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Women's Whispers: Chelsea's yarmulke

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08/13/2010 15:35

The shidduch – match - looks perfect, what we would call “*invei hagefen v’invei hagefen*.” Fruit from neighboring vines. Chelsea and Marc have known each other most of their lives, having met as teenagers at a salubrious Democratic pow-wow. All four parents are elected Washington politicians; both fathers involved in scandals. They have both lived under the glaring media light since birth and have successfully avoided it in adulthood. Each one is rich and could independently obtain any advantage available on this earth.

Marc is Jewish and Chelsea is Methodist. On their Shabbat wedding under a huppa of twigs and vines, the seven Jewish wedding benedictions were recited and the couple exchanged vows and rings. Marc’s arms were draped with a talit and on his head a kippa. Two officiants presided, a minister and a rabbi. Propped on a stand behind them was a decorated document looking suspiciously like a ketuba. All of this fully adheres to the standards for interfaith weddings reported in *The New York Times* for 15 years.

And then, the official photographs. Along with Chelsea and her parents and Marc is an oddity I can’t banish from my mind: Marc’s kippa. This family snapshot is not under the huppa or in connection with any ritual. Marc could have taken it off, for goodness sake, but he didn’t. There it is, sitting atop the celebrity wedding of the decade.

My father – an Orthodox Jew and a survivor of Hungarian fascism, the Holocaust and Stalinist Communism – might put a kippa on in public if you put a gun to his head and

demanded it, not otherwise. Decorating yourself Jewishly could variously lose you your job, your home or your life, depending which railcar you were in, in which decade. When he leaves synagogue every day he pockets his kippa and wears a baseball cap.

Even amongst the Orthodox men with whom I have worked, kippa wearing is uncommon. The elite workplace in America is conservative and conformist. Whether they wear suits or business casual, men's dress is rigidly uniform. One friend called Menahem retains his unpronounceable Hebrew name, but removes his kippa at work. Menahem and others still believe that the visual impression they give means a great deal, and they are not wrong. When I was in London recently, walking with my son on a public thoroughfare, a man approached us, looked from the boy's kippa to my Japanese peasant cap and spewed out in a strong accent, "Lie down on the road and die, you Jewish cunt!"

In my youth, I was taught an abhorrence of intermarriage. Upon reaching bat mitzva, my mother told me there were two things I could do for which she would not speak to me again; one was to marry out. Her indoctrination was from her mother, a freethinking humanist who never overcame her guilt for living out the war in Australia while her clan was gassed in Europe. Despite their inconsistency, I maintained both her free thoughts and those on endogamy, and was outraged at my grandfather's choosing a gentile spouse after my grandmother died. I cut off all contact with him. In my maturity, I have learned to be more tolerant.

Choosing a partner in marriage is such a finicky matter today. The modern single selects her partner alone, and she alone must bear the burden of living what is likely to be exceedingly many years in close quarters with her chosen one. Having spent our early lives designing our identities from whole cloth (so we imagine), we seek life partners who have labored on their identities with comparable seriousness. A person's history is salient in that it reflects on the method or the materials of the design; it is not prescriptive.

Half my office consists of Jews married to non-Jews. A typical non-Jewish colleague is an irresistibly attractive nonbelieving former Baptist who met her spouse at Harvard Law School. A typical Jewish colleague has similar characteristics but met her nonbelieving former Russian Orthodox spouse in a PhD program.

The Jewish sides of these partnerships are not cavalier about Judaism: one had a traditional huppa and the ketuba hangs in their bedroom. They all participate in seders and may even clean the kitchen of leavened food beforehand.

Marc Mezvinsky didn't change his Jewish name, and if he wore a kippa to work, no damage would be done to his career. I don't know why he left this vestigial symbol of his history on his head while he celebrated his marriage to the country's most eligible daughter; clearly he is not ashamed of his ethnicity nor concerned about what some London street thug would say about it. Perhaps Chelsea values this confidence in him, his choosing to highlight his distinct origins, even in the ceremony that signals the end

of the distinctiveness.

For most, Marc's wedding garb is one hue in the multicultural rainbow that is America's crown. And for me? A form of liberation.

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