

Judaism Straight Up
Why Real Religion Endures



Moshe Koppel

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Maggid Books

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*Dedicated by Harold and Dolores Arnovitz
In honor of their children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren*

*Dedicated in awe and unending thanks to our parents,
Mr. and Mrs. Michael and Hilda Aaronson.
May we live by the values you embody
and pass them on to the next generation.*

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Preface

Most people I know live somewhat bifurcated lives. Their family and communal lives are characterized by strong ethnic and religious ties and traditional norms, while their lives outside family and community are saturated with contemporary Western culture, including its cosmopolitanism and its often dismissive attitude toward tradition. The subtle tango involved in reconciling these two worlds is as familiar to Buddhists and Hindus as it is to Christians, Muslims, and Jews.

I began this dance as a child in a Yiddish-speaking *heder* (religious elementary school) on the Upper West Side of Manhattan and continue it today as a computer-science professor living in Israel. This book has grown out of my own efforts to integrate the seemingly disparate facets of my social, religious, and intellectual experience.

Many, if not most, people who live bifurcated lives don't feel that there is a problem to be solved. They simply speak two languages, using each as appropriate. Others believe that reconciliation is impossible. Some of them attempt to cut themselves off as much as possible from contemporary Western culture, building high walls around themselves and their communities in the hope, often vain, that the barbarians at the gates can be

warded off. Others abandon traditional norms, or simply drift away from them, at least to the extent that family obligations permit.

This book is addressed mainly (but by no means exclusively) to those who have wrestled with the problem of maintaining deep traditional commitments while engaged with a cosmopolitan society that often denigrates such commitments. One of the reasons that such reconciliation is difficult is that even those who are deeply embedded in both cultures have a hard time putting their finger on the key underlying differences between their specific culture and the dominant Western one. Furthermore, certain norms and beliefs that are at odds with most religious traditions are so pervasive in contemporary Western society that one can hardly imagine them as anything but a part of the fabric of reality itself. They become the starting point from which traditional norms are judged – and, typically, found wanting.

In this book, I focus specifically on the particular tradition I know best: Judaism. Readers affiliated with other religious traditions can decide which of my insights carry over to their own experiences. I identify the most fundamental ways in which traditional Jewish norms and beliefs differ from those of the dominant culture, and in the process offer a somewhat novel primer on Judaism as it is actually experienced by some of its most devoted practitioners.

I have tried to frame the differences in a way that avoids the common pitfall of assuming the superiority – or, more precisely, the inevitability – of certain suppositions of contemporary Western culture. In particular, I endeavor to tease out the sacred beliefs and norms that render parts of progressive society something akin to a religious order of its own. It's my hope that once these beliefs and norms are made explicit and subjected to scrutiny, they'll lose the luster of inevitability.

The particular version of Judaism that I focus on is considerably more intuitive and experiential than the more text-based

version familiar to most people who have received their religious education in institutions rather than in family or community settings. In fleshing out this organic version, I describe in considerable detail the views and attitudes of a particular character who personifies it.

The fact that I need to reach back two generations to find such a character is telling, and it might suggest that the version of Judaism I describe is a thing of the past. But I do not believe this is so. I have written this book precisely because I am convinced that the kind of organic Judaism I describe here can make a comeback of sorts, and I wish to make my own modest contribution to nudging it along.

One brief methodological comment is in order. Although I discuss political philosophy at some length, I have avoided the words *liberalism* and *conservatism*; although I use ideas taken straight from the theory of evolution, I hardly use the word *evolution*; although this is a book about religion, I skimp on using the word *God*. This is deliberate. Most people assume that the meanings of these terms (and many others I avoid) are well understood, when in fact they are loaded with ambiguities and hidden assumptions that require unpacking. I've tried, therefore, to simply spell out precisely what I mean rather than lazily hiding behind such terms. I hope that the benefit of speaking plainly outweighs the occasional jarring effect of an anticipated word's non-occurrence.

* * *

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I am grateful also to many people who read all or part of earlier drafts of the book and offered useful comments: Ed Aaronson, Elliott Abrams, Richard Aiken, Josh Amaru, David Arnovitz, Jeff Ballabon, Michael Berkowitz, Josh Berman, Yitzie Blau, Sarah Rindner Blum, Michael Broyde, Isaac Chavel, Eric Cohen, Shlomo Engelson, Stefanie Engelson, Elli Fischer, Netanel Fisher, Ralph Frankel, Azriel Ganz, Emmett Gilles, Heshy Ginsburg, Yehonatan Givati, David Goldman, Stefan Goltzberg, Mark Gottlieb, Eli Gurevitz, Danny Gutenmacher, Malka Rappaport Hovav, Seth Kaplan, David Kessler, Seth Avi Kadish, Jonathan Klahr, Yitzhak Klein, Arnold Kling, Steve Klitsner, Eugene Kontorovich, Roberta Kwall, Sam Lebens, David Leiser, Yechiel Leiter, Saul Lieberman, Elad Lison, Mishael Lobel, Jerome Marcus, David Matar, Yaniv Mezuman, Emmanuel Navon, Danny Orbach, Yehoshua Pfeffer, David Pilavin, Jay Pomrenze, Ido Rechnitz, Aryeh Roberts, Anat Roth, Chaim Saiman, Benjamin Schvarcz, Alon Shalev, Yitzchok Silber, Michael Weingrad, Joshua Weisberg, Aviva Winter, David Wurmser, and Jeff Zucker.

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Finally, this book is an expression of gratitude to my parents' generation of European refugees in the United States and an expression of hope for my children's generation of native Israelis. If not for the wisdom, kindness, and fortitude of my wife Channah, I would surely have been a wholly inadequate intermediary between them.

Introduction

Shimen and Heidi

It was in the kosher dining hall at Princeton where, in the early 1980s, I lost my innocence. In my first foray into life in a non-yeshiva environment, I was a newly minted PhD in mathematics with a one-year appointment to the Institute for Advanced Study. Heidi was a graduate student in the humanities who had taken it upon herself to educate me about the special duties of the Jewish people to humanity. “How can you justify your narrow tribal loyalty? Isn’t the lesson of the Holocaust that we Jews must *never* put our parochial interests ahead of others’ interests? We should know better than anyone what happens when that lesson isn’t learned.” That was the moment I realized that I had never encountered true orthodoxy before.

My own thoughts about Jewish obligation were somewhat less righteous than those of my interlocutor. My first lessons in the matter had been learned in the small *shtiebel* (prayer hall) on the Upper West Side of Manhattan where my grandfather prayed along with his fellow Gerer Hasidim.

Even several decades after The War, this *shtiebel* had the look and feel of the hundreds of its Gerer counterparts that dotted Poland before every one of them was destroyed in The War. They were focal points of Hasidism, a movement that, spreading through Eastern Europe in the nineteenth century, advocated a form of organization into tight-knit communities centered around a rebbe (spiritual leader), with an emphasis on the social and experiential aspects of Jewish observance accessible even to the less learned. The Gerers – named after the town of Gura-Kalwaria, where one of the rebbes lived for a time – were probably the largest and most learned of the hasidic sub-groups in Poland, its members numbering in the many tens of thousands, perhaps in the hundreds of thousands.¹

The regulars at this particular *shtiebel* were among the few survivors of their families and communities. They retained their loyalty to the ways in which they had lived before The War, but without beards or the fur hats (known as *shtreimlekh*, or in the case of the taller version worn by Gerers, *spodeks*) typically worn by Hasidim on Shabbat and Holidays. They were God-fearing Jews, but they felt sufficiently at home with God to take liberties as necessary. They were worldly, cynical, and fiercely independent, but had chosen to remain loyal to the ways of their fathers. Although some were fully committed, others and maybe most might better be thought of as semi-lapsed Gerer Hasidim who nevertheless wouldn't think of jumping ship after what had happened to their families.

1. For some background in English on Hasidism in general and the Gerers in particular, see D. Biale et al., *Hasidism: A New History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), a recent anthology on the history of Hasidism; and A. J. Heschel, *A Passion for Truth* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), on the Kotzker Rebbe, a forerunner of Gerer Hasidism, whose quirks provide insight into the Gerer mindset. Also of interest is H. Seidman, *Warsaw Ghetto Diaries* (New York: Targum Press, 1997), a Holocaust diary by a member of the band of Gerers that included Shimen and my grandfather.

My grandfather and Shimen, his best friend in the community, were of the latter variety. Shimen told many stories, all about the same topic. Here's an example: A Nazi officer in the Lodz ghetto demanded that he hand over either his son or his daughter within forty-eight hours. One of Shimen's profoundest sorrows, and he had many, was that his daughter sensed he had fleetingly thought to choose to keep his son. Up to the time both she and her brother were murdered, she never spoke to him again. After The War, Shimen got his hands on a pistol and went from house to house on a mission to extract Jewish children from the Polish families with whom they had been left when their parents were deported to the camps.

Elie Wiesel, who often prayed in that Gerer *shtiebel*, relates a story about Rosh HaShana, the Jewish New Year, in Auschwitz.² One of his fellow inmates announced to the rest of the assembled in the barracks that though they had no wine, "we'll take our tin cups and fill them with tears. And that is how we'll make our kiddush (a Holiday blessing made over wine) heard before God." That inmate was Shimen. Of course, Shimen had no patience for drama, and whenever the story was told he would scrunch up his eyes behind his thick black-framed glasses and say, dismissively, "Nu, Wiesel. He makes a living telling *maiselakh* (tales) about me."

The Gerer *shtiebel* gang were intense, they were angry, they could be funny in a biting sort of way, they were devoted. But one thing they had no patience for was high-minded pieties. They despised pomposity and self-righteousness. Their devotion to *Yiddishkeit*, old-fashioned Judaism, as a way of life, and to the Jews as a people, were as natural and instinctive as drawing breath.

For reasons not quite clear to me, to this day I see the world through their eyes. My instinctive judgments about most things are their judgments. My views are hopelessly, and proudly,

2. E. Wiesel, *One Generation After* (New York: Random House, 1970).

old-fashioned. In some odd way, I think of myself as an ex-Gerer Hasid without having ever actually been a Gerer Hasid.

The very cosmopolitan Heidi of Princeton, and the many, many Heidis I've met since then, patronize old Shimens as addle-brained relics out of touch with contemporary doctrines. First, Shimen's old-fashioned views evince what Heidi regards as an immoral preference for the welfare of Jews over that of others. Second, Shimen is committed to social norms that are mediated by rabbis and thus, in Heidi's view, insufficiently respectful of the autonomy of individuals. Third, Shimen's understanding of the world is rooted in a set of beliefs that are, to Heidi's understanding, ahistorical and unscientific.

In this book I'll present a defense of Shimen's cranky, old-fashioned view of the world – okay, my own cranky, old-fashioned view of the world – against Heidi's progressive pieties. My main argument will not focus on the misrepresentation of Judaism advanced by cosmopolitan critics like Heidi. Rather, I will argue on behalf of the provocative claim that Heidi's critique is rooted in her failure to fully grasp the nature and scope of morality, tradition, and belief necessary for *any* society to flourish.

In short, between Heidi of Princeton and Shimen of the Polish shtetl, one is narrow and orthodox and the other is worldly and realistic. I will argue in this book that most people are confused about which one is which.

* * *

The book will focus on three main differences between Heidi's world and Shimen's world.

The first difference concerns the scope of morality. Heidi is extremely sensitive to treating people unfairly or generally causing others distress. In fact, as far as she is concerned, this is the main moral litmus test; otherwise, no harm, no foul. By contrast, Shimen (of whom I'll speak in the present tense even though he is

long gone) lives in a highly moralized world. What you eat, what you wear, and whom you sleep with are all fraught with moral considerations, whether or not anyone else is adversely affected. Furthermore, Shimen feels morally bound by particular loyalty to the Jewish people, deference to its scholars and elders, and reverence for institutions and objects sanctified by its traditions – again, even at the possible expense of others.

The second difference between Heidi and Shimen concerns the mechanisms through which communities determine and enforce the boundaries of the forbidden and the obligatory. For Heidi, though she is no great patriot, the relevant community consists of citizens of the state (or supranational entities); the best mechanism for determining obligations and prohibitions is public policy; and the method of enforcement is prosecution. For Shimen, who lives in the Jewish diaspora, the relevant community consists of those committed to the norms of the Jewish way of life, also known as halakha; the best mechanism for determining obligations and prohibitions is community tradition and practice, occasionally codified and augmented by expert opinion; and the method of enforcement is social pressure. In short, Shimen – though he is assuredly bound by laws, including the laws of the state – lives mostly in a world of social norms driven from the bottom up, while Heidi – though she is subject to plenty of social pressure – lives mostly in a world of laws driven from the top down.

The third difference concerns the relationship of one's beliefs about the world to one's social and moral commitments. For her part, Heidi aspires to ascertain the truth through the study of science and history and to base her commitments on such truths as best she can. For his part, Shimen's social and moral commitments precede his most important beliefs about the world – that is, his religious beliefs – and those beliefs are deeply intertwined with his moral commitments.

These three somewhat telegraphic claims will be discussed in detail in the following three sections of the book. In each, I'll begin with a primer on Shimen's world: respectively, the substance of halakha, the mechanisms through which halakha develops, and the nature and content of Jewish belief. This will be followed by a brief précis of Heidi's reservations about that world and an analysis of the differing assumptions and motivations that underlie the pair's divergent perspectives. Then I'll explain why every long-lived society that we know about is more like Shimen's than like Heidi's.

In the first section, I'll argue that societies need rich systems of social norms – including public rituals, food taboos, kinship rules, and commercial-exchange regulations – in order to cohere and survive. In the second section, I'll argue that, to remain viable, such systems of social norms must, like language, adapt to circumstances slowly and organically, and not, like legislated law, through sudden, theory-driven upheavals. Finally, in the third section, I'll argue that members of a society, in order to be willing to make the sacrifices necessary to sustain that society, must genuinely believe that they are part of a meaningful, directed project that will long outlive them.

In brief, I'll argue that Heidi's world is doomed.

* * *

Before we begin, a few words about what not to expect in this book.

Although I'll be discussing some classical Jewish sources, my arguments will not be drawn primarily from these sources. Rather, since my assumption is that my readers, whatever their religious sentiments, spend a fair amount of time, like me, in Heidi's world, I will be mostly arguing on Heidi's turf: classical and contemporary social-science literature, including anthropology and cultural evolution, moral psychology, game theory, and economic signaling theory.

Since morality is precisely the issue in dispute here, an argument against Heidi on grounds of morality itself risks being circular. So, to avoid even the impression of circularity, I won't be arguing that Heidi's world is morally deficient, but rather that it is simply not viable. To the extent that I do draw moral conclusions from this lack of viability, I'll avoid the naturalistic fallacy by being explicit about how they follow. Indeed, while the argument against Heidi's viability is itself, I believe, a damning one, this is not a how-to guide for any Heidi types who might be considering transitioning into Shimen types. If there's a roadmap for that, I don't have it.

By the same token, it's not my intention here to provide an exhaustive overview of all the types of characters and attitudes one finds in Jewish society. I chose Shimen and Heidi because they are good representatives of two common attitudes toward Jewish tradition – and tradition generally – that I wish to contrast, but I'm quite aware that most readers will probably not identify with either one of them.

I'm just as aware that my choice of Shimen and Heidi as the characters on which to hang my arguments has certain inherent limitations.

First, Shimen is a cranky old Polish Jew for whom many people might have sympathy, but he is certainly not a person with whom young readers can easily identify. By contrast, while Heidi (though she is by now middle-aged) is younger and more in tune with most contemporary readers than Shimen, portraying her as naive in comparison with someone possessing Shimen's life experience might strike readers as too easy an enterprise. At least in that respect, I haven't set up a perfectly fair fight.

Second, Shimen is a man in a society in which men dominate the public sphere; if I had chosen, for example, to compare Heidi with Shimen's wife, rather than with Shimen, this would be a very different book. It would likely be richer regarding the inner

life – Gerer women are famously more open than Gerer men – but it also would be poorer regarding the public communal life that I wish to focus on. And, it must be said honestly, it would bring into sharp relief certain aspects of Shimen’s world that, for better or worse, are less attractive to most contemporary readers than the ones I emphasize here.

Having said that, I will try throughout to represent Heidi’s views fairly and to give her the strongest possible arguments on behalf of those views. If I can’t contend with Heidi’s best case, my argument will be weak indeed.

PART 1

What Is the Right Way to Live?

In this part of the book, we'll consider the most basic question of all: How should we live our lives? We'll look at the way Shimen lives his life and at Heidi's reasons for rejecting that way of life. In particular, we'll confront Heidi's main challenge to Shimen: What is the point of obligations and prohibitions that seem arbitrary and don't contribute to human flourishing in any apparent way? We'll argue that the kinds of norms to which Shimen is committed are necessary for a society's survival.

Chapter 1

Jewish Morality and Its Critics

After The War, Shimen did not return to the full hasidic dress that he wore before The War. There were aspects of hasidic life about which he became perhaps a bit less naively enthusiastic than he had once been. He was also quite angry – not at the perpetrators, whom he regarded as no worthier of his anger than rabid dogs, but mostly at those who failed to comprehend the enormity of what had happened or who espoused views that somehow blamed the victims. And, yes, he had a few bones to pick with the Creator, though for him this was an entirely intimate matter.

Nevertheless, for the most part, he lived his life in accordance with halakha, pretty much as he had before The War, and he did so in an extremely natural manner. While this naturalness might distinguish him from many contemporary practitioners of halakha, some of whom we will discuss below, the details of

Shimen's daily life as a Jew committed to halakha are hardly different from those of any halakhically observant Jew.¹

I'll review these details now, mainly as a primer for those less familiar with halakha but also to reorient the reader already familiar with halakha from those aspects regarded by authorities as formally the most important to those aspects that are actually experienced most saliently in the everyday life of practitioners.

EVERYDAY SHIMEN

Immediately upon awaking on a typical weekday, Shimen will wash his hands in a ritual manner and recite the appropriate blessings. If he shaves at all, it will not be with a razor blade but rather with scissors or an electric shaver, and he will always leave ample hair on his temples. He will dress modestly and will wear a *tallit katan* (a garment with fringes called *tzitzit*) under his shirt and will keep his head covered at least partially at all times. He will not wear any clothing that includes mixtures of wool and linen. In public, he will usually wear a jacket and a hat, though not the long jacket (*bekeshe*) and round hat (*kapelush*) he wore before The War.

On most weekday mornings, Shimen will go to his *shtiebel*, don his full-size prayer shawl and phylacteries, and recite the morning prayers with a *minyan* (a quorum of ten men). He will treat religious articles with great reverence, pointing to the *mezuzah* as he passes through a door frame and handling his phylacteries only in accordance with specified rules. He will stand for the Torah scroll when it is taken from or returned to the ark for the

1. As we shall see below, Shimen's routine reflects communal practices more than book knowledge. Nevertheless, the reader seeking more information about halakha might be well served by the literature, including: S. Ganzfried, *Kitzur Shulhan Arukh* (Mesorah, 1864, trans. 2011), an English translation of an abridged (and stringent) code of Jewish law; H. Donin, *To Be a Jew* (New York: Basic Books, 1972), a summary of Jewish practice for the contemporary reader; C. Saiman, *Halakhah: The Rabbinic Idea of Law* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), a recent academic work on how rabbinic scholars have viewed halakha.

abridged readings on Monday and Thursday mornings, just as he would stand in the presence of a scholar of Torah.

During prayers, Shimen will put some coins in the charity box or in the hands of a beggar passing through. He will catch up on who in his community is ill or in mourning and will plan to visit them at the first opportunity. Although he is by no means a wealthy man, if a friend asks for a small loan, he will comply on the condition that no interest be paid; if he needs a small loan, he will expect the same conditions. When approached, Shimen will make a modest contribution to the maintenance of the *shtiebel*, the *mikve* (ritual bath), and other community institutions. All of Shimen's friends and acquaintances are Jewish, and almost all are from backgrounds very similar to his own.

Shimen's routine is broken for Shabbat and Holidays. For a twenty-five-hour period beginning on Friday evening just before sundown, he will observe prohibitions too numerous to list in full. For instance: he will not light or extinguish a fire or even turn a light on or off, not move money or make a transaction, not cook or even pour directly from a preheated kettle onto a tea bag, not write with a pen or a keyboard, not carry objects in an unenclosed space, not tie or untie any semi-permanent knot (like on a package), and generally not even speak of business and other mundane matters.

On Shabbat, Shimen will spend extra time in the *shtiebel* praying and listening to an extended reading of the Torah. After communal prayers on Friday night, he will recite kiddush at home over a cup of wine and then wash his hands and recite a blessing over two whole loaves of challah; this will be repeated in the morning after prayers; he will have challah again at the third Shabbat meal before sundown.

These Shabbat restrictions and rituals will be repeated with relatively minor variations on the Festivals, each of which has its own associated special rituals. Thus, Shimen will eat all meals during the seven-day fall Festival of Sukkot in an outdoor sukka

(booth); during the spring Festival of Passover, he will neither eat nor maintain at home any foods, other than matza, that include grain; on the eve of Shavuot he will typically stay up all night studying Torah; and on Rosh HaShana he will spend extra time in the *shtiebel* and listen attentively to the blowing of the shofar. On Yom Kippur, he will fast for the entire twenty-five hours, spending most of it praying, focused on the theme of repentance.

On five other fast days during the course of the year, four of which commemorate events associated with the destruction of the First and Second Temples thousands of years ago, Shimen will fast from morning to night, except on Tisha B'Av, when he'll fast for a full twenty-five hours. On the minor festivals of Purim and Ḥanukka, he will commemorate miracles from the period of the Second Temple. On the eve of Purim and again in the morning he will go to the *shtiebel* to hear the reading of the Purim Megilla (scroll), and he will partake in a festive meal with friends in the afternoon. On Ḥanukka, he will light candles on the windowsill of his home for each of the eight days of the festival, adding one candle each night.

Shimen eats with considerable restrictions. He will buy meat only from a vendor under strict supervision, ensuring that the meat is from approved species, that the animal was slaughtered in a strictly specified manner, that certain parts of the animal were removed, and that the edible parts were soaked and salted appropriately to remove blood. He will not mix milk products with meat products or eat them at the same meal; in fact, he won't consume milk products for six hours after eating meat, and he won't use the same dishes or utensils for milk and meat. He will eat fish only from species with fins and scales. He will not eat any processed foods unless marked with a trustworthy seal of approval attesting that they contain no non-kosher ingredients. He will not eat agricultural produce of the Land of Israel without first ascertaining that symbolic tithes have been taken. He will drink wine

only if it has been produced by Shabbat-observant Jews. He will not eat any food (fruit, vegetables, etc.) without first reciting the appropriate blessing for it, and will also recite appropriate blessings following eating.

Shimen will frequently attend life-cycle rituals – a *brit* (circumcision ceremony), a bar mitzva, a wedding – often addressing the assembled guests to share a thought based on the weekly Torah reading and his gratitude that Jews are once again capable of celebration. He will take pleasure in suggesting matches, *shiddukhim*, for his friends' children and grandchildren, the rules of which are well known to the participants: courtship is meant to be relatively brief, and the prospective mates are supposed to refrain from sexual activity, even touching. Engagement and marriage are regarded as creating a bond not just between two individuals but between two families, each of which undertakes financial obligations related to the well-choreographed celebrations surrounding the marriage and to the establishment of a new home. Even after marriage, couples are not permitted to engage in sexual activity while the wife is menstruating and for the subsequent week, after which she immerses in a *mikve*. They are expected, if they are able, to produce many children, with one son and one daughter regarded as a minimum. Abortion is forbidden, except in relatively rare circumstances. If the marriage fails, a *get* (writ of divorce) must be enacted in a very precise manner; a child born to a woman who has not obtained a valid divorce is regarded as a *mamzer* (illegitimate) and is almost unmarriageable.

Whenever he has free time, Shimen studies Torah; on any given day, he is working his way through one of the tractates of the Babylonian Talmud. The subject is only slightly more likely to be one of the matters enumerated above, most of which determine the texture of his daily routine, than matters that have been without any direct application to Jewish practice for the past two millennia.

For example, Shimen might study the laws of sacrifices brought in the Temple: categories of sacrifices, on what occasions they were brought, the sequence of the associated rituals, who was eligible to perform them, which errors of action or intention disqualified a sacrifice, and so on. He might study the laws of ritual defilement: the hierarchy of impurity from human corpses on down, the means by which contamination could be transferred to a person or object, the means of purifying a contaminated person or object, the proper handling of uncertainty regarding possible contamination, and so on. He would as soon study laws of torts and fines intended for application by specially ordained judges, not one of whom has existed for centuries, as he would the laws of ordinary debts and transactions that are still adjudicated on a daily basis.

Shimen works in the diamond business, interacting mostly with people with backgrounds like his own. In the rare event that some dispute needs to be adjudicated, he will – with the agreement of his counterpart – approach a local rabbinic scholar to propose a compromise or to rule in accordance with halakha. When Shimen needs to make an especially important personal decision about which he is uncertain, he might turn to the Gerer Rebbe for guidance.

This sketch merely touches the surface of halakha as it is expressed in daily practice, but it should give us adequate background to highlight some key distinctions from the very different moral principles preferred by Heidi, whose reservations about all of the above we can now consider.

HEIDI OF PRINCETON

Heidi's maternal grandfather studied in a yeshiva in Lithuania and came to the United States in the 1920s. He married a young woman from a fairly well-to-do American family and subsequently became the rabbi of a nominally Orthodox synagogue in a medium-sized

city in the Midwest. His was the only Shabbat-observant family in the neighborhood. Heidi's mother and her two brothers went to public school; after school, her grandfather studied Talmud with the boys.

On her father's side, Heidi's grandparents moved to New York shortly after their marriage in Warsaw in the early 1930s. Jobs were hard to come by during the Depression; her grandfather worked in a kosher butcher shop, and her grandmother freelanced as a seamstress. There were few Jewish day schools available and, in any event, the family could ill afford one, so Heidi's father and his sister attended public school. They both went to the local Orthodox synagogue's Sunday School program.

Heidi's parents met in New York in the mid-1950s. Sharing a traditionalist sensibility that was already on the verge of becoming rare at that time, they married and moved to Long Island, where Heidi's dad worked as an engineer at a large firm and her mom worked as a schoolteacher. They became active in the local Conservative congregation, attending services often, if not regularly. Like her older brother, her only sibling, Heidi attended the local public school because it was regarded as excellent academically; almost all of her classmates and friends were Jewish.

Heidi attended after-school classes in the local synagogue; she could read Hebrew passably and was well versed in Jewish legends. She had good relationships with her Orthodox grandparents and even with her mother's brother's family, who had turned *yeshivish* (that is, strictly observant in a non-hasidic style) and lived in the Flatbush neighborhood of Brooklyn.

When she came to Princeton as an undergraduate in the mid-1970s, Heidi naturally gravitated to Stevenson Hall, the forerunner of today's Center for Jewish Life. Most of the students who dined at Stevenson came for the kosher food, but Heidi, whose family had observed the laws of *kashrut* only at home and not outside, simply felt comfortable in the company of other Jews. In

fact, on Shabbat she sometimes attended egalitarian services, ones with mixed seating for males and females and with equal roles for women in leading prayers. After befriending Orthodox students who had returned from post-high-school programs at yeshivas in Israel, she also occasionally allowed herself to be pulled in to lectures on halakha.

When I met her at Stevenson Hall, Heidi was tall and graceful with a startling mop of curly black hair; she was attractive despite her almost complete lack of attention to her appearance. Blessed with a good sense of humor and an engaging personality, she was especially entertaining when riffing on her mother's Long Island Jewish accent and bourgeois manner. ("This house looks like a pig stoy! A *shanda* [embarrassment]! I have to clean it up before the girl comes" – the "girl," of course, being the house cleaner.)

Heidi's student days were for her a time of discovery, of expanding horizons, and of disappearing barriers. She wished to know all cultures, to love all people, to drink the world in whole. And she made friends easily. By her junior year, her social circle, including Black, Hispanic, Muslim, and Hindu friends, began to resemble the General Assembly of the United Nations.

At first, this only reinforced her fondness for Judaism. Even if her friends didn't quite get most of her jokes, witnessing their evident ethnic pride increased her appreciation of her own ethnic identity. Gradually, though, she felt her ethnic loyalties under challenge, in two ways.

First, she became keenly aware of the utter arbitrariness of her own particular identity. Second, she became sensitive to the financial, social, and cultural obstacles that many of her new friends had to overcome in order to be accepted to Princeton and survive there, and she began to feel guilty about her own advantages as a white and relatively wealthy American.

From this new point of view – it might be called the view from nowhere, and it certainly accorded no privilege to Judaism – she

began to reassess her Jewish attachments. Her Orthodox friends and relatives seemed a bit, well, provincial. Their professed beliefs seemed so random as to be either insincere or the product of brainwashing. Their concern with picayune details of halakha also seemed somewhat obsessive, and it apparently sapped them of energy for the truly important social-justice causes crying out for attention.

But most of all, halakha itself, as practiced by her Orthodox friends, struck her as suffering from serious moral failings. In particular, it appeared to encourage in its practitioners a certain hostility to non-Jews. She had always known that Jews were opposed to intermarriage; for reasons becoming increasingly vague to her, her parents had mentioned their own abhorrence of the idea on several occasions. But at Princeton she had discovered that Jewish disdain for non-Jews extended well beyond that.

She once attended a lecture by the local representative of Chabad – a hasidic sect that, unlike the Gerers, engages in outreach – on the topic of Jews and non-Jews. Despite his effort to present an idyllic picture, it slipped out in the question period that observant Jews do not collect interest for a loan to a fellow Jew but are allowed to take interest from a non-Jew. In the chaos that ensued after she protested this injustice, it further emerged that observant Jews don't drink wine handled by non-Jews. She never attended another class on Judaism.

As Heidi distanced herself gradually from the small Orthodox scene at Princeton, she became more sensitive to what she perceived as a certain condescension not only toward non-Jews but also toward non-observant Jews like herself. She noticed that when discussing Torah, her more religiously observant acquaintances would switch into a private language she felt was deliberately intended to exclude the uninitiated.

But in the final analysis, what really turned Heidi off to Judaism was its attitude toward women. On the rare occasions when

she attended the Orthodox congregation for an event she couldn't avoid, she would quietly seethe behind the *mehitza* (partition) that separates men and women in such congregations. She recalled her mother's unspoken resentment at not having been included when her own father had studied Torah with her brothers. When attending a traditional Jewish wedding, Heidi understood the ceremony well enough to reach the conclusion that Jewish marriage was a patriarchal institution, entered into by the man's "acquiring" a wife. She took to referring to Judaism as being "oddly essentialist" in regarding men as inherently different from women, and Jews as inherently different from non-Jews.

In brief, the Judaism for which she once had a certain atavistic fondness now seemed unnecessarily restrictive, confining, and narrow. It squelched universal love in the name of obscure, particularist principle. By the time I met her, Heidi was far more committed to what she regarded as social justice than to any form of Judaism, and she came to the kosher dining hall mostly to educate innocents like me on the immorality of our version of Judaism.

Was there merit to her claims?