

## Cover Me

MICHAEL JENKELOWITZ

**A**shton Kutcher did a little Irish jig as he stepped out onto the set of *The Late Late Show* in January 2004, took a seat next to his host Conan O'Brien, and adjusted his gray wool cap.

"You are rarely photographed without a hat," Conan opened.

"Well I'm Jewish, you see," Ashton said, a smile on his face, fighting back laughter.

"Yes, well then I guess I am too," Conan retorted, realizing Ashton hadn't really answered.

"But, seriously, any reason or just an affinity for headgear?"

"Well you see Conan," Ashton began, shifting his weight, the smile disappeared as his face took on a serious pall, "It's therapeutic," he decided.

"Are you balding," Conan said, attempting a shift from the serious to the jocular, but it seemed Ashton wasn't biting.

"It's a balance, a check. There's a positive and negative, and then there's a filament that balances the two. The hat is my filament. It's Kabbala, Conan," Ashton finally revealed. I remember thinking to myself that the need for internal stability had hit Hollywood.

I first became conscious that I wore a *yarmulke* some six months ago even though the velvet had sat atop my head since the age of three. Growing up in a neighborhood with a strong Jewish presence,—people, restaurants, stores, and synagogues—the world would go real quiet when Sabbath came around as stores closed their shutters and cars sat in the garages. Stepping outside my door in the mornings I would be greeted by *yarmulkes* atop every male head. With it, though, came not only the easy identification of a Jew but the yoke of a religion and people with thousands of years of history, and expectations. At three, my parents sent me to begin my education. In Jewish schools—nursery, elementary, junior high, high school and a year in Israel—my environment, predominantly, mirrored my theological orientation. I remember being told that the kippa, a "Hebracized" form of *yarmulke*, symbolized modesty, fabric on the head to keep me ever conscious of a Higher power. And if the

fabric didn't do it the two silver clips digging into my scalp to keep that *yarmulke* down, would make sure I couldn't forget.

I couldn't forget, but there were surely those times I wish I could have forgotten as I struggled to put my religious past into perspective with the demands of my business education.

Waking in my comfortable Brooklyn Jewish "ghetto" on a Sunday morning at the end of August, I extended my left hand groggily toward my nightstand and picked up my *yarmulke*. I carefully crowned myself, threading shiny metal clips through my hair. This was to be quite a day. I was about to move into my dorm, and I was feeling some nervousness. I went through my morning routine—prayer and breakfast—and packed up the car. Forty minutes later my dad and I pulled up to the front door of what would become my home for the year and... suddenly I became very conscious I wasn't in Jewville anymore. I couldn't help but feel conspicuous with tri-colored woolen fabric atop my head; then again, I wasn't doubtful of my faith, and I didn't feel right tearing the *yarmulke* off my head, but, unexplainably, I felt worried about the impression I gave off because I displayed my faith, in gray and blue at the apex of my skull. I was worried about being different.

I lowered my head and walked into the building and onward into my new life. I rushed up to my fourth floor room, tore the tape off one of the cardboard boxes of clothing and books, and quickly pulled out a worn orange Texas Longhorns hat. I bent the brim, put it on my head, and pulled the brim up a little showing some hair. "There I go, I've got my head covered and no one can tell that it's because I'm Jewish. Perfect," I told myself. My new orange covering was a perversion of the *yarmulke's* balance; the Longhorns became the satisfaction of religious obligation and a quieting of my fears of being noticed.

My *yarmulke* isn't simply a silent announcement of my Judaism, but it helps me find my balance. I cling to the *yarmulke* as a raft of religious devotion in this storming sea. Stripping it off out of potential discomfort, replacing it with a sports-cap, might discharge me of my religious obligation, but the Longhorns could never hide the religious weight the *yarmulke* placed upon me, forcing me to consider both the need to maintain separation and the desire to fit in.

In a world that worships the future, idolizes novelty, and lionizes technology, feeling the *yarmulke* atop my head, I feel called upon to acknowledge religion continuously, its texts and traditions. Yet occupying my time with religion, one so rooted in the past, while my education pointed to the future, only represented part of the problem. My orthodox religious consciousness

demanded daily, even hourly, active awareness of God. The Torah [Old Testament, Bible—call it what you will] calls for man “in all his ways to know God” and “to cleave to Him.” The expectation of an upbringing with this emphasis—religious schools and a religious home [not to mention a religious community and religious summer camps]—called for the impossible. On the existential plane, I was called upon to number the infinite, to define the indiscernible, to emulate the unknowable, and to cleave to the unseen. A task so large, with limited time to complete it, creates difficulty in justifying a life’s routine that departs, for even the smallest amounts of time, from that commitment. The task, though, operates on a practical level too. I am expected to pray three times daily, devote significant portions of my day to Torah study, make blessings before and after I eat, ritually wash my hands after waking up in the morning, and pray once more, briefly, before laying my head on the pillow at the day’s end. These daily activities are designed to heighten awareness, and although the *yarmulke* represents a passive form of acknowledgment, I felt the demands upon me, demands that due to my immersion in the course-work of college, I had begun to ignore.

My initial understanding was of ritualized Judaism that nagged, wanted every minute of my time, active and passive, conscious and subconscious. Yet opposite that singular consideration of Judaism—the personal, consistent development of the relationship between man and God—I saw value in the extra-Judaic. Georg Simmel, in his essay, “The Metropolis and Mental Life”, understands the conflict between the city-dweller and the non city-dweller, the rural and suburban dweller. Simmel tells us that “the deepest problems of modern life flow from the attempt...to maintain the independence and individuality of [our] existence...against external culture and technique of life” (1). Simmel, as early as 1901, understands that a single-sided existence, one defined by limited experiences and vantage points, creates, what he calls, “the deepest problems of modern life,” while variation “stimulates the difference between present impressions and those which have preceded” (1). Exposure to college wasn’t a divorce from the Brooklyn life I had led; it simply forced a re-evaluation of my primitive understandings of Judaism.

Logically, I understand the idea of a well-rounded life as richer; a greater variety in the sources of inputs produces an output of greater depth. In that same vein, however, if religious study represents, as I understood it, the only authentic input, then my desire to increase the roundedness of the output, me, can be likened to forging an impure alloy. In discussion of the possible knowledge sources in the world, the *Midrash*, a collection of Rabbinical literary exegesis on the Old Testament, says, “If a person tells you there is wisdom

among the gentiles believe him, if he tells you there is *Torah* among the gentiles do not believe him” (Eichah Rabati 2:17). This *Midrash* highlighted the recognition of wisdom outside Torah-proper, yet that very same recognition is tempered by the statement that although wisdom can exist outside Torah, Torah can’t be found outside *the* Torah. I was left floundering; there is wisdom to be acquired in the ‘gentile’ world, yet every waking minute seemed to require daily direction in the development of a relationship to, and knowledge of, God. The belief in mass-revelation of God to the Jews at Mount Sinai, and the giving of the Torah, a text not simply divinely inspired but written by the Divine hand, necessitates recognition on my part of the loftiness of Torah, and the serious consideration that needs to take place upon deciding to depart from it for the majority of a day to acquire ‘wisdom.’ I sat with the conflict of the modern artist, on the one hand to embrace classical art—the embodiment of proportion and control, fixed limits—and on the other to acknowledge romantic art, creativity that extends in all directions.

“To what extent is there value in a secular education?,” one boy asked from the back of the room as Rabbi Lichtenstein’s Talmud lecture neared its end. I had been studying in Yeshivat Har Etzion, a religious school in Israel, for six months. Every time Rabbi Lichtenstein would take those few steps from his scratched table littered with tattered Judaica, love-worn from decades of use, to the lectern at the center of the study hall, silence would rush over the crowd, like a wave. The awe for a man who held a doctorate from Harvard was palpable, but the diploma didn’t find a place on his wall; he saw himself as a Rabbi, not just first and foremost, but in his mind, solely. He held the religious title and was able to “strike the balance” that I saw as nearly impossible, between religious and secular, between the academic and transcendent.

Rabbi Lichtenstein let a smile crawl at the edges of his mouth for the briefest of moments before answering the question, as the students shifted in their seats awaiting the response. “The preface ‘to what extent’ presumes a value on the spectrum, as if I could give a measurement or a weight. Secular education has different weight to different minds, a generalization of an answer can only serve as a trivialization,” he responded, and the question was too quickly put to rest.

I remember not being satisfied with the answer at the time. Yet now, six months into my educational career at NYU, newly, perhaps overly, conscious of my religiousness, spending hours each day immersed in that secular education, his answer begins to make sense. The assumption that there exists a recipe for the “right” blend of Torah and secular education, and one merely

needs to combine precise ingredients is preposterous. The mind that lacks desire for a breadth of knowledge that extends outside Torah should see no force pushing him in that direction. To him Torah is the alpha and omega. Yet, the mind that thirsts for the entirety of wisdom, withholding that wisdom and confining that mind to Torah alone is tantamount to strangulation and can only result in a resentment of Torah and discomfort with Judaism.

The idea of singularity felt escapist, as if I were running to the refuge of religion to shield myself from the evil of academe, yet the idea of simply blending the two presented the obvious difficulties. Malcolm Gladwell, in his essay, “Designs for Working,” grapples with the effects of creation on a collaboration-environment in the workplace. By studying, in part, the demographics and geographic setup of the West Village, a paradigm of incidental social interaction, Gladwell suggests that precise organization of the office space, increasing communication and interaction, can increase creativity and productivity. Yet Gladwell’s idea, taken in the form of spatial organization of desks, offices, and photocopiers, is not only one about the enriching value of collaborative minds and persons, but also about the concept of collaborative ideas.

In advocating that the CEO’s office not be a “gated community,” that is the corner office with “secretaries out front, guarding access,” and instead be at the geographical center of communication, Gladwell is, perhaps, censuring the aloofness of anything one-sided. Growing up in a community oriented by a uniform theological understanding and persuasion, where secular studies seemed a necessary evil, a potential adversary to be wary of, and religious study the ideal, I faced a neat dichotomy. Judaism was the guarded CEO; kept-away were the minions of gentile wisdom. Rabbi Lichtenstein’s pithy response on a winter afternoon opened a box revealing a complexity inside that I could never have imagined. After leaving Israel that June, I was tested.

I walked into NYU.

Reading, writing, and arithmetic took time from religious study. I felt like I was learning so much in those spheres, but they were crowding out the sphere of religion. Religious study shouted at me to pay heed to it, but I couldn’t hear it over the raucous din of Microeconomics and World Cultures, The Caribbean. I kept the *yarmulke* on my head, but it didn’t help me find the balance I was looking for. It was a placeholder, reminding me that something was missing. My experiment in balancing secular education and religious devotion began to fail. In the hustle and bustle of the business school education—constant papers, classes, and meetings—religion not only took a back

seat, it also jumped out of the car, and I couldn't recall where along the road it had happened.

7:45 A.M. I had been home, in Brooklyn, for the long Presidents' Day weekend, and it was Monday morning; I needed to get back to NYU for a 9:00 class. I had just finished morning prayers at synagogue and stopped at Starbucks for a much-needed coffee. Juggling my prayer book in one hand and a Starbucks coffee in the other, I stepped on the train and grabbed a seat; quickly the rush hour traffic filled the car. I pulled my headphones over my head and dropped my prayer book into the knapsack at my feet. After the preparation I leaned back against the orange, hard, plastic chair. As I glanced over to my right I noticed a fellow Israelite, decked out in a gray pinstriped suit, red power tie, very professional-looking, standing with a briefcase at his feet and tattered Talmud in his hands. I imagined him to be a stock-broker, maybe an investment banker. It was almost humorous to note the contrasts, thousands of years of history splayed at the appendages of his body—the leather briefcase and the tattered Talmud. I sat silently and watched. The Talmud in his hands didn't strike me, nor did the suit, but their juxtaposition grabbed me. Before me lay Simmel's cosmopolitan, the member of the metropolis, but here "the deepest problems of modern life...maintain[ing] independence...of his existence...against external culture" was avoided (Simmel 1). The businessman didn't attempt to shield himself against the external; he blended the two. I might have been mistaken, maybe Rabbi Lichtenstein wasn't an anomaly, and maybe the balance was achievable in my own life.

My quiet gazing at the businessman as he stared intently into his ancient texts transported me to that moment back in Israel, staring in awe as Rabbi Lichtenstein stood at the lectern. He could quote orally and juxtapose sages of Talmud and Renaissance authors [his doctoral thesis analyzed the neo-Platonism of English renaissance author Thomas More] as he lectured on Talmud. The only thing I could offer then was my own inadequacy, my silence.

Silence is most often seen as an absence, the absence of speech, conversation, overall sound. A silent room is a room we might see as lacking vibrancy or vitality. Yet silence can also be an heroic act, deafening in its might. Throughout the story of Job, the biblical character whose faith is tested by constant and consistent suffering, Job challenges God, demanding a trial to air his grievances. The last chapter finds God, in all His might and glory, responding that there is no way Job can understand the Divine scheme. Job is silent, submissive. He is confronted with what he thought impossible and

can offer none of the arguments he had so carefully planned. The Talmud concludes that “silence is acquiescence.” Job’s silence is acquiescence to the highest power.

The two silences I experienced, the quiet observation aboard the Q train and my sitting awestruck that afternoon five thousand miles away, allowed me to understand each in a new light. In Andre Aciman’s “Arbitrage,” there is discussion of the past not as preceding the present and the future, but as enriching and explaining it. “I had marked this moment as one of those to which I knew I’d return many times over...in other homes...in other cities...the very act of thinking back could, in the end make me no less happy than...Ulysses waking up in Ithaca,” Aciman ends his essay, telling the reader that he has placed an experience in a time-capsule to be opened many times over the course of his life, each time with new understanding of the present and of that day in the distant past (112). The Jewish texts I spent, and continue to spend, so much time over I place in a similar time capsule. Every generation of students of Torah and Talmud are building on the past experiences of the scholars who preceded them. Aciman’s arbitrage was entirely personal, re-interpreting *his* past through *his* present and considering *his* future. I was able to participate, daily, in study that wasn’t simply bound to *my* past, but a past that consists of five thousand years of national existence. Keeping a *yarmulke* atop my head, always, during those days when midterms and term-papers take up so much of my time, I find that I can manage only a few minutes of Torah-study. I am pushed to consider myself part of that past, and that recognition clarifies for me the fact that my studies also deepen my understanding of God through deeper consideration of the world He created. I wasn’t the artist who balanced the classical and the modern forces, I used one to effect the other.

A sage once said, “If you believe in evolution then every generation is progress, one step further from the monkey. But, if you believe in a mass-revelation at Sinai, then every new generation is further from authenticity, and by definition one needs to regress to progress.” While a firm believer in a God-given Bible at Sinai, I found myself hard-pressed to believe that I am expected to transport myself, through this textual time machine, to a day five thousand years ago and live in that past, alone. Regression always meant regression; attempting to live in a day five thousand years ago seemed escapist and an attempt to ignore all the good that the future, our present, has provided. In that same vein, ignoring the richness of the past seemed all too presumptuous, as if ancestry has little to contribute to the modern world. I didn’t want to escape to the past, nor did I want to escape from it. I needed to allow both to co-exist within myself.

I imagine that I had Aciman's epiphany on that subway train transporting me not only the forty minutes and twenty-three miles away to the Village but also to a place five thousand miles, twelve months in the past, into an understanding of a past that preceded my existence and that would further mold my future. I didn't want to escape the world; I wanted the briefcase at my feet and the Talmud in my hands, the pin-striped suit on my frame, and the *yarmulke* on my head, the Ph.D. on the wall, and the title of Rabbi. Seeing Rabbi Lichtenstein and the train passenger I saw proof that no escape was necessary to live the authentic religious experience. In fact, I found it hard to believe that the religion I believed authentic would require an escape.

I had wondered about religion. Not a Seinfeldian "What's the deal with religion," but its impacts and restrictions. Raised a religious Jew, with 613 Godly commandments, 248 positive commandments and 365 prohibitions [one for every day of the year], religion represented an abandonment of life, while the flipside also seemed true. The abandonment of religion meant a seizure of what life had to offer, without need for heavy concentration on the heavenly spheres. Yet, as I aged, that duality began to evaporate—there no longer was just good and evil, black and white—as my gray matter developed the grayer matters of the world presented themselves. I imagined a religious form of Einsteinian relativity, religion-proper taking on deeper meaning in light of the non-religious, and reciprocally a world deepened through the glasses of religion. Understanding the third day of creation, "earth bringing forth vegetation, seed bearing plants of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it" (Genesis I.11), allows the understanding of the plant world as divinely created. But, can anyone, even the ultra-religious mind, deny that appreciation of God's vegetation is enhanced by Wordsworth's description of "a crowd/ a host, of golden daffodils; Beside the lake, beneath the trees, Fluttering and dancing in the breeze" ("The Daffodils" 4-6). The Bible told me what happened, and Wordsworth allows me to see the vitality in that happening.

The time I've spent in the two spheres, the staunchly religious in Israel and the fiercely secular in NYU, converged on the Q train that blustery February morning, I realized there was no balance I needed to strike. I needed only to maintain a proper perspective. Approaching studies not for their own sake, but to deepen my intellectual sensitivity to the world I inhabit, I find wisdom outside Torah. But I am haunted by the *Midrash* whispering in my ear that there is no ready substitute for Torah. I must juggle college-life, papers and exams, lectures and readings, socializing, knowing that my relationship to God isn't directly enhanced by those pursuits. But my apprecia-

tion of the breadth of wisdom in the world is. The consequence of my struggle is forced arbitrage. I must constantly take inventory of the intellectual achievements I've made and see how they affect my past or can affect my future religious experiences. Only then can I truly understand my role, and my *yarmulke*. Rabbi/Dr. Lichtenstein and the anonymous businessman have pointed the way, but only I can negotiate the journey.

---

## WORKS CITED

- Aciman, Andre. "Arbitrage." *Advanced College Essay: Business and its Publics*. 2nd ed. Ed. Denice Martone, Pat C. Hoy II and Natalie Kapetanios. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003. 95-113.
- Gladwell, Malcolm. "Designs for Working." *Advanced College Essay: Business and its Publics*. 2nd ed. Ed. Denice Martone, Pat C. Hoy II and Natalie Kapetanios. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003. 185-191.
- Midrash Eichah Rabati. Torah.
- Simmel, Georg. "The Metropolis and Mental Life." 1901.  
<<http://www.scholars.nus.edu.sg/writing/ccwp11/simmel/metropolis.html>>.
- The Oxford Study Bible*. New York: Oxford UP, 1970.
- Wordsworth, William. "The Daffodils." *The Golden Treasury of the Best Songs and Lyrical Poems in the English Language*. Ed. Francis T. Pelgrave. London: Macmillan, 1875.

172 - MERCER STREET