not be too skeptical, just rigorous and self-analytical. St. Ignatius stressed first the role of emotions, and second "intellectual prudence." Jesuits a twice a day held an examen, a prayerful analysis of the datum of one's experience that day:

He emphasized, we can always interpret happenings around us as meaningful, or dismiss them as meaningless coincidence or accident. Here, and later, I decided to find meaning where others might not. Maybe I was wrong. Either way, after all this, I made sure to go to shabbat services every week.

I found a one-hour-a-week Hebrew class, and a high school friend recommended to me a class on Jewish religious experience. With my Catholic-Jewish Bible study, I was now spending 4 or 5 days a week at Hillel. Meanwhile, although I bonded great with the Catholic chaplains and my godfather, the student leadership at the CSA was right-wing "Opey-Dopies", as Fr. Tom called them, far to the right of me and the chaplains. I felt much more at home at Hillel.

Meanwhile, in my Godfather's class I wrote two papers on poems by Solomon ibn Gabirol, one on the Zohar, and others on Hispano-Jewish literature. I grew more knowledgeable about and connected to Sephardic culture.

One paper, "The Breath of Life that Makes ibn Gabirol's Prayer Possible," was published in Harvard's Journal of Jewish studies. [Some people have criticized this spiritual history for not conveying how I emotionally fell in love with Judaism. That's not the point. The point of this is to relate some extraordinary events that naturally led me to Judaism. If you want to sense my emotional love of Judaism (and my budding love of the Hebrew language), read that paper I wrote for my Godfather's class.]

Even more important, two years earlier in another class with my godfather, I discovered I

had Jewish ancestors from Spain, including my direct ancestor Juan Sanchez de Toledo who, because he was Jewish, was forced for seven weeks to walk to every church in Toledo every Sunday, wearing crosses. Stigmatized as a Jew, he moved to more tolerant Avila. There, his granddaughter, my ancestor's sister, St. Teresa of Avila, taught him the ways of mental prayer and really converted him to Christianity.

After learning about my Jewish ancestry, I began to identify a bit with Sephardic Jewry. I joked with Eli that maybe we were long-lost cousins. This became a tiny part of my identity even then in 2000.

I remained ambivalent about my role at Hillel. The only active non-Jew, I remained a committed Catholic. When the kippot basket vanished, I asked my spiritual director, the Jesuit, if I was allowed to buy my own yarmulke/kippah. He emailed me, "I see nothing disordered about your attachment to Jewish services. Buy it! Wear it! How blessed you are to have more than one community where God is worshiped."

Bob Walsh mentioned having two religious communities, but the Hillel community quickly became a bigger part of my life than the Catholic one. A month before, in October, I had given a talk at Memorial Church about my spiritual journey and the role of community. As a Catholic, I believed that the community as a whole has a relationship with God and that the individual's is part of it. But in my talk I emphasized that the concrete religious community in which I felt most at home was Hillel.

When I went to Church every week, I went at various different times to different parishes, so I wasn't regularly and deeply involved with any specific Catholic community. Except for Fr. Tom and Luis my godfather, there was no stable group of people in my life as a Catholic.

In contrast, I went to kabbalat shabbat with the same group of friends every Friday at the same time, scheduling other things around it. I'd schedule Catholic events around other activities, and I'd schedule other activities around Hillel ones. Hillel was the home I prioritized above others.

After Hillel helped me be elected a class marshal, I joined the high-volume email list and started participating in the leadership meetings.

One day, in December, Julia, whom I barely knew, but just elected a Hillel vice president, asked me to run for a certain leadership position. I was surprised.

Julia: "Harpaul, here's an application. I want you to fill it out and apply for"

Me: "But I'm not even Jewish. I can't be on leadership at Hillel."

Julia: "Harpaul, you **are** a member of this community. And I want you on my committee."

Never before in my life had I been so clearly told that I belonged somewhere religiously, something especially touching at this point. So when Julia emphatically declared, "You are a member of this community", Hillel became my stable rock of refuge at Harvard, and I attended services every week. Month by month, Judaism became more central to my spiritual life than Catholicism. But I did not see that as preventing me from being a devout Catholic. *Two is better than one.*

A decisive question was how I would manage my life as a Catholic and desire to be a priest with my passion for Judaism.

First, I compartmentalized them completely in my mind. In a Jewish context, I approached God entirely on Jewish terms. I did not have any Christological thoughts in a Jewish context. The result: I'd see God one way 2 times a week and see God another way 4 or 5 times a week.

What most influenced my dual religious life were two Catholic Church documents about Judaism. As I was Catholic, I accepted its teachings, and without them I would not have converted to Judaism. I keep my promises and honor my commitments, so these proved necessary. First, some background in case you do not know the Church's teachings on the salvation of non-Catholics:

In the 1960s, Vatican II taught: "Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience. Nor does Divine Providence deny the helps necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and with His grace strive to live a good life" (*Lumen Gentium* 16).

(But Vatican II also taught: "Whosoever, therefore, knowing that the Catholic Church was made necessary by Christ, would refuse to enter or to remain in it, could not be saved." (*Lumen Gentium* 14)

Pope Benedict XVI on Psalm 137: "Whoever seeks peace and the good of the community with a pure conscience, and keeps alive the desire for the transcendent, will be saved—even if he lacks biblical faith."

Right before my senior year, a month before I went to Rosh HaShanah services to hear Ben's dvar Torah, the US Catholic Church issued a document entitled "Reflections on Covenant and Mission". It drew much press.

The *Boston Globe* wrote the Aug 13, 2002 article "Catholics Reject Evangelization of Jews." The *Washington Post* wrote the Aug 17, 2002, article "U.S. Catholic Bishops Disown Efforts to Convert Jews." What caught the media's attention was the statement "campaigns that target Jews for conversion to Christianity are no longer theologically acceptable in the Catholic Church," and the statements that Jews were already saved.

The Catholic Church was saying it was forbidden for a Christian to try to convert a Jew to Christianity and that Jews were already saved. *This is great. Does this then mean that the Catholic Church's saying that rabbinic Judaism is every bit as good as Catholicism?* The document explained that both Jews and Catholics are equally assured of God's grace and salvation, and this does not apply to other religions, for whom a Plan B allows salvation if they don't reach Plan A. Here are some excerpts (highlighting mine):

The Vatican said in 2001, "The term mission, in its proper sense, refers to conversion from false Gods and idols to the true and one God, who revealed himself in the salvation history with His elected people. Thus mission, in this strict sense, cannot be used with regard to Jews, who believe in the true and one God. Therefore, and this is characteristic, there exists dialogue but there does not exist any Catholic missionary organization for Jews."

"From the point of view of the Catholic Church, **Judaism is a religion that springs from divine revelation.** As Cardinal Kasper noted, "God's grace, which is the grace of Jesus Christ according to our faith, is available to all. Therefore, **the Church believes that Judaism,** i.e. the faithful response of the Jewish people to God's irrevocable covenant, **is salvific for them,** because God is faithful to his promises."

This statement about God's saving covenant is quite specific to Judaism.

1985 Vatican Note: "The permanence of Israel "while so many ancient peoples have disappeared without trace) is a historic fact and a sign to be interpreted within God's design." **Rabbinic Judaism, which developed after the destruction of the Temple, must also be "of God."**

According to Roman Catholic teaching, **both the Church and the Jewish people abide in covenant with God. We both therefore have missions before God to undertake in the world.**

As Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger [now Pope] recently wrote, " God's providence ... has obviously given Israel a particular mission in this 'time of the Gentiles.'"xxiii However, only the Jewish people themselves can articulate their mission "in the light of their own religious experience."xxiv

Nonetheless, the Church does perceive that the Jewish people's mission ad gentes (to the nations) continues. This is a mission that the Church also pursues in her own way according to her understanding of covenant. The command of the Resurrected Jesus in Matthew 28:19 **to make disciples** "of all nations" (Greek = ethne, the cognate of the Hebrew = goyim; i.e., **the nations other than Israel**) means that the Church must bear witness in the world to the Good News of Christ so as to prepare the world for the fullness of the kingdom of God. However, this evangelizing task no longer includes the wish to absorb the Jewish faith into Christianity and so end the distinctive witness of Jews to God in human history.

The Jewish people have a mission that is addressed to all human beings.

The Pope said, "in order to be a blessing for the world, Jews and Christians need first to be a blessing for each other."

We must also accept our responsibility to **prepare the world for the coming of the Messiah** by working together for social justice, respect for the rights of persons and nations and for social and international reconciliation. To this we are driven, Jews and Christians, by the command to love our neighbor, by a common hope for the Kingdom of God and by the great heritage of the Prophets.

Thus, while the Catholic Church regards the saving act of Christ as central to the process of human salvation for all, it also acknowledges that **Jews already dwell in a saving covenant with God.**

However, it now recognizes that Jews are also called by God to prepare the world for God's kingdom.

(Note the reinterpretation of tradition: that the Matt 28:19 commandment "to make disciples of all nations" correctly translated only meant goyim, nations other than Israel. And the emphasis that Jews who keep the covenant are just as saved, without need for belief in Jesus.)

So this document seemed to tell me that the Catholic Church taught that Judaism is every bit as good as Catholicism. *No wonder there was so much newspaper coverage.*

(In this picture, the Chief Sephardi and the Chief Ashkenazi Rabbis of Israel with Pope Benedict XVI.)



(In case you missed the reference: Pope John Paul II was famously quoted as saying, “As Christians and Jews, following the example of the faith of Abraham, we are called to be a blessing to the world (cf. Gen. 12:2 ff.). This is the common task awaiting us. It is therefore necessary for us, Christians and Jews, to be first a blessing to one another (*L'Osservatore Romano*, Aug 17, 1993).”)

On his commentary of Psalm 137: Pope Benedict XVI wrote and declared, “Whoever seeks peace and the good of the community with a pure conscience, and keeps alive the desire for the transcendent, will be saved even if he lacks biblical faith” (The Vatican News Agency, Nov 30, 2005). Note that he says “Biblical faith”, rather than faith in Christ. He says Plan A is “Biblical faith” (which includes Judaism), and plan B is the alternative he describes.

Confused or skeptical? Read the Cardinal’s and Bishops’ Conferences subsequent statements: If not, skip.

On the document “Reflections on Covenant and Witness”, Cardinal Archbishop Keeler said, ““This joint reflection marks a significant step forward in the dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Jewish community in this country. Here one can see, perhaps more clearly than ever before, an essential compatibility, along with equally significant differences, between the Christian and Jewish understandings of God’s call to both our peoples to witness to the Name of the One God to the world in harmony. This echoes the words of Pope John Paul II, praying that as Christians and Jews we may be ‘a blessing to one another’ so that, together, we may be ‘a blessing to the world.’”

A Seattle Catholic newspaper wrote, “Also, the idea that this document did not represent the views of other bishops runs contrary to the statements made to writer Chris Ferrara when he contacted the USCCB: “...Bill Ryan of the USCCB’s Office of Communications advised me personally that RCM is no “working document” but a final document of the USCCB Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs Committee. Ryan added ‘I haven’t heard any bishop say that this statement does not reflect their views’ and that he did not think it ‘departs in any way from the thinking of the bishops.’”

The article continued, “Reflections made concrete and emphatic statements with no question or equivocation. It was not the scattered result of some brainstorming session but an organized, researched and deliberate pronouncement.” Against those who said the document was heretical, the newspaper wrote, “is it not much more newsworthy that a high-ranking Cardinal is openly promoting heresy and apostasy?”

One question remains: What about the issue of Christ? Is he or is he not the messiah, according to Catholic teaching? Once again, the Vatican answered this question in a shocking way.

Cardinal Ratzinger, now the Pope Benedict XVI, wrote a book. With it, the Church taught that the Jewish understanding of the Messiah is correct. A New York *Times* article (January 18, 2002, pg A8) and a *The Jewish Week*

(<http://www.thejewishweek.com/news/newscontent.php3?artid=5649>) article highlighted a book written by the now-Pope: As one website put it, “Vatican Accepts Jewish Belief about the Messiah”: The Messiah has already come for Catholics, but not for Jews. When the Messiah comes, it will be the first time for Jews and the second time for Catholics. Ratzinger wrote, “the Jewish messianic wait is not in vain.”

The New York *Times* article quotes Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls: “It means it would be wrong for a Catholic to wait for the Messiah, but not for a Jew”. He continued, “The expectancy of the Messiah was in the Old Testament, and if the Old Testament keeps its value, then it keeps that as a value, too. It says you cannot just say all the Jews are wrong and we are right.”

The pope’s spokesman emphasized, “Everything in the report is now considered part of

official Church doctrine.”

Confused? Read more of the *New York Times* article (Jan 18, 2002). If not confused, skip:

The Vatican has issued what some Jewish scholars are calling an important document that explicitly says, "The Jewish wait for the Messiah is not in vain." The scholarly work, effectively a rejection of and apology for the way some Christians have viewed the Old Testament, was signed by the pope's theologian, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. The document says Jews and Christians in fact share the wait for the Messiah, though Jews are waiting for the first coming, and Christians for the second. At least one Jewish scholar said the new document is a marked departure from "Dominus Iesus," a study of the redemptive role of Jesus that was released last year in Cardinal Ratzinger's name and that fanned disputes between Catholic and Jewish scholars.

The new document also says Catholics must regard the Old Testament as "retaining all of its value, not just as literature, but its moral value," said Joaquin Navarro -Valls, the pope's spokesman. "You cannot say, 'Now that Jesus has come, it becomes a second-rate document.' " "The expectancy of the Messiah was in the Old Testament," he went on, "and if the Old Testament keeps its value, then it keeps that as a value, too. It says you cannot just say all the Jews are wrong and we are right." Asked whether that could be taken to mean that the Messiah may or may not have come, Dr. Navarro-Valls said no. "It means it would be wrong for a Catholic to wait for the Messiah, but not for a Jew," he said.

The document, the result of years of work by the Pontifical Biblical Commission, goes on to apologize for the fact that certain New Testament passages that criticize the Pharisees, for example, had been used to justify anti-Semitism. Everything in the report is now considered part of official church doctrine, Dr. Navarro-Valls said. "This is important," he said, "and all the more so because it comes from Cardinal Ratzinger, who is not considered the most liberal spokesman for the church. It represents real and remarkable progress on the Catholic-Jewish front," even as the dispute over the Catholic Church's wartime history seems to be hardening, he added.

The oddest thing about the document from the Jewish perspective is that it was so quietly released. It has been in bookstores here since November, but as a small book titled "The Jewish People and the Holy Scriptures in the Christian Bible," it drew no notice until the Italian news agency ANSA printed a small report on it Wednesday. Tullia Zevi, a longtime Jewish community leader and commentator here, said: "The widespread opinion on the document is that it's trying to question the validity of past attitudes of the church, and seems an attempt to move us closer to together. So why was such an important document kept secret?" One possibility, she said, was that the church was trying to avoid criticism within its own ranks. Vatican officials, however, say it was not announced because it was seen mainly as a theological study intended for other theologians.

"In the past, we've talked about an ancient, common heritage," he said. "But now, for the first time, we're talking about our future waiting for the Messiah and the end of time." Waiting together? "No," Mr. Riccardi said. "But waiting close to each other."

Confused about how the meshes with the classic Catholic Church? If not, skip. That's like arguing, Is this sentence grammatical correct by the Old English of Beowulf? If the Catholic Church's teachings are true, then the modern Catholic Church's teachings are too. See the books *Creative Fidelity* and *Salvation Outside the Church?* By Francis A Sullivan, who taught this subject of how the Church uses reason to update its teachings, while remaining "consistent", at the top university at the Vatican. The latter book shows how the Church reasoned its way from the

teachings a thousand years ago that anyone who didn't accept the Pope went to hell, to the Vatican II documents that said that atheists will be saved if they follow their conscience. The book convinced me, believe it or not, that this change was logical and not inconsistent. This book made me fall in love with theology.

Do you feel these teachings self-contradictory? If not, skip: Isn't it a logical contradiction for the Church to say that both Catholicism and Judaism are equally true and salvific, whereas Protestantism and other religions are not? you ask. How can the Church say, Catholics are right that Jesus is the Messiah and Jews are right that he is not, and both be absolutely and transcendently true? But then say that Muslims are not right, and neither are Protestants?

Well, in Harvard I studied much model theory. My professor wrote the textbook, and one semester I was even the teaching assistant, teaching this stuff to other undergrads. It provided a suggestion: I like to think of the Trinity/Jesus/Christ question as the Parallel Postulate of Jewish-Catholic theology. You can either accept it or deny it, and the resulting systems are contradictory. You can get either Euclidean Geometry, Spherical Geometry, or Hyperbolic Geometry. For thousands of years, mathematicians, knowing that Euclidian geometry was true and complete, tried to prove the others were false. They knew that given any statement, Euclidian geometry would tell you whether it was true or false. That meant, they thought, that you were wrong if you denied the Parallel Postulate. Turns out they were right that Euclidian Geometry is true and complete, but they were wrong that the other, contradictory, systems were false. Each of those three systems is complete and true. In each system, from the basic axioms you can derive everything there is to know and that is true. There is no truth inaccessible from the system; it can tell whether anything is either true or false. But the three contradict each other. But they have a lot in common: There are 23 definitions and four postulates shared between the three different, contradictory kinds of geometries. If you ignore the fifth postulate (the Parallel postulate), there's still plenty to talk and reason about that applies to all of them. The fact that the Parallel Postulate is complete and true in Euclidian geometry does not make Spherical Geometry untrue, despite its negation. And this isn't just theoretical. Without this, they couldn't use computers to navigate a plane.

Of course, this is within first order logic. Most of this is true in second order logic, except the complete part. But we believe Judaism to be completely true and to determine everything true or false: That contradicts second order logic. But I have faith the concept still applies, because any human being treats second order logic as first. What we can do with first order logic, maybe God can do with second. After all, according to second order logic, Godel's Theorem (1931), you can never know whether anything you believe is true. And if you can prove that a single one of any of your beliefs is true, then logic generates a contradiction. Faith lets you operate with the certainty of first order logic even in a system of second order logic.

If you're willing to believe a single one of your beliefs is true, you're pretending to use first order logic where others would say second order logic applies, in which case I can say Euclidian Geometry is true and complete and Spherical is true and complete too.

Note, this is not relativist at all. It's pure logic. And I believe wholeheartedly in absolute Truth. The twentieth-century model theory I learned in Math 141, 144, and then taught in Math 141 again followed ordinary logic, and in it, things were either absolutely false, or absolutely true.

There was now no doubt in my mind that according to the Catholic Church, Judaism was every bit as good as Catholicism. My love of Judaism grew stronger every day; the Church encouraged that love to grow.

At the end of the year, commencement coincided with Shavuot, the Jewish holiday of the giving of the Torah. I had already been chosen to give the very last Friday-night dvar torah of the year. In addition, I had been scheduled to teach a class for tikkun leil shavuot, using the paper I'd

published in the Harvard Journal of Jewish Studies about a poem by Solomon ibn Gabirol that's in some siddurim. I had the 1:30-3 am time slot.

(As background, to what happens, my reform friend Tim had, an hour before, pissed me off with a comment, and also an hour before, I had pissed my friend Orit off by opening a book to a certain page. And two hours later, Orit would be furious at Tim.)

Right before my class, I attended a class on the Zohar. Never having experienced a Shavuot before, I did not know that the shabbat restrictions applied; I pulled out a pen.

Tim, a Reform friend who did not keep shabbat or kosher at all, sat next to me. He told me, "You can't write."

Annoyed that he of all people would be telling me this, I shot back, "I'm not shomer shabbat."

My friend Orit, also sitting next to me, pointed out, in a whisper, "You're not even Jewish."

Albeit true, this really hurt. I started crying. Judaism had become a strong part of my identity, and Hillel was the place on campus I felt most at home. Now, on my graduation day, I was told I did not belong.

My job had fallen through, which perfectly set the stage for what happened the next day, still shavuot: My friend Rafi invited me to come stay with him in Jerusalem. Meanwhile, my Godfather had given me as a graduation present *The Little Prince* in Hebrew and told me that by the end of the summer I had to be able to read it. So Rafi's invitation seemed a perfect opportunity to learn Hebrew and complete my Godfather's assignment.

The Ulpan program at the Conservative Yeshiva best fit my schedule. I applied; they told me that if they received any more applications like mine they'd be schizophrenic, but they let me in. Upon arriving in Israel, I went straight to the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem. (Incidentally, my luggage in hand, without any planning, the very first building I entered in all of Israel and in all of Jerusalem was named after my friend Orit's dad.)

I never would have gone to Israel had Orit and Tim not made their comments on Shavuot. And Orit would not have been there had I not almost died.

The story of my apparent death & how I "miraculously" survived:

One day I happened across someone crying on the street.

Kate?

Yeah. I don't think I've seen her since September.

I tried to comfort her.

"Orit doesn't treat me like one of her friends!" she wailed.

The semester before, they'd been problem set partners in Applied Math 105a, a class of 80 students. They'd worked together hours each week all semester. But since September, Orit had never even mentioned Kate to me.

"I do anything I can for her. I really thought I was special to her. But she doesn't treat me like one of her friends."

Kate was right.

So I wasn't the only one crying over Orit, but this was weird: Kate wasn't a guy; she was a girl—with a boyfriend.

“I even got her my sister’s old driver’s license for her fake ID. But when I finally got it, she already had another.... And Orit got into the Artemis, but I didn’t.”

I revealed Orit was my friend. Kate didn’t seem to know this.

“You’re friends with Orit?”

“Yeah.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Orit’s my best friend.” I omitted the little fact that we weren’t talking.

“You’re so lucky. You get to be friends with Orit.”

Looking back, I’d realize, *this random conversation may have saved my life.*

A couple of weeks later, the following happened:

Meanwhile, my final days of class at Harvard approached, so I had to make the most of them. I remembered my friend Alvin Rockefeller, son of the senator—in high school he’d made me a deal: If I didn’t get drunk at college, he’d give me his house.

Then in 1998, he’d written, “Lastly, I’ve decided to up my ante. I’m now betting that not only will you get drunk at Harvard, you will do so at least once on a school night. And so my offer stands. If I lose, you can have my entire DC property.”

My friend-of-eight-years Rick DuPuy deciphered the message: This was a gentleman’s challenge: I had to get drunk on a school night.

The week ending May 2 would be my final-ever week of classes. I was running out of time to lose Rock’s bet.

But then over the Currier listserv, an email arrived: The female final club The Jet would present “The Jungle Party”, at Club Aria downtown, Monday night.

This will be it.

A problem: I had no connections to The Jet. My female final club friends mostly belonged to the Artemis or the Nefertiti.

Ok, sure. I don’t know anyone in The Jet, but, I’m a class marshal. Everyone knows me. Anywhere I go I’ll find friends.

... like my last female social club party—the Isthmus’s party at Venu. I thought I’d know no one. But I ran into dozens of friends. I’m sure this’ll happen again.

I was wrong.

Meanwhile, a few months before, my therapist and I had discussed my bipolar diagnosis. I’d kept detailed sleep logs for three years, and it had seemed evident that the lithium increased my sleep requirement by an extra hour or two a night. So lithium had a clear opportunity cost.

Further, I’d never seen any benefit from the lithium—or even a need for it. Orit had been misdiagnosed, I’d told my therapist. Orit was simply (selectively) exuberant, which some people mistook for mania.

I, too, was emotionally vibrant—and proud of it. Those doctors had never met me before—they didn’t understand me at all. {And when diagnosed, I’d been infatuated with a girl, Mary, making me even more exuberant.}

{ And I always talked fast anyways. If you gave New Yorkers to those doctors, I'd suggested, they'd probably deem them bipolar too. }

And my depressions over the past year were clearly a result of Orit; the lithium hadn't helped at all.

So my doctor decided to wean me off lithium. I'd been on 1500 mg a day; she had then lowered me to 1200, and then to 900.

Monday, I needed to write a paper and finish an Ec problem set. And I'd go shopping for a GPS system for my hoped-for job on the Kerry campaign—I'd even started checking New Hampshire churches.

The Jet was offering free drink tickets for early arrivals. *Drinks there are so expensive; I have to get there early.*

At dinner, I took my lowered—yet still high—900 mg dose of lithium. But en route to pick up the GPS system, I, ironically, got lost, so by the time I returned, and then wrote my paper, it was past eleven.

But the party had started at 10, all the way downtown at Tremont St. *Surely, no drink tickets will remain. I need to pre-game.*

Our floor's kitchen harbored some arak. Clueless about alcohol, I chugged two cups.

Yikes. It's strong.

But I forced it down. (I didn't realize I'd just had 10–30 drinks in a minute—on top of my lithium.)

Finally, around midnight, I arrived.

Lucky me, they've still got drink tickets.

I'd already felt tipsy, but I wasn't yet drunk. So I got a glass of red wine and set out to find friends.

After a couple of times around the club, I still hadn't seen anyone I knew. *They must all be sophomores. Maybe Orit'll be here?*

But then I remembered our Ec 1011b problem set due tomorrow. Not only would Orit not be here, but her Applied Math friends wouldn't be here either.

This is so strange. Going to a Harvard event and not knowing people? Me, the super-celebrity on campus? Oh well.

I stopped looking for people and focused on the music.

I soon realized I was finally drunk. *I've fulfilled my deal with Rock!*

But whoa, I'm really having trouble walking.

Next thing I knew, I was in a great mood—alert and exuberant, albeit with my clothes shorn open, only my boxers intact. I felt like a totally new person. I was so happy. I had no idea why.

A nurse looked me over. “You're really lucky to be alive.... I'm amazed you're so chipper.”

“Huh?”

“We really thought you were dead. You don't realize how lucky you are. Your friends saved your life.”

“What friends?”

She handed me a piece of paper: Orit’s and Kate’s numbers.

I was quite confused.

Kate reported the following account:

I ended up outside the club, moaning—almost lifeless—on the sidewalk. Some guy found me. He unearthed my driver’s license and entered the club to see if anyone knew me.

The first person he approached, out of hundreds of people, was Kate. (I guess there was someone there I knew after all.) She recognized my ID.

She returned to the club to call the ambulance, but they vetoed her move. Just the week before an ambulance had been called to the club. With their developing reputation, if they reported me, they might get in trouble with the police.

They checked with the bartender and looked me over.

He’ll be just fine, they told Kate. After all, the bartender had just given me just a little booze. *That wouldn’t hurt anyone. He just needs some time.*

The bartender was convincing... but Kate wanted to be sure. As she’d cried over Orit the week before, she’d learned Orit and I were friends. And she had Orit’s number from ApMath 105a.

It was about one am, but she called Orit anyways.

Ordinarily, Orit turned off her phone at night—either to sleep, or to bond, privately, with Ari. In case someone needed to reach her in an emergency, she gave her family and closest friends like me the direct line to her bedroom. Kate did not have it.

But this week’s Ec 1011b problem set had been extraordinarily hard. (In fact, I’d given up on it—I used one of my two freebies instead.) So, as great a time manager as she was, Orit still had to stay up late. Only because the problem set had been so hard did Orit’s phone remain on around 1 am.

So when Kate called, it rang—and Orit, surprised at such a late call, answered.

Kate asked Orit if I was on any meds.

Yes, Orit said. Lithium.

Kate panicked again. Her sister had almost died from a bad drug interaction with alcohol. *Screw the club*. Kate called an ambulance.

Orit dropped everything and rushed across the river to the hospital.

There, my heart beats grew worse. Weaker and more erratic.

For some time, the nurse said, they alternated between only two terrifying states: Weakly erratic—or nonexistent. So they said.

Eventually, they thought I was dead.

Kate and Orit cried desperately.

And of course, when you worry for someone and cry over them, you develop an even deeper lasting care for them. As usual, shared suffering binds people. Orit’s care for me deepened.

Kate insisted they pump my stomach, but they’d done their best in the ambulance and

now it was too late; it wouldn't make a difference. It wasn't the alcohol. It was the alcohol mixed with the medication.

{I cheerfully wrote my closest friends a long email explanation—"closest friends" having been defined by Orit a few months before.}

In large doses, alcohol and lithium both impart toxic effects onto the brain. And together, they compound each other's toxicity.^a

Had my doctor not lowered my lithium intake from 1500 mg, my doctors and I are fairly certain I would have died.^b

But because my therapist had lowered my dose to 900 mg, I'd just barely squeaked by—making the doctors think me lost without actually being dead myself.

Had I digested everything, my BAC would have been .20—.60. But probably in the ambulance Orit got Kate to call, they must have induced vomiting. So my BAC wasn't close to .6. Instead, what almost killed me was the lithium-alcohol inter-escalation.

My imagination revved up:

Had Orit and Kate not been math buddies in their 80-person Applied Math class, I would have been dead.

Had I not run into Kate crying on the street, I would have been dead.

Had that guy with my wallet not randomly found Kate amidst hundreds of people who didn't know me, I would have been dead.

Had Kate not still had Orit's number on her phone a semester later, I would have been dead.

Had Orit not been one of the few people who knew I took lithium, I would have been dead. (Though this isn't at all surprising.)

Had Kate's sister not almost died of an alcohol-medication interaction, I may have been dead. Or maybe not.

Had my doctor not lowered my dosage, I would have been dead.

And had the Ec 1011b problem set been easier—leaving Orit either asleep or with Ari at 1 am—I would have been dead.

Whether or not true, these what-ifs fired up my sense of wonder.

Religious me thought all these life-saving coincidences divine providence, but that's only because I was religious. They could have been totally random.

Thanks to a term from Jewish tradition, my ridiculously pattern-seeking mind would re-read Orit's name to mean, in Hebrew, "life restoring stuff, of me." (That's what

^a {No scientist has yet studied the quantitative effects. (Scientist to test subject: "Are you almost dead yet? No? How about 100 more miligrams?")}

^b {Footnote for the devil's advocate: It's true that had I been on 1500, I would have passed out much earlier. But that would not have much reduced my alcohol intake, because I drank all the Arak at once. And even if I'd passed out in the taxi, an impossibly remote possibility, the hospital doctors would not have found out I was on lithium. Which confirms that had I been on 1500, I would have died. }

you get when you take too many literature classes. Things could become meaningful to me even without a solid basis.) Although a ridiculous stretch, from now on just calling her name would be, to me, a testament that I owed my life to her—and to that oh-so-lucky chain of coincidences.

Because Orit saved my life, she ended up at Shavuot, and she made that comment. Which sent me to Israel.

There, at the Conservative Yeshiva, the more about Jewish liturgy I learned, the more powerful became what my Godfather had once taught us in class. This later proved the catalyst for my conversion:

What is the point of the liturgical prayers in Judaism and in Christianity? We must look at their original source, the sacrifices in the Temple. They were the atonement people needed before God. The Temple was destroyed in the year 70. The question became, now that the Temple is destroyed, what do we do about atonement? The two answers would cement the split between the two communities and form their liturgies in opposite directions.

The Christian Response: Christ is the ultimate sacrifice. Nothing more need be done about atonement. All humans need to do is recognize that sacrifice and commemorate it. Christian/Catholic liturgy was about watching a drama. The priest recreates the ultimate sacrifice, and the congregants there are present to it (though in contemporary times they're more active than before). Catholic liturgy, therefore, is about watching the spectacle of a drama. It is passive in its original conception.

The Jewish Response: In addition to acts of chesed, prayer (tefillah) is the substitute for the Temple sacrifices. The daily prayers are arranged to substitute for the sacrifices. Therefore, what needs to be done about atonement is that each person needs to pray 3 times a day. Each person's prayer becomes metaphysically important. No one person is dispensable. The point of liturgy therefore is to get each and every person to pray. This is a much more active conception of liturgy.

The lesson: In its conception, Catholic liturgy is about watching/being present to a spectacle: passive. Jewish liturgy is about the radical importance of each individual person's prayer: active.

The other lesson: The cementing of the split between Judaism and Christianity, and the reason their liturgies split totally, despite having the same source, was the destruction of the Temple. For Tisha B'Av, I would remember this.

As I said, I was by April/May identifying as both Catholic & Jewish. An analysis showed that if a choice need be made, Judaism was maybe better for me:

- My initial approach to religion had been text study, a love I could more easily share with my Jewish friends (or Jesuit priests).
- I preferred the Jewish participatory liturgy over the more passive Catholic drama of spectacle (at least in original conception).
- I'm a logic (Math & Phil) major, and reason is central to everyday Jewish practice.
- I could better emotionally relate to the God-centered attitude rather than the Christ-centered one.
- In Judaism I had strong religious communities; in Catholicism, the only ones I had were older priests.

- I preferred the conception of "Wrestling with God" (Israel) over "Following Christ" (Christian)
- The Jewish purpose in life: Sanctifying everyday life, That the mission of a Jew is to bring holiness into the world, That a Jew is a vessel of holiness; That God needs our help in spreading holiness to what's dark in the world; That halakha builds a divine dwelling -place in our lives to experience holiness.
- I'd long criticized St. Paul's dropping Jewish law as merely a tool to better attract Christian converts. After all, if you believe in Christianity, the gospel quotes Jesus: "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; so practice and observe whatever they tell you" (Matthew 23:2). And at the Conservative Yeshiva, I would develop an appreciation of halakha.
- I found halakha to perfectly fulfill the center of Catholic life and Catholic theology's attitude towards the one fundamental property of created reality: Sacramental Theology & Sacramentality. If you asked a Catholic theologian to describe created reality in one word, it would be "sacramental." But whereas in Catholicism there were only 7 sacraments, of the 613 mitzvot, 130-140 would be deemed sacramental by Catholic theologians. And I liked them better. And while both believed in a sacramental/mystical tikkun olam, Jews stressed that more.
- I'd always believed in the Jesuit/Chassidic idea of "finding God in all things" but I found better for me the Chassidic/kabbalistic (halakha) rather than Jesuit approach, which relied more on one's own judgment.
- I needed more discipline in my life. Halakha seemed to help with that.
- I loved Chassidic and Sephardi Jewish theology. A pithy statement from chabad.org: Our mission in life is 1. "to bring God into the world", and 2. "to make the world a home for God"; 3. "to vanquish darkness", and 4. "to uncover the light implicit within the darkness."
- My favorite Jewish theologian is Abraham Joshua Heschel; my favorite succinct exposition of Jewish theology is his *Between God and Man: An Interpretation of Judaism*. He's totally sacramental.

Theologically, I felt that in the Judeo-Christian tradition, halakha was a proven way to relate to God, and if St. Paul was right, which I doubted more and more, so was "relationship with Christ", for Christians. But for all these reasons above, halakha seemed better for me.

But from the Catholic perspective, there was no conflict, as the two Church documents quoted above would indicate. And I'd always identified as a devout Catholic and I wanted to be a priest.

Enough theology; back to chronology: in Jerusalem: My encounters with Catholicism drew me towards Judaism.

I went to a Jesuit church. The gospel reading of the week was Jesus's telling the disciples to preach the good news, to go make disciples of all nations. Very evangelical.

Well, this being a Jesuit church, what do you think the sermon would be about?

You guessed it: The Baal Shem Tov (founder of Chassidism). Apparently the Baal Shem Tov taught that there is something unique and special about every human being. God wants us to go out and share that uniqueness and specialness to the whole world. *Oh, how much I love the Jesuits! Are they Catholic or Jewish?*

Another week I went to the Franciscan church: There the liturgy was all in Hebrew. There was no mention of Christ. Further, a bunch of prayers were exactly the same as the Jewish liturgy. The Kedushah "Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh AdHashem tsvaot, mlo kol haaretz kvodo." was exactly the same. Before communion, the "hamotzi lechem min haaretz" and "borei pri

hagefen” blessings were exactly the same. Usually you don’t realize it because the mass is in a n- other language, but when in Hebrew, the commonalities are striking.

So these two experiences of Catholi cism drew me closer to Judaism.

Meanwhile, my experience of evangelical Christianity repelled me from Christianity. There was another non-jew at the Yeshiva. She didn’t tell anyone, but she was an evangelical Christian. As her name was Mary, I tried to s trike up a conversation about Catholicism. Turns out she was an ex-Catholic and hated Catholicism. We got into a big discussion. Finally, we were studying mishna together and she kept insulting the rabbis. I kept defending the Jewish tr a- dition. Finally, we got into an argument about Christ. She insisted that Christ was the one true way, that non-Christians were going to hell. I kept quoting Catholic Church document after document rejecting this theology.

Finally, she asked me, “Are you Christian?”

“I’m Catholic,” I replied.

She reiterated, with a twinkle in her eye, “But are you Chris tian?”

Given the context, I had to answer “No.”

It was the first time in my life that I denied b eing Christian.

I was miserable.

All my housing and backup housing in Jerusale m fell through. I moved through 11 di f- ferent places. For a while, I was sleeping outside on the roof of the Petra Hostel, overlooking the Dome of the Rock. My friend Rafi had gone north. In the US I’d arranged roommates and a place to live, but when we got to Jerusalem we couldn’t move in. One place I stayed, my roo m- mates lied and cheated me out of \$500, which a rabbi had to force them to return.

One of my goals in Jerusalem had been to live and be friends with cool roommates. So far, I’d failed. I gave up on my mini-dream.

But then, a week before Tisha B’Av, I met two Bri tish girls. One of them was moving out, and they needed a new roommate. They invited me in, and my itinerant rooming and hous- ing fiasco came to an end. Having given up, I’d reached my goal .

The landlady, who lived with us, approved my living there.

I unpacked and all was set.

Then the Sunday before Tisha B’Av came, and the landlady came to speak to me. She was kicking me out. . . because I was not Jewish.

“You’re kicking me out because I’ m not Jewish?”

“Yes. You’re Christian.”

“But you realize I’m not one of these evangelical Christians. I’ve come here to study J u- daism on it’s own terms. I don’t share their beliefs.”

“It has nothing to do with you. It has to do with your label as a Chri stian. For centuries, Jews have been persecuted by and have suffered under Christians. Just the fact that you’re Catholic will make Jews uncomfortable.”

“But where will I stay”.

“Can’t you ask some church; they’ll take you in.”

It was becoming clear: Judaism had become central to my life, but the label of my being Catholic prevented me from having my spiritual needs met.

Meanwhile, knowing my Jewish ancestry and that there was a chance I might be h a-

lakhically Jewish, some students lambasted me for ever stepping foot in a church, while in the same conversation, other students, knowing that I was Catholic, criticized me for wearing a kippah. I felt stuck in the middle.

One rabbi at the Yeshiva made it very clear to me. “Harpaul, religion is like a car. You need a car to get around. You might want both a Cadillac and a Lexus, but you can only have one. You need to choose. Harpaul, you can’t be both Jewish and Catholic. You need to choose.”

It was the night before the night of Tisha B’Av. I was walking to the Old City to buy kinnot. A car bumped into me.

It kept going.

Another car bumped into me.

It stopped. After asking if I was ok, the driver asked if I wanted a ride to the kotel.

I said no.

He insisted.

Me: “But I was just at the kotel a week ago.”

He wouldn’t take no for an answer, so I jumped in. He drove me there, dropped me off, and left.

Odd.

Now I was at the kotel, out of my way, with nothing to do. I walked up to the wall. Already there, I pulled out my Minchah-Maariv and decided to daven Maariv. I was standing right up against the wall. While davening it hit me:

In the liturgical calendar, tomorrow the Temple would be destroyed, and I was standing against the little that was left. Tonight was the last night the Temple remained standing. From what I learned in my Godfather’s class about Jewish and Catholic liturgies, how the Temple’s destruction cemented the split apart, I drew the following meaning for me: Tonight, the Jewish and the Catholic could still coexist. Tonight I could still have both. But tomorrow they’d be separated, and I’d have to choose.

Naturally, I chose to be Jewish.

One piece, though, might seem to not fit. Of the seven principles of Catholicism I described above, I’ve explained how I recognized six of them permeating Orthodox Judaism.

But what about the seventh, Universality?

Judaism valued the opposite, particularity. I had discussed this with my friend Adrian: We both agreed we value diversity. He went on to explain that we also value the salad bowl metaphor over the melting pot metaphor. But for the salad to taste good, the different pieces in it have to be different, distinct, and have a solid particular identity. But to acquire that strong, solid particular identity, one has to belong to a particular community, with a particular identity.

My last non-shabbat full day in Jerusalem was a Catholic holy day of obligation to go to church, the Assumption of Mary. I did not go to church. I did go sightseeing.

I felt this was the last chance in my life to visit Christian holy sites, because in the future I wouldn’t be Catholic. So I went to Mary’s Tomb, the Garden of Gethsemane, the Church of All Nations, etc. At Mary’s “tomb” was a procession for the feast day (the assumption of Mary, which means she went straight to heaven, and never died or was buried in her “tomb”).

Everyone there went to venerate or look at Mary’s tomb. I was among the last.

There, I knelt & offered my thoughts to God.

It hit me that all of Mary's life, in Catholic thought, was about following and sharing the sufferings of Christ. Such seemed the essence of Catholic life.

But something a friend had convinced me a year before came to mind. There's no need for you to be a martyr. Except in exceptional cases, in the modern world, suffering and martyrdom are the waste of one's life. Just as Fr. Tom had always told me, to contribute to God's world, one has to take care of oneself. Maybe centuries ago one could help others by suffering religious martyrdom; in modern times no one is asking you to worship foreign gods or denounce God. Now, suffering without positive effects for others is wrong. One is just as valuable as anyone else. To treat oneself as worthless is to disrespect the sanctity of human life and to insult God's creation.

I felt that the only thing my label as a Catholic did for me was cause needless suffering and hamper my relationship with God. That label did not seem to add anything to my life or to the world. It henceforth seemed destructive to my spiritual development to remain Catholic.

I next went the Garden of Gethsemane, where Christ was said to have spent his final hours in agony about what do to before his death. It hit me that what that agony was about: According to Christian thought, Christ was being excluded from the Jewish community he loved, and to stay true to his identity, he had to suffer and die for that.

I felt that I was, to a minuscule degree, being excluded from the Jewish community I loved, but not for a good reason -- instead for stereotypes & misunderstandings that did not involve me or my beliefs.

I thought, *maybe there was a point for Christ to suffer, but my suffering here would not accomplish anything. No one's benefiting from my label as a Catholic; even the Catholic Church would be better off with me Jewish I could promote better understanding.*

I convinced myself in many ways I could better contribute to the world and others, to peace on earth, & to my wellbeing, and even to the Catholic Church, if I were Jewish.

I felt over the last year I had experienced some of what Christian tradition considered Christ's suffering, except that my suffering would henceforth be pointless and ruin a beautiful life God had given me. To me, my Catholicism became synonymous with needless, unproductive suffering. My Godfather told me such experiences were what Christian pilgrims sought, but to me, the only point of my suffering seemed to be to teach me to exclusively embrace Judaism.

I realized I could only be happy if I were Jewish, and I could not benefit the world if I were depressed. Now I was convinced that suffering had served its purpose: Its only purpose had been to lead me to Judaism. I didn't regret it, but it was time for it to stop.

Some thoughts on theology of suffering:

It's one thing to say that even in suffering God is with us. Even suffering God experienced, so even in the worst situations we're not alone, but instead are surrounded by God's love. In this view, suffering is still to be avoided, but there's a consolation if it befalls us.

It's another thing to say that because in suffering God is there, we should pursue or glorify suffering. This is a logical fallacy: God is also present in happy moments, and, according to Christianity, the incarnate God experienced happy fellowship and merriment. God is present everywhere, not just in suffering.

In Jewish thought, it is said that when Israel suffers, God suffers with God's people. When Israel is in exile, so is God. That God is with us even in suffering. But God wants us to be happy. Suffering can motivate productive change. Part of the point of suffering is to change us to be happier and grow spiritually. When Israel is happy, God is happy too.

And if we suffer, we are causing God to suffer.

The problem with much Christian thought is that suffering is sometimes seen as the be all and end all of Christ's experience on earth. But Christ experienced joy and happiness too. We can find God just as much in the happy moments and in God's created world as in the sad moments and the ascetic world. Judaism is all about finding God and holiness through the material world and creation.

God wants us to be happy and enjoy and sanctify God's creation. Some Christian thinkers glorify suffering, mistaking a theological consolation with a theological goal. Saying God is with us everywhere, even in suffering, is different from saying that because God is with us in suffering, we should pursue God only there.

The two Catholic Church documents I quoted above seemed official permission, even encouragement, from the Catholic Church to become Jewish, if that would make me happier and draw me closer to God and help to better manifest God's presence in the world. So I saw my becoming Jewish and dropping Catholicism as consistent with being a good Catholic.

I could be a good Catholic by not being Catholic any more, by being Jewish instead, which fit me better and which I loved — with permission from the Church, without breaking my promises — more.

Note: As I interpret the Catholic documents and Pope Benedict XVI's statements above, **it seemed the Catholic teaching was, it's equally good and salvific either 1. to be Catholic, believe in Jesus, and keep the 7 sacraments or 2. to be Jewish, don't believe in Jesus, and keep the 613 mitzvot.** Both have tikkun olam missions to the world, and you should choose 1 or 2 depending on where God wants you, which suits you best, and where you can contribute the most. Depending on which one you love more.

But that this was true only with Judaism. The Catholic Church seemed to be telling Protestants, **"You need to become either Catholic or Jewish, but you shouldn't stay Protestant."** **Ditto with Muslims, other religions, and atheists.** If you insist on remaining Protestant/Muslim/atheist, it's still possible for you to be saved, but only being either Catholic or Jewish will you be where God desires to be you and where you may attain the fullness of salvation. **The Church seemed to say, "It is permissible, and sometimes desirable, for a faithful Catholic to stop practicing Catholicism & not believe in Jesus, only if he/she becomes an Orthodox Jew, but not anything else."**

As I honor my commitments and do not break my promises, I could not have converted without this permission. Just so you know, I believe that Jesus is not the Messiah, and that Jesus is not God. And I love Judaism. Without breaking my promises and commitments to the Church.

I wrestled: convert Conservative? or Convert Orthodox? For now I omit the debate from this short version of my bio. At one point, for totally non-religious reasons, many of my ties with the institution of Conservative Movement were cut off. Also, one thought, on the Orthodox side, is that Judaism is about the community's relationship with God, and that the individual's is part of that. So any halakha one follows has to be the halakha of some community. That halakha has to be one that an observant community actually keeps, not just one on the books without practitioners.)

Still, I kept going to mass. I continued to see both Catholicism and Judaism as valid systems.

tems. The sacramental part of Catholicism was the sacraments, and that of Judaism, halakha. But I felt that until I were fully Jewish, my mitzvot wouldn't really count towards mystically repairing the world or have a spiritual impact. In the meantime, I needed some sacramental content to my life. And as a means of atonement described above, I had to be in one system or the other: I could follow either Paul or the rabbis, but I couldn't be in neither. So, I resolved, until I were fully Jewish, I'd have to keep going to mass. (But then this changed when a Conservative rabbi insisted that for Judaism to completely permeate my spiritual life, I'd have to create an empty space for it to fill.)

The first few rabbis I talked to either said no or else wait a year or two, despite the fact that I already had the necessary knowledge.

But soon I was convinced: I should wait a year from my decision.

Then, while working on the Clark campaign in New Hampshire, the Conservative rabbi there offered to convert me. I was glad I had a choice, but I still wanted to wait a full year. (Meanwhile, keeping shabbat proved challenging: I worked from 5 am till 10 pm every day, producing for all the staff, twice a day, a hyperlinked, categorized press clips database they relied on as the eyes and ears of the campaign. They needed this every day, and no one else knew how to run my database. After shabbat, I'd arrive at the office Saturday night and work 30 straight hours, preparing the report for Sat am, then Sat pm, & then Sun am all in the same night, and then doing the Sun pm one and starting Mon am.)

In Switzerland, as earlier at Chabad, I became familiar with the Ultra-Orthodox community I happened to live right in the middle of, and I came to respect their hospitality towards others and their devotion to God. The modern Orthodox rabbi there told me that if I stuck around for 2 years and became part of the community, he'd be willing to talk to me about conversion, but no guarantees.

In the meantime, I grew even more attached to the Sephardi rite, which made sense given my family history, my cultural background, and my studies with my Godfather. If the opportunity presented itself, I definitely wanted to convert Sephardi.

Back in the US, I drove to Columbus to have dinner with my boss from the Clark campaign. After dinner, while driving, my car broke down, and, long story short, I ended up stranded on the front lawn of a frum Sephardi Persian/Iranian rabbi whose synagogue had died and whose wife had left him. I had never met him before, though we'd chatted twice by phone. With no one in his home and his job lost, what better thing could he do than take me in as a student? He invited me to live with him.

But before this happened, another cool coincidence: I had just arrived in Cleveland with my broken-down car. This rabbi I was looking for wasn't at home. So I decided to go to the nearest synagogue. Now Cleveland is an entirely Ashkenazi city; there are very few Sephardim. Further, I'd never in my life been to a brit millah. Well, within three hours of my arrival in Ashkenazi Cleveland I randomly went to this Ashkenazi synagogue, one of many in the neighborhood, and I ended up in the middle of a Sephardi brit millah!

I interpreted this as meaningful and auspicious, a possible hashgacha pratit. I felt I'd been moving from place to place, looking for a community in which I could convert. I knew conversions could take years, after already being established in a community. The brit millah is a central part of conversion. As it was the first brit millah I'd attended, as it was Sephardi, in an Ashkenazi town, I thought maybe this symbolized that it was with this Cleveland community that my conversion process would end.

I lived with Rabbi Ezra for two months, learning with him every day, eating at his parents' house, becoming a part of his family. He made clear that he considered me like a younger brother. As I spoke Spanish, I also mediated between him and his wife—in Argentina—giving advice to both. My Jewish ancestry intrigued him, and he hoped to teach me all he knew, and for me to become a great Torah scholar.

Meanwhile, I had many doubts about learning in such a frum environment. But the Conservative and Open Orthodox communities were, at least in the US, Ashkenazi dominated, so to achieve these purposes from a Sephardic perspective, I had to master the traditional Sephardic halakha first. Rabbi Elfasi convinced me that there was only one Sephardic halakha, that both modern Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox had the same rules, so I had to accept that for my conversion. Meanwhile, Rabbi Ezra and I argued a lot about the role of women and about attitudes towards non-Jews, but that didn't hurt our relationship. Most annoying, though, was that he wouldn't take my objections seriously, saying that once I knew more I'd agree with him. In these debates, he treated me like a little kid, explicitly saying, "you're like a little brother to me."

In addition to learning with him, he wanted me to establish myself in the community. He said I couldn't convert in Cleveland until I was well respected as a Torah scholar. But I had trouble finding a regular chevruta (learning partner).

Meanwhile, everyone around me was quite Republican. I felt a bit out of place. I made one friend with whom I seemed to share more values and a more open approach to the world. His name was Sam. We became friends, but soon he left town to yeshiva; I did not remember where he went.

Soon after I arrived in Cleveland I had to settle my Hebrew name. In January, a friend had suggested "Uri". Now, the night of June 29, I had to write Rabbi Ezra a note, and I decided to sign my Hebrew name. I got out my Tanakh/Bible to find the Biblical spelling of "Uri". To my dismay, it was smushed—all from traveling and packing. I opened to investigate the damage, and the page where my Bible's random crumpling and smushing began happened to be the first page in the Bible where the name Uri appears: Exodus 31:2. Exactly. And the crease of that smushed page was exactly on that verse Ex 31:2 and right by the word Uri. Although not as splitting-mountain-and-shattering-rock an incident as that 2 yrs before, this remained impressive. Maybe human mind imposing patterns and meanings, but maybe hashgacha pratit.

But it was a far more extraordinary coincidence that had earlier convinced me to become "Uri". When my friend first suggested "Uri", I merely started thinking about it. But an extraordinary not-just-coincidence in S. Carolina seared "Uri" into my identity:

On the campaign trail for Clark, I tried to keep shabbat and not drive. But in South Carolina, I couldn't find shabbat hospitality. Almost no observant Jews in South Carolina, and the Chabad couldn't host me. The best I could do was a motel three miles from the Conservative shul. I considered a cab, but decided no, I'll just trust God and go with the flow.

This was the suburban/rural South, very sparse. Not anywhere you'd ever find a religious Jew. After walking 15 minutes, sans-map, totally disoriented, in the middle of nowhere, I walked to the only traffic light around—very few cars, and no red light to stop them. It seemed hopeless.

But finally, a car drove up with the light red. It stopped, and I approached it for directions, secretly hoping maybe they'd also give me a ride. The guy rolled down the window, and I asked him if he knew where the Conservative synagogue was.

His response: “Jump in, I’ll take you there.” !

Turns out he was Jewish, an immigrant from Russia. How unlikely it was to find a Jew in Columbia, SC! What luck! No way I ever would’ve made it to services had I not been so lucky. I mean, this is the middle of nowhere South Carolina.

I thanked him profusely, and told him I’d be super, super late if I tried walking. I was feeling there was some hashgacha going on here, and the name Uri was on my mind; I asked him his Hebrew name:

“Uri”!

It hadn’t been a common name in my experience till then. At Harvard, I didn’t even know any Uri’s, let alone in South Carolina. This seemed hashgacha pratit. Well, after that incident, I decided my Hebrew name would definitely include “Uri”.

Well, June 29 night when I randomly opened to the first of 7 mentions of Uri (this is my imposing patterns and meanings on what I see) in the Bible, I learned it’s always spelled with an aleph, never with an ayin. But I wanted mine with an ayin. How to justify this?

I turned to the first liturgical song I learned. It was first through the a capella group Mizmor Shir that I became the celebrity and mascot at Harvard Hillel. And Jewish liturgy and singing was a small reason I fell in love with Judaism and chose it over Catholicism. Well, the first liturgical song I ever learned by heart—the first time I ever sang with Mizmor Shir in concert—was an arrangement of the Lcha Dodi stanza that says “Uri Uri Shir Daberi” = “Awaken! Awaken! And sing a song” (From Isaiah 52:1) Here, “Uri” is spelled with an ayin, just like I wanted. This partly settled my Hebrew name. I turned it into , “Uri Uriel”, which means, “Wake up! God is my light.”

Finally, I found a chevruta, Dr. Walden. We learned well together, many hours a day. Eventually, he invited me to his home for shabbat lunch. After a wonderful lunch, the time came to bentch. We were three men present, so they were about to say the zimun, when I interrupted, saying they shouldn’t count me, much to their shock. So we didn’t do the zimun.

After shabbat, I was going to stop by to borrow some of Dr. Walden’s books. This was the shabbat before Tisha B’av. But when I stopped by, he told me that he wouldn’t be able to lend me the books.

I asked why.

He responded it was because I wasn’t Jewish yet. He continued: he would not be able to learn with me anymore; his rabbi had told him he could not learn with someone who wasn’t Jewish yet. I called Rabbi Ezra, who failed to convince Dr. Walden to change his mind, much to Rabbi Ezra’s incredulity.

I was really hurt, and I started to cry, but was at the same time happy, recognizing the potential of maybe hashgacha pratit: I knew this would motivate Rabbi Ezra to speed up my conversion process. I was right: Rabbi Ezra set up some appointments with a local rabbi who recommended we see a great posek: HaRav Feinstein in Monsey, NY.

So we went to Monsey, one of the most famous American centers of ultra-Orthodox life. Rav Feinstein was willing to convert me, if my references panned out. In addition to my recommendations from Cleveland and Zurich, he insisted on a frum rabbi who’d known me for years. My relationship with the Harvard Chabad rabbi, cultivated through my solving his computer problems, saved the day.

But Rav Feinstein made unhalakhic demands that I accepted in my enthusiasm but which

I came to regret. He said I should not again wear jeans and that I should keep a beard.

But on my next trip home to DC, I realize that this kind of Orthodoxy would cut me off from the non-Jewish world. I realized I didn't agree with some of the ultra-Orthodox community's values and standards, and I wasn't sure if I could commit to them for life. I'd been fairly open to my rabbi about my beliefs about non-jews and the role of women, but he doesn't want me to raise them with the *beit din*. My rabbi insisted that I just go to the *beit din* and only answer directly the questions they ask—and not bring up anything extra. But I feel this dishonest

Most ultra-Orthodoxy believes there is no value outside Jewish texts and tradition, so their rules are strict to prevent interaction with the rest of the world. I disagree. God created the non-Jewish world and the Bible says God saw that it was good. Otherwise, why would God create it? Each and every human being is created in the image and likeness of God and is equal in its human dignity, be one Jew or be one non-Jewish. There is much good in the non-Jewish world, and much is lost by cutting oneself off. The only gain is a rigidity and closed-mindedness which makes one closed to others and spiritually unable to grow.

It is that kind of attitude revealed in the legend about the destruction of the library of Alexandria, the concept that there's nothing worth studying outside of the religious tradition: Caliph Omar (Umar ibn al-Khattab) supposedly decided the following: if the books of the library did not contain the teachings of the Qur'an, they were useless and should be destroyed; if the books did contain the teachings of the Qur'an, they were superfluous and should be destroyed. The decision: destroy the greatest repository of Western cultural knowledge and history.

In Cleveland, I remember someone asking me where I learned: Harvard, I said. They responded, Why are you wasting your time at Harvard when you could be in yeshiva? And it was a similar mindset in the Jewish world that led to the burning of the great Rambam's writings—now among the most authoritative Jewish texts. *By converting in the ultra-Orthodox world, will I be aligning myself with these values?*

So extreme was this ultra-Orthodox world that if Rabbi Ezra reached in from outside the bathroom to turn off the light to save energy, his hand would become tame and he'd have to go to the kitchen to ritually wash his hand that entered the bathroom. This *chumra* I considered a diversionary waste of time. Further, I didn't think I can commit to being *shomer negia* for the rest of my life. But when a college friend told that all Orthodox halakha officially interprets *shomer negia* as my rabbi did (my friend was completely wrong), I don't see a choice, for I knew I want to convert Orthodox. Fortunately, Rabbi Ezra gave in: he now said I was allowed to hug my sister or shake hands at work or when it's obviously non-sexual.

I disagreed when he says that women should not learn Talmud or teach classes, but my rabbi insisted this does not directly concern me. When we argue about pluralism and the role of women, all he says is, "You're only 24—you're young—I know—I'm a rabbi—when you learn more, you'll know you were wrong and I was right."

He said that as long as I answered their questions, as long as I was honest, even if they ended up with a wrong impression of me, the *gerut* (conversion) was valid. That it was their responsibility to ask the right questions. If they didn't find out something about me, then that was their fault.

I was furious that the *beit din* was going to make me commit to all sorts of religiously irrelevant promises. Meanwhile, Rabbi Ezra said that he'd done all he could for me and that if I canceled this *beit din* appointment, he wouldn't help me again.

My friend Adrian wrote me,

This is a really difficult situation; it must be terrible to be stuck between

this Scylla & Charybdis.

Fortunately for me, I was never forced to make promises about communal affiliation or minhagim (who I would marry, how I would dress) ...

I was turned down by the Boston Va'ad's beit din because I was honest with them and told them that if they converted me on a Sunday I would go to egalitarian davening on Monday morning.

I know this isn't the easiest thing to hear/read, but I think your only option is to be not just honest but totally open with them. There are two reasons for this, one hashkafic and one halakhic.

Hashkafically, this process sets the tone for your entire Jewish life – if it is tainted in any way, you live with that for the rest of your life. Further, it is a question of fairness to the people on your beit din -- they both 1. are convinced that non-haredim are destroying Judaism and 2. are willing to do a tremendous act of hesed for you by bringing you into Judaism. For them to do this thing for you, while you are simultaneously contemplating (or even planning on) a life that they view as abhorrent, seems to me to be fundamentally dishonest and ungrateful. (I think this is the difference between your beit din and mine -- Rabbi Lookstein doesn't think of SCM as a threat to the Jewish people; perhaps just the opposite...) (This is, incidentally, the idea of being naked in the mikva – that you are totally unguarded and open as you enter... you hide no parts of yourself.)

Halakhically, openness might actually be required for your conversion to work in the first place. There are numerous discussions of marriages being retroactively nullified when (for example) the wife learns something about the husband that he had concealed at the time of something about the husband that he had concealed at the time of marriage. The logic is either a: had she known that, she never would have married him, and since it was his obligation to reveal it, he breached his obligations and she will not be punished for that, or b: she wasn't actually marrying HIM, it was only a constructed, false image of him, and therefore the marriage never happened. Though one doesn't have to follow this logic with conversion, I think you can see why it could be compelling. In gerut, you are essentially making a contract, and if at the time of conversion you either lack the intention of fulfilling it or have a reasonable expectation that you will be unable to fulfill this beit din's expectations of you, I think that the gerut may reasonably be ruled invalid. I know this is strong language, but it is the only way I myself can understand the process.

I'm disgusted that they're imposing these kinds of conditions on you, but I really don't know what to tell you. Conversion is primarily accepting the community's authority: the whole idea is that the Jewish community, not the ger, is the entity that decides who is Jewish & what the criteria are for being accepted.

Adrian convinced me: On my dad's birthday, 8/11, I started to realize that I would not be able to go through with this ultra-Orthodox conversion, that I should give up and just have a Conservative conversion.

For my dad's birthday, our family went to dinner to the Four Seasons. Because it was a nice restaurant, I couldn't wear a baseball cap, so for the first time since I'd started living an Orthodox lifestyle, I took off my kippah. Also for the first time, I was going to eat with plates and

utensils that were not kosher. I was quite depressed and was giving up.

But as soon as I started eating, as if God were trying to stop me, I got a phone call. It was Charlotte—a girl with whom I'd been briefly infatuated over 5 years before! (I'd been totally over her for years, so there's no romantic component here.) I hadn't talked with her since 2001, over three years before.

On July 30 (2 wks before), I'd received an email from her, saying "Hey now, ho now, guess who else is Jewish - did an Orthodox conversion". She'd heard through the grapevine that I'd converted Orthodox, even though I actually hadn't by then. But I hadn't heard from her again. So I was shocked when she called the moment I'd started eating in the non-kosher restaurant.

We spent 45 min on the phone then, mostly her trying to convince me to not abandon Orthodoxy. She invited me to Philly for shabbat: The trip (and mostly the all) re-convincing me to go through with the Monsey conversion.

When I'd known Charlotte before, she gone to a Quaker school; she'd had no expressed interest in Judaism. We hadn't talked in over 3 years. So it seemed pretty miraculous that the moment I was deciding to abandon my Orthodox conversion, she called me. I suspect it was hashgacha pratit. Had she not called then, I definitely would have abandoned an Orthodox conversion. Instead, thanks to Charlotte's timely intervention, I wrote Adrian back,

I've talked w my rabbi, and he insists that the Monsey NY beit din is only trying to scare me and make sure I'm committed, and they don't actually mean I have to dress a certain way or hang out with certain people. He's saying it's all for show and intimidation and isn't what they actually mean. He's insisted that they aren't really expecting me to agree to anything more than the mitzvot, but they're just saying things for rhetorical purposes.

He says it's fine for me to shake hands w a female for professional purposes.

All I need to agree for Monsey is keep the mitzvot - to keep shabbat, to not eat traife, etc. That it's fine if I shave the beard the day after the beit din, that it's fine if I wear jeans. etc. That they're assuming I'll be more meikel (lenient) than I agree at the beit din. etc. He's insisted that it's not a matter of honesty but just a matter of rhetoric.

Rightly or wrongly, to me, Charlotte's call exemplified my idea that many answers to prayers were creations of unique opportunities that, occasionally, gave me a difficult choice, testing if I really wanted what I prayed for. When the Israelites fled Egypt, God split the sea for them. But they still had to walk through. They could have given up and stayed on land, wasting the miracle God performed for them. It still came down to their choice—accept the miracle or reject it. I deemed Charlotte's call was a little miracle for me, but I still had the choice: accept its purpose or not. This time, I accepted.

The beit din ended up being quite international and ecumenical.. My rabbi was Sephardic and Persian. Rav Feinstein was Chassidic and American. Another rabbi was Ashkenazi (non-Chassidic) and British. And the last rabbi was Chassidic and Israeli. Quite appropriate for my diverse background: Rabbis from four countries and three rites.

You wonder: What did they ask me?

"Uri, why do you want to be Jewish?"

"I believe Hashem wants me to be Jewish." *Why else all those manipulative coinc-*

dences?

Rav Feinstein objected. “How do you know what Hashem wants?”

Bad answer... Uh-oh.

“Say something else,” whispered Rabbi Ezra.

“I want to live my life so that all my actions are meaningful. I want every single little thing I do to have deep spiritual meaning. When I do a mitzvah, I release the spiritual sparks —I bring the divine presence down to earth to inhabit the physical world. Each mitzvah I do repairs the spiritual world—tikkun olam.”

Ignoring the sexism, I adored Chabad’s statement: “the Creator's plan: our mission in life is to bring God into the world (the male role) and to make the world a home for God (the woman's specialty); to vanquish darkness (male), and to uncover the light implicit within the darkness (female).”

I continued, “I’ve always believed our mission in life is to improve the world. And I believe there is no more powerful way to do that than to do mitzvot. And I can only do them if I’m Jewish.”

The Chassdic and Sephardic rabbis ate up my speech.

Then they asked me about eating a big mac at McDonalds.

In the mikvah, I sincerely and enthusiastically accepted all the commandments, but I had made clear I was not promising anything beyond the minimum. My thoughts partially focused on my soon-to-be-revived platonic friendship with Orit. I naked stood in the ritual pool of water.

“Uri, do you promise that your wife will cover her hair, not wear a [wig]?”

“Yes.” *After all, classy hats look cool and elegant. Why the heck would people wear a [wig]?*

“Uri, in Judaism, the relationship between a man and a woman is very important. But we have rules about when we may have relations. If you become Jewish, for twelve days a month, you and your wife cannot touch. Do you accept this?”

“Well, for Sephardim it can be one fewer day than for Ashkenazi.”

“Ok. Fine. But you agree to it, right?”

Those were the only two questions they asked. I converted.

Rav Feinstein insisted I daven mincha in Monsey, and suggested I go to Kol Yakov. I wanted to get to NYC ASAP to see friends before my flight, but he insisted otherwise, that I should go to Kol Yakov.

There are many yeshivas in Monsey. Why this one?

I took a cab to Kol Yakov, about 15 min away.

The moment I approached the door and started to open it, Sam rushed out.

He was flabbergasted, shocked, delighted to see me. He wondered what the heck I was doing there. He gave me great big hug.

As we went to daven, he wondered how I ended up there at Kol Yakov. He wondered how the heck Rav Feinstein had idea that I should go there for Mincha. He insisted it couldn’t be explained - how did I open the door the split-second he was running out. I’m positive this was hashgacha pratit, albeit purposeless. He joked, “Is Rav Feinstein a prophet?”

Sam was my only close friend in Cleveland, the only person with whom I felt I could be totally honest. I didn’t even remember he’d gone to Monsey. And I had no clue that Kol Yakov was his yeshiva. Meanwhile, I hadn’t told anyone outside my or the rabbi’s family that I was going to Monsey, so Sam had no idea I was there. Of the dozens or more yeshivas and shuls in Monsey, the chances were low, to begin with, that I’d be sent to the one Sam was at. Further,

there were dozens of students there at that time. The chances that he'd be rushing out the door the same moment I was entering were so low. Further, there were so many different doors. I'm impressive.

Finally, still on August 25, my rabbi and I flew to Argentina. Interestingly, the poster next to our hotel room door declared "Ruinas Jesuitas"—Jesuit Ruins, which I thought might be meaningful: as if my conversion seemed an end to my once-held dream of becoming a Jesuit. (Maybe a stretch, my mind imposing patterns.)

In Argentina, I fall in love with the Jewish community there, in comparison to the frum world at Cleveland. Everyone, including the frum world, seemed committed to their Judaism, but pluralistically tolerant, and friendly with non-Jews. In the shul we went to Friday night, one could find both men in black hats and women wearing kipot. It seemed like everyone—Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, & Ultra-Orthodox—prayed together and accepted each other's differences.

The Jewish world was not segregated from the prevailing culture. In one of the nicer shopping malls, next to the movie theater is the food court: there are two kosher restaurants along with the others, sharing the same tables and trays, open till 2 am. There's even a kosher McDonalds, right across the hall from the non-kosher McDonalds.

That Saturday night after shabbat, at 2 am, I ordered some kosher food and go to the movie theater to see Fahrenheit 911.

Even the most ultra-orthodox Jews seemed involved in non-Jewish culture. One guy at a frum yeshiva was in an arabic-music band. A Catholic I talked to on the street emphasized how Buenos Aires prided itself on its various religions cooperating in peace.

There were 54 synagogues and 30 yeshivas/kollels in just the city limits of Buenos Aires. Jewish culture seemed to thrive. I went to a party for the dedication of a new Torah scroll. There, hundreds of men and women sang and danced, entranced. I loved it.

As a sign of how wonderfully I felt at home, another seemingly supernatural coincidence occurred. We stayed with Rabbi Levi for shabbat and davened there Friday night. The next morning was a bar mitzvah at a shul an hour's walk away, so I went there the next morning, then back to the first shul Sat afternoon. As I've said, my father is from India and my mother is from Ecuador. Of the 54 shuls in towns and {thousands} of streets, it turned out that the first shul was on the street "Republica de la India", and the second shul was on the street "Ecuador"! Such were their mailing addresses!

Even if it may possibly have been hashgacha pratit, and not, more likely, my mind imposing meanings and patterns where none exist, it didn't seem to have much purpose, except to indicate how much I felt at home, so happy. Whatever it was, it was shocking.

But what I had to learn next was that one shouldn't let the best be the enemy of the good: Given one's limited time and resources, trying to do everything 100% right all the time might accomplish less than a more realistically set 95% goal. And inventing cute extra rituals or chumras on top of many pre-existing obligations may divert resources away from what's important. Genesis Rabbah (19, 3) warns, "Do not consider the hedge more important than the vineyard."

One should follow halakha, but one should also make further decisions with economic thought-processes, looking especially at the opportunity costs, and also at comparative advantages, niches, and prisoner's dilemmas—all of which mandate against excessive stringencies so that one may accomplish other things to help improve the world, too.

In a strange sort of way, my dream of becoming a Jesuit priest was fulfilled by becoming an Or-

thodox Jew.

— By ,Uri Uriel