

# Prologue



WHEN I WAS TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OLD and dating an Irish Catholic, my very liberal Jewish mother became an instant reactionary. All her teachings about tolerance and open-mindedness seemed to evaporate overnight. When she suddenly grasped that I might actually end up married to this man, and produce grandchildren who would celebrate Christmas, she panicked. The tension between us was startling. It lasted almost two years.

I didn't end up with Michael, but two lessons stayed with me: first, that my mother had one benchmark issue that was nonnegotiable. And two, that no matter how angry I was at the way she handled it, when I really played out what my life would be like with a non-Jewish husband, I couldn't do it. No matter how close I was with Michael, there was some unmistakable barrier. I knew that navigating our different backgrounds would be too hard.

Jewish identity has crept up on me. And now that I'm forty and ten years married (to a Jew from Skokie), with two young children who are ours to shape, I'm aware of both how connected I feel to other Jews and how confused I feel about Judaism.

Which is what led me, in part, to this book. I found myself looking at

public figures that happen to be Jewish and wondering how Jewish these people felt. It occurred to me that we might share a kind of figurative secret handshake—not just pride in the heritage and endurance of the Jewish people, but uncertainty about what it means to be a Jew today. Was their ethnic and religious identity crucial to them, incidental to their lives, or meaningless? If they were raised with rituals, had they maintained them? Did they care if their Jewish daughter decided to marry a Michael?

I realize that choosing to talk to prominent Jews instead of regular folks is slicing off a narrow population, but that was the point. I consider myself a journalist, not a sociologist, and I wanted to focus on one snapshot of American Jewry—albeit a random sample within that group—who have in common a level of achievement that represents the American Dream. If an obvious goal of Jewish immigrants was to reach the highest rungs of American success, then what happened to the religious underpinnings of their children and grandchildren? Did being in the American spotlight require them to neutralize their ethnicity? Had they felt pressured to downplay their Jewishness at any point in their careers? Or had they benefited from it? Been ashamed of it?

Adam Sandler’s “Chanukah Song” (in which he lists—and in some cases, outs—famous Jews) is hilarious precisely because it gets at something true. Jews feel a particular ownership of public figures who are members of the so-called tribe. We see Steven Spielberg and Joe Lieberman, for instance, as representing us. I know my parents still look at the newspaper headlines and cringe when a Jew is the one indicted, feel proud when it’s a Jew who’s won the Pulitzer. I wondered, is that a generational phenomenon? Do we still feel that any Jew fortunate enough to have become famous has a duty to be a credit to the Jewish people because their behavior reflects on us all? And if that’s true, are Jewish celebrities aware of it and do they embrace or reject this burden?

The majority of prominent Jews are not prominent for being Jewish. Most Jews with boldface names don’t hide their Judaism, but they don’t flaunt it either. And it’s certainly not a staple of the typical celebrity interview. So I set out to ask how being Jewish fits into a public life.

For my parents’ generation—children of immigrants or first-generation Americans—the framework for being Jewish was heavily influenced by

their parents' experience of poverty, bigotry, and the Holocaust. They absorbed a sense of peril, the need to prove themselves, to stay connected to the Jewish community and hold fast to rituals that were ingrained since childhood. My generation, on the other hand, has been given Cafeteria-Style Judaism: We can pick and choose. Nothing is required. There's no sense of urgency or menace, of having to boost up or protect our people. Some of my friends fast on Yom Kippur, others come to our annual breakfast party having already eaten. Some go to synagogue only on the High Holy Days, others only when they're invited to a wedding. I have no close friends who attend Shabbat services regularly or build a sukkah every fall. Many are sending their kids to Hebrew school, but few could say exactly why. Because they think they should, or because they went, or because they want their children to have more Jewish education than they did. My sense is the decision is often more reflexive than considered.

I was interested in what people who happen to be Jewish and happen to be famous think about being Jewish today, when à la carte Judaism is the norm and when strict observance and fervent Zionism have largely fallen away.

For a book that features conversations with sixty-two well-known high-achievers, it seems like the ultimate in hubris to start by talking about myself. But it also feels compulsory, because clearly I came at these interviews from my own vantage point. Though I consider myself a fair reporter, it would be disingenuous to call myself completely disinterested when it comes to this particular maze.

The fact is, I'm curious about all of this because I'm Jewish, but also because I'm not sure how Jewish I am. Judaism wasn't a huge part of my growing up, though I was surrounded by Jews on New York's Upper West Side. I was raised with occasional shabbos, synagogue twice a year, two seders, and eight nights of Hanukkah. My mother, who was raised in a Conservative home in Queens, given an extensive Hebrew school education, and a bat mitzvah, which was unusual for her era, turned her back on formal Judaism at the age of fifteen. This was because when her mother died, she was excluded from the mourners' minyan (at that time, a quorum of ten men) solely because she was female. After she married my father, she maintained a home-based Judaism that involved intermittent Shabbat

dinners and the celebrations of every major Jewish holiday—including the warmest overpopulated Hanukkah party every year, with latkes dipped in sour cream and a gift for every guest. She also helped found a makeshift congregation in Saltaire, Fire Island—a church was borrowed for the High Holy Days—where she was the cantor and people worshipped in bare feet.

My father was a Jew without portfolio: no Hebrew school, no synagogue (until he met my mother), and no belief in God. But he was utterly Jewish in his sensibility, sense of humor, tastes in culture and penchant for Talmudic argument.

My siblings and I were not sent to Hebrew school, nor given bat or bar mitzvahs, which my mother regrets to this day, especially now that she's a fairly observant, involved Jew again. Eventually, she found her way to a more egalitarian practice that includes women without over-modernizing or abandoning the basics. She writes about Jewish issues and tries to regularly attend Friday night services. But by the time she had her “rebirth,” when she was in her late forties, my Jewishness was already formed in its fragmentation and ignorance.

I took Introduction to Hebrew in college because I wanted to try to catch up. My professor taught us vocabulary by having us memorize the Israeli Top 40, which she recorded off a shortwave radio. After graduation, I visited Israel and was very popular there because I knew all the latest hits. Now, eighteen years later, I can't put a Hebrew sentence together.

That trip was actually kind of a bust. It was my parents' graduation gift to me and my twin sister, Robin: They booked us on what they thought would be a spirited bus tour. When we arrived at the departure lounge at Kennedy Airport, everyone in our group was geriatric. Somehow the American Jewish Congress had assigned us to the wrong itinerary. Despite our disappointment, we still got on the plane and managed to enjoy the trip. Robin and I became the communal grandchildren, and there was something more poignant about touring the “homeland” with people who remembered its founding and who had lost family in the Holocaust.

I met my husband, David, on a blind date in 1993 and married him the same year on a mountaintop in St. Lucia; we imported our college friend and newly minted rabbi, Mychal Springer, to officiate, and brought our own kosher wine for the vows. It was the first Jewish wedding the Caribbean hotel had ever hosted, and their staff referred to the *chuppah*—the traditional wedding canopy—as the “hooper.”

## P r o l o g u e

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David grew up in Skokie and Evanston, Illinois, and was bar mitzvahed in his neighborhood shul. I keep his bar mitzvah invitation in a frame on my bureau because the pencil drawing of his thirteen-year-old self in 'seventies big hair and yarmulke make me smile. He wants to give our children a religious education, but his emotional connection to Judaism is vague and tenuous. Our ease together as a couple is not based in faith at all, though I'm aware that so much of our common vocabulary—our humor, eccentric relatives, close siblings, focus on food—feels somehow quintessentially Jewish.

Since the arrival of our two children, I've tried to figure out how to incorporate rituals that acknowledge the sacredness in our daily lives. But my efforts still feel stilted, forced. I light candles on Friday nights when we're home, and savor watching our son, Benjamin, rip into the challah and pass pieces around the table. I love watching our daughter, Molly, imitate me sweeping my hands three times over the candles. Before the meal, I say out loud what I was grateful for that week and Ben and Molly pipe up with some thanks of their own. We all trade kisses and say "Good shabbos." But I feel David's discomfort—he lacks my sentimentality, and ritual doesn't come naturally to him—and that makes me self-conscious.

I pray briefly before bedtime most nights, thanking God for the health and safety of my children. But I worry that my appeals are too self-centered.

I'm still in synagogue twice a year on the High Holy Days. I've always loved the chaotic family suppers before we rush out to evening services: Mom sets a beautiful table with lace and silver, there are the round, shiny challahs, apples dipped in honey, familiar blessings. But I get annoyed by my mother's explanations; they feel like a reproach, a cue that I should know more about the symbolism of things.

In synagogue on Kol Nidre—the eve of Yom Kippur—I always feel hypocritical confessing my sins. But that doesn't stop me from asking God for clemency: My list of lapses is always easy to summon up. During one service recently, I found myself weeping during the Shehechianu (the blessing that thanks God for giving us life, sustaining us, and allowing us to reach this moment). I was overcome by the singing, everyone standing and swaying, arms around neighbors they didn't even know. Of course, minutes after that transcendent moment, I found myself flipping ahead in the prayer book to see how much of the service was left.

Every year, my husband says he doesn't know why he's fasting or going to temple since he doesn't feel anything there. When I suggest that maybe we ought to tell each other our sins for the year, he says he can't have that conversation when he's so hungry.

I go to two seders every year, but I grew up attending three. The first two were the typical Passover gatherings, one at cousin Danny's on Long Island, the other at Aunt Betty's in Larchmont—same Haggadah, same undersalted matzo ball soup, same chocolate macaroons, same thirty people around the table. The third seder was the feminist adaptation, co-conceived by my mother, who seemed to be the only one of the five so-called Seder-Mothers not dressed in a bohemian caftan. I remember feeling moved by a room full of articulate, animated women sitting on cushions on the floor, making the themes of the Haggadah relevant, seeming interested in my nascent opinions. But that same comforting circle would turn on each other in later years—fighting over who should be invited—and the event would sour in my mind.

I know I've inherited my mother's superstitions. I close the shades when there's a full moon, toss salt over my shoulder after it spills, and say "tuh, tuh, tuh" when a bad thought creeps into my head. My fear of tempting the evil eye goes even further than my mother's: I feel convinced that cancer is just around the corner and I've written notes to my children in case I go down in a plane.

I've tried to resist my mother's prejudices: her cringing at Christmas carols playing in every store, the involuntary recoil at the sound of a German accent, the sense that Jews are the supreme sufferers. I'll never forget, when I was dating Michael, that I was stupid enough to venture to my mother that Jews are not the only people whose ancestors had endured massive, premeditated persecution. I mentioned the Irish potato famine as an example. Not wise. *You're comparing the Shoah to the Potato Famine?* She looked as if she wanted to disown me—rip her shirt as is the Jewish custom when a child is considered symbolically dead.

Michael was a great boyfriend, but there was undeniably a cultural chasm between us. He didn't "get" my family's *mishigas*, let alone find a way to deal with it. And when I was with his family on Easter, sitting quietly around the table, I missed my family's tumult. It was unsettling to go with him to Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve, no matter how merry. I couldn't imagine my children taking the sacrament and crossing themselves. Bap-

tism was out of the question. It bothered me, when we watched the film *Music Box*, about a woman who discovers her beloved father's Nazi past, that Michael had no personal link to that story. We didn't share an indigent sorrow. He would never feel entrusted with or obligated by the responsibility to carry Judaism on. I realized that no dash of Christianity, however modified, would ever be palatable for me.

I also realized I'd have to work harder to keep my own family Jewish than I would if I'd just married another Jew. I wanted the Jewishness to just be there: in my children's faces, in their food, in their celebrations. I wasn't sure enough of my own faith and history to be confident I could effectively pass it on.

My religious identity used to be informed entirely by my mother: She made the holidays sparkle, she made me feel there was a privilege and weight to being Jewish, she made me feel lazy for not doing more to understand it. But now I'm wading in in my own way, on my own time. And this book felt like one step in that direction.

The specificity of each person's Jewish chronicle was unexpected. The fact that Mike Nichols still feels, at his core, like a refugee; that Edgar Bronfman Jr. initially rejected Judaism because he rejected his father; that Beverly Sills felt uncomfortable enrolling her deaf Jewish child in a Catholic school, chosen because it specialized in educating deaf children; that Alan Dershowitz gave up his Orthodox observance because he couldn't defend it to his children. That Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg spurned Jewish ritual because of its sexism; that Barry Levinson believes Jewish Hollywood executives abandoned his film *Liberty Heights* because it was "too Jewish"; that Mike Wallace—long labeled a "self-hating" Jew because of his coverage of the Middle East—recites the Shema, Judaism's most hallowed prayer, every night; that Natalie Portman feels ashamed of her Long Island hometown's materialistic Jewish values; that Kati Marton never quite forgave her parents for hiding the fact that she was Jewish; that Kenneth Cole has misgivings about agreeing to raise his children in his wife's Catholic faith. My conversation with Leon Wieseltier upended my approach to Judaism because he challenged my justifications for remaining uninformed about it.

These portraits are micro snapshots: They are private, often boldly candid, idiosyncratic, scattershot, impressionistic. They are not exhaustive,

they do not purport to answer the macro questions about assimilation, anti-Semitism, or Jewish continuity. They are highly personal stories from people we feel we kind of know—stories that hopefully peel back a new layer. I was not investigating how many powerful Americans are Jewish, or how much power powerful American Jews have; what interests me is how Jewish those powerful Jews feel they are.

I intentionally chose not to underscore the commonalities among these voices because I believe they will reverberate differently for each reader. Recurring themes, including the tendency to abandon childhood rituals, the thorny questions of intermarriage, the staunch pride in history, and the ambivalence about Israel, will undoubtedly feel familiar depending on one's experience.

I understand the temptation to turn first to chapters about the people one already admires, but some of the best nuggets lie among the least known. Even if you've never read a Jerome Groopman piece in *The New Yorker*, it's intriguing to hear this doctor's views on the clash between science and faith. Even if you're not a *Star Trek* fan, it may surprise you to learn how Leonard Nimoy based Spock's Vulcan greeting on a rabbinic blessing. Even if you disagree with every word "Dr. Laura" has ever said on the air, you may feel a pang of sympathy for her once you read about the vitriol she endured from other Jews after her conversion to Judaism.

We are living in a period of heightened religious awareness. Our political leaders cite biblical verses and claim to act in the name of God. Popular magazines run cover stories on spirituality. From Chechnya to Iraq, from Rwanda to Bosnia, we've seen how ethnic loyalties can bring out the worst in people. What I've attempted to probe in this book is how those Jews who are major players on the stages of American politics, sports, business, and culture feel about their Jewish identity and how it plays out in their daily lives. Just as these public Jews have entered our collective consciousness through their outsized accomplishments and celebrity, we can find parts of ourselves in their honest, intimate personal stories.

# Dustin Hoffman



ALEX BERLINER © BERLINER STUDIO/BE IMAGES

DUSTIN HOFFMAN VIVIDLY RECALLS ONE AFTERNOON, sitting in his apartment on 11th Street in New York City, talking on the phone to Mike Nichols. The director was trying to convince Hoffman to audition for the part of Benjamin Braddock in *The Graduate*. “Mike was asking, ‘What do you mean you don’t think you’re right for the part?’ ” Hoffman says. “ ‘Because you’re Jewish?’ I said, ‘Yeah.’ Mike said, ‘But don’t you think the character is Jewish *inside*?’ ” Hoffman reminds me that Braddock was originally written as a thoroughbred WASP. “The guy’s name is Benjamin *Braddock*—not Bratowski,” Hoffman says with a smile. “He’s a track star, debating team. Nichols tested everybody for the part—I think he tested Redford, who visually was the prototype of this character.”

Hoffman finally agreed to fly to L.A. to audition. “That day was a torturous day for all of us,” he says. “I think I was three hours in the makeup chair under the lights. And Mike was saying with his usual wry humor, ‘What can we do about his nose?’ Or, ‘He looks like he has one eyebrow’; and they plucked in between my eyebrows. Dear Mike, who was, on the one hand, extremely courageous to cast me, in the end was at the same time aware that I looked nothing like what the part called for.” Hoffman laughs.

We're having breakfast in a Columbus Avenue restaurant near his apartment in New York City. He arrives in buoyant spirits, dressed in jeans, white T-shirt, and blue blazer. Right away he befriends the waitress—"Where did you grow up?" She turns out to be from his childhood neighborhood in Los Angeles: Orlando Street. "Oh my God," he says, "I grew up on Flores!"

He orders very specific "loose" scrambled egg whites with one yoke thrown in, plus onions, salsa, and garlic. "Not too dry, no milk, no butter; a little olive oil." Hoffman shakes his head when I order my omelet. "Omelets aren't the best way to go," he advises me. "Scrambled is tastier. But you go ahead with your omelet."

Back to 1967: Nichols, who had seen Hoffman in an off-Broadway play, invited him to California to audition: "I flew out to L.A. with very little notice, and of course hadn't slept," says Hoffman. "I was very nervous. And in my memory, it was an eight-page or ten-page scene in the bedroom, and of course I kept fucking it up. I distinctly remember Mike taking me aside and saying, 'Just relax; you're so nervous. Have you ever done a screen test before?' I said, 'No.' He said, 'It's *nothing*; these are just crew people here; you're not on a stage. This is just film; no one's going to see it. This isn't going into theaters.' And I nodded and I was so thankful that he was trying to soften me; but then he put his hand out to shake mine, and his hand was so sweaty that my hand slipped out of it. *Now* I was terrified. Because I knew, '*That man is as scared as I am.*'

"I felt, from my subjective point of view, that the whole crew was wondering, 'Why is this ugly little Jew even trying out for this part called Benjamin Braddock?' I looked for a Jewish face in the film crew, but I don't think I sensed one Jew. It was the culmination of everything I had ever feared and dreaded about Aunt Pearl." He's referring to his Aunt Pearl, who, upon learning that "Dusty" wanted to become an actor, remarked: "'You can't be an actor; you're too ugly.'" "It was like a banner," Hoffman continues: "'*Aunt Pearl was right!*' She'd warned me."

Hoffman reaches into the bread basket to break off small chips of a baguette. "It was probably one of the more courageous pieces of casting any director has done in the history of American movies," he continues. "And an act of courage is sometimes accompanied by a great deal of fear."

Obviously the film went on to become a classic and made Hoffman a star. But even after becoming a Hollywood icon, with memorable roles in such films as *Midnight Cowboy*, *Marathon Man*, *Kramer vs. Kramer*, *Tootsie*,

and *Rainman*, at the age of sixty-eight, Hoffman says he's still being "miscast": "Someone told me about a review of this movie I did, *Runaway Jury*, which indicated that I was miscast because the part was a Southern gentleman lawyer. Which must mean to that critic, 'He shouldn't be Jewish.' The unconscious racism is extraordinary—as if there are no Southern gentlemen Jews. So he implied I was miscast. And I mentioned that to my wife and she said, 'Well, you've always been miscast.' And she's right. The truth is that you've got two hundred million people in this country and I don't know the number of Jews—are there six or seven million? [An estimated 5.7 million.] I think there's thirteen million in the world [13.9]. So in a sense, we're miscast by definition, aren't we? That's what a minority is: It's a piece of miscasting by God."

Hoffman grew up unreligious—"My father later told me he was an atheist," he says of Harvey Hoffman, a furniture designer. Though they celebrated Christmas, one year he decided to make a "Hanukkah bush" instead. "About the time I realized we were Jews, maybe when I was about ten, I went to the delicatessen and ordered bagels and draped them around the tree."

But when it came to Hoffman's neighborhood friends, something told him he should deny his Jewishness. "It was so traumatic to me, before puberty, realizing that Jews were something that *people didn't like*. I have a *vivid* recollection—literally *sensory* feeling—of the number of times people would say to me (whether they were adults or kids), 'What are you?'" Hoffman pauses. "It was like it went right through me." He twists his fists into his belly. "It was like a warning shock—painful. And I *lied* my way through each instance of that kind of questioning. So here would be the dialogue: You ask me, 'What are you?'"

POGREBIN: "What are you?"

HOFFMAN: "American."

He gives me direction: "Now you press."

POGREBIN: "What kind of American?"

HOFFMAN: "Just American."

POGREBIN: "What are your parents?"

HOFFMAN: "American—from Chicago."

More direction: “Keep pressing—because they would. They’d ask, ‘What *religion* are you?’ And I’d play dumb.”

So he knew that being Jewish was something to hide? “Oh God, yes,” he replies immediately. “I didn’t want the pain of it. I didn’t want the derision. I didn’t come from some tough New York community where I’d say, ‘I’m Jewish—you want to make something out of it?’ There was an insidious anti-Semitism in Los Angeles.”

It’s one of the reasons he was impatient to move to New York, which he did, at age twenty-one. “I grew up always wanting to live in New York, even though I’d never been here. And what’s interesting is that all people ever said to me and still say is, ‘Oh, I always assumed you were from New York!’ Even now, if you look Jewish, you’re from New York. I didn’t know that most of the Jews in America live in New York. But I did know it inside. I flew to New York to study acting in 1958; I took a bus from the airport terminal to New York City and they let me off on Second Avenue. It was summer, it was hot, and I walked out of the bus, and I saw a guy urinating on the tire of a car, and I said, ‘I’m home.’” He smiles. “The guy pissing on the tire must have represented to me the antithesis of whitebread Los Angeles: New York City was the truth. It was a town that had not had a face-lift, in a sense—that had not had a nose job.”

Despite the city’s ethnic embrace, when it came to open casting calls, Hoffman learned quickly into which category he fell. “Character actor,” he says with a grin. “The word ‘character’ had a hidden meaning: It meant ‘ethnic.’ ‘Ethnic’ means nose. It meant ‘not as good looking as the ingenue or the leading man or leading woman.’ We were the funny-looking ones.”

I ask whether it frustrated him—being pigeonholed. “Sure. But everything frustrates you when you’re not working.” He pauses. “I think I just gave you the glib answer. I think the non-glib answer would be how quickly you accept the stereotype that’s been foisted on you: ‘They’re right; I’m ugly.’ You learn that early, before you even think about acting. You learn that in junior high school.”

I assume that changed for him when he became a bona fide movie star whom many considered adorable. “I still don’t feel that, by the way.” He shakes his head. One’s self-image, he maintains, is indelibly shaped in adolescence. “You’re really stuck with those first few years,” he says. “That’s what stays with you. It takes a lot of therapy to break through that.”

What about all the women who must have thrown themselves at him

at the height of his fame? “It doesn’t matter,” he insists. “If you’re smart, you know you’re interchangeable. It’s like people coming up and asking for your autograph; they’ll ask any celebrity.” He also says he realized after a while that the shiksa conquest has little staying power. “The cliché from the male point of view—which is another interview—is the number of times we men in our youth would talk about girls that we had bedded down. And there was often the comment, ‘What a waste; I mean here she is—a model, gorgeous—and she’s just a lox.’ ” He laughs. “I mean, you learn. That outward stereotype only goes so far.”

But the short Jewish guy with the nose did choose the trophy wife for his first marriage. “The first wife was Irish Catholic, five-foot-ten, ballet dancer.” He smiles. “I don’t want to discredit this ex-wife, but the grandmother of my current and lasting wife, Lisa, her grandmother Blanche once referred to my first wife as,” Hoffman dons a husky voice, “ ‘He married a bone structure!’ ” He laughs. “I mean, that was the prize.”

I wonder if he himself ever thought about changing his appearance? “No, but my mother asked me to. When I was a teenager, when she got *her* nose job, I remember she wanted me to get one, too. She said I would be happier.”

I tell him it’s probably a good thing he didn’t. “Oh but I did,” he jests. “You should have seen it before!”

He says his first set of in-laws—from Chappaqua, New York—weren’t thrilled about their daughter’s choice in husbands. “I think there was a certain amount of ambivalence on her parents’ part that she was marrying a Jewish guy. I don’t think they were tickled about me before I became famous and I think they were a little more tolerant afterwards.”

Didn’t he feel some vindication once he became prominent—a kind of “I showed them” to his in-laws, to Aunt Pearl, and to all the casting directors who’d once dismissed him? “I can’t say yes because I don’t remember that feeling. On the contrary, I tried my hardest after *The Graduate* to defame myself. I was *sent* scripts for the first time, and I just kept saying, ‘no, no, no.’ I did not want to be a part of this party joke that I was now a leading man.” Hoffman is almost never still; he keeps tearing at the baguette, adjusting the sugar packets, the flatware. “None of this is simple,” he says.

His second and current wife, Lisa Gottsegen (“We just celebrated twenty-three years,” he announces proudly), took him on a more Jewish path. “My wife changed everything,” he says. “Two sons bar mitzvahed,

two daughters bat mitzvahed.” They have four children together (he also has two children from his first marriage, one of whom was a step-daughter). Their family rabbi, Mordechai Finley, who Hoffman describes as “a red-headed Irishman with a ponytail”—is someone to whom Hoffman speaks candidly about his misgivings about faith. “I said, ‘Mordechai, can I tell you the truth? I used to live on East Sixty-second Street—years ago, when I was still married to my first wife—and there was the Rock Church (it’s still there) across the street. And I’d hear the singing and the clapping and I loved it.’ I said to Mordechai, ‘I always wanted synagogue to be like that.’ ”

Hoffman acknowledges he hasn’t given the time to his Judaism that he has to his acting. “I have no one to blame but myself, because I could have learned it,” he says. “Every one of my kids that has had a bar or bat mitzvah, I’ve had to learn my part phonetically; it’s uncomfortable for me.” The family observes all Jewish holidays, though Hoffman noticed his son Max didn’t go to synagogue on Yom Kippur in Providence, where, at the time we meet, he’s just started Brown University. “We called up Max in Rhode Island, and the first thing he said was ‘Good Yom Tov.’ But he didn’t go to services. He just said it to say, ‘See, I know what today is.’ ”

Hoffman is, in fact, planning to drive up to Brown after our breakfast: It’s parents’ weekend. “My son met a girl who we’ll probably meet and her name is Brittany from Mobile, Alabama; I don’t think that she’s Jewish.” He smiles. “But I don’t care.” His cell phone rings: It’s Lisa wondering when he’s coming home. “Can you give me ten, fifteen minutes?” he asks her. “Okay, my dear. I’ll hurry.”

He and Lisa were spotted on camera a couple of nights earlier at the Yankee playoff game against the Boston Red Sox. “Because the New York fans are so devout, if the Yankee pitcher strikes somebody out, everybody stands,” he says. “Then they sit down. And then they stand for the next guy. And the next. They sit down, they stand up, sit down.” He demonstrates. “And at one point, Lisa said, ‘This is worse than temple.’ ”

He says Lisa cares deeply about Jewish tradition, while his connection is more unconscious. “I have very strong feelings that *I am a Jew*.” He punctuates the declaration with his fist. “And particularly, I am a *Russian, Romanian* Jew. I love herring and vodka; I feel it comes from something in my DNA. I do love these things. And I know I have a strong reaction to any anti-Semitism.”

He recounts a story that was clearly disquieting. It happened when he took his family to the premiere of his film *Outbreak* in Hamburg, Germany—the hometown of the film’s director, Wolfgang Peterson. “I said to my wife before we left, ‘Are there any concentration camps around there? Because I think these kids are now finally at the age when they can handle it.’ We found out that Bergen-Belsen was forty minutes south. That is where Anne Frank was taken.”

They decided to go the morning after the premiere, and Hoffman took an early walk from the hotel to buy some provisions for the drive. “I heard there was a nearby fancy bakery, and I could get wonderful German pastries and sandwiches. And this place had all these little tables, like this,” he gestures around our restaurant, “and against the wall were these beautiful pastries and the waitresses were very attractive German girls in their striped uniforms—it was as upscale as you would come across. And I’m aware of the fact that no one is coming up to me—because when you’re a celebrity, you’re aware of when you’re being recognized—and they were quite respectful.

“I’m waiting in line to pay, and as I start to pay, a man is sitting at a table—a man in his twenties—short haircut, drinking coffee, well dressed. And he starts yelling, ‘*Juden!*’ ” Hoffman pauses. “And the place stops. In my memory, it was like a movie: Suddenly everyone stops like this.” He freezes. “And he repeated it: ‘*Juden!*’ ” Hoffman is inhabiting this character now, shouting threateningly—with an accent: ‘*Dostin Hovvman! Juden!*’ I remember my brain had to do some work, but I had already done *Merchant of Venice* in London and I remembered that Shakespeare had used the word in the play. So I made the connection: ‘Oh, that must mean Jew.’ It was an extraordinary moment. The irony of hearing this when I’m buying German pastries to go to a concentration camp.

“Finally I turned to this guy and he’s just with his coffee—he’s not drunk. And I’m aware of men in overcoats walking over to him,” Hoffman acts this all out, “and they didn’t grab him; he just stood up and they followed him out. And I go back to pay, and there was complete, total denial. All of us. Everyone in the room, including me.” He pantomimes paying his bill. “ ‘Thank you very much.’ And I walked out in a kind of haze. And of course, when I get a block away, I think of what I should have done. I should have gone over to him and said, ‘Yeah—and? *And? What of it?*’ ”

Hoffman may have drawn a blank in that instance, but he didn’t

hesitate years earlier, when there was an artistic dispute as to how his character in *Marathon Man* should handle an anti-Semite. “The big sticking point in *Marathon Man* was the ending,” he explains. “I was called on, as the character, to fire point-blank at the Laurence Olivier character, Dr. Szell [a Nazi dentist], and kill him in that last scene. And I said that I couldn’t do it. The screenwriter, William Goldman, was quite upset about it, because first of all, how dare I? He wrote the book. ‘Your job isn’t to rewrite; your job is to play it as written.’ I think we had an outdoor meeting in L.A. at the home of the director, John Schlesinger—there was me, Goldman, and Schlesinger around the table—and it got nasty. I said, ‘Go hire someone else’—Pacino wanted the part—‘Go get Al.’

“I remember Goldman saying, ‘Why can’t you do this? Are you such a Jew?’ I said, ‘No, but I won’t play a Jew who cold-bloodedly kills another human being. I won’t become a Nazi to kill a Nazi. I won’t demean myself. I don’t give a fuck what he did. Even though he tortured me, I won’t do it.’ And we worked it out—it’s in the dialogue. Olivier says”—Hoffman does the German accent—“ ‘You can’t do it, can you? You don’t have the guts.’ So I don’t shoot; he comes at me, there’s some wrestling or whatever, and I throw the diamonds at him. *That* I wanted to do. That I dearly loved doing because I believed it. I throw the diamonds at him and they’re all falling in the grate around him, he is losing them. And I say, ‘I’m going to keep throwing them at you until you eat them.’ I say, ‘*Essen, essen*’ [“Eat, eat”]. Because I didn’t mind torturing him; but I wasn’t going to shoot him point-blank. I wanted to do what felt like the Jew that’s in me. I want him to swallow those fucking diamonds for all those people that he tortured and he killed—‘Eat these fucking diamonds because that’s what it was all about to you.’ ”

He describes how Dr. Szell ultimately falls and impales himself, and then Hoffman’s character walks to the Central Park reservoir. “There’s a great moment for me—I mean it’s just a movie, but nevertheless—there’s this music playing, and there’s the fence, and I just go,” he reenacts it, “I wind up my arm and throw this gun over the fence into the reservoir. And I just keep walking. And it’s the end of the movie.” He pauses. “And that’s important to me: that I didn’t shoot him in the end. Being a Jew is not losing your humanity and not losing your soul. That’s what they were unable to do when they tried to erase the race; they tried to take the soul away.

That was the plan.” He gets choked up and excuses himself to go to the bathroom.

When he returns, neither of us refers to the moment before. He asks if I want to walk with him the few blocks to his home and, as we chat, we end up talking again about the Yankee game he attended a few days ago. “I didn’t have any identity on—neither a Yankee hat nor a Red Sox hat,” he says, “and this one woman said, ‘Are you neutral?’ And before I could stop myself, I said, ‘No, I’m Jewish.’” He chuckles. “That would never have happened a bunch of years ago. Some part of me wants to advertise it now. Finally.”

# Ruth Bader Ginsburg



JUSTICE RUTH BADER GINSBURG HAS A RUN in her stocking, which, I must admit, puts me at ease. It's my first time in a U.S. Supreme Court Justice's chambers—even that word, “chambers,” conveys hushed, erudite activity—and it's strangely comforting to see that this tiny woman with the giant intellect gets runs in her hose like the rest of us. “Why don't we just sit here.” She gestures to a couch in her sitting area.

Ginsburg, often described as small and soft-spoken, appears almost miniaturized in her sizable office space, formerly occupied by the late Thurgood Marshall. Dressed all in black—slacks, blouse, stockings, sandals, a shawl draped around her shoulders—she looks like a frail Spanish widow rather than one of the nine most powerful jurists in the land.

But it's clear that despite her petite frame, small voice, and a recent battle with colon cancer, Ginsburg—age seventy when we meet, the second woman on the bench in the court's history and its first Jewish member since Abe Fortas—is formidable. She tells one story that illustrates her intrepid style: “My first year here, the court clerk, who is just a very fine fel-

low, came to me and said, ‘Every year we get letters from Orthodox Jews who would like to have a Supreme Court membership certificate that doesn’t say *In the year of our Lord*. [She’s referring to the certificate lawyers receive when they become members of the Supreme Court bar.] So I said, ‘I agree; if they don’t want that, they shouldn’t have it.’

“So I checked to see what the federal courts and circuit courts were doing and discovered, to my horror, that in my thirteen years on the D.C. circuit, the membership certificate has always said *In the year of our Lord*. So I spoke to the chief judges of all the circuits, and some of them had already made the change, others were glad to make the change. Then I came to my Chief and said, ‘All the other circuits give people a choice.’” Her “Chief,” William Rehnquist, recommended she raise the issue “in conference” with her fellow justices, which she did. “I won’t tell you the name of this particular colleague,” she says, “but when I brought this up and thought it would be a no-brainer, one of my colleagues said, ‘*The year of our Lord* was good enough for Brandeis, it was good enough for Cardozo, it was good enough—’ and I said, ‘Stop. *It’s not good enough for Ginsburg.*’”

Significant laws have been changed over the last few decades because the status quo wasn’t “good enough for Ginsburg.” She is known as a pioneer in the field of antidiscrimination law, a founder of the Women’s Rights Project of the American Civil Liberties Union, the first female tenured professor at Columbia University Law School, and the lawyer who argued six women’s rights cases before the Supreme Court and won five of them.

She abandoned Judaism because it wasn’t “good enough for Ginsburg” either. Its exclusion of women from meaningful rituals was painfully brought home to her at age seventeen, when her mother, Celia Bader, succumbed to cancer a day before Ruth’s high school graduation. “When my mother died, the house was *filled* with women; but only men could participate in the minyan [the quorum required for public prayers of mourning].” It didn’t matter that the young Ruth had worked hard to be confirmed at Brooklyn’s East Midwood Jewish Center—“I was one of the few people who took it seriously,” she remarks, or that at thirteen, she’d been the “camp rabbi” at a Jewish summer program. Having a Jewish education counted for nothing at one of the most important moments in her life. “That time was not a good one for me in terms of organized religion,” she says with typical understatement. I ask her to expand on how Judaism made

her feel secondary. “It had something to do with being a *girl*. I wasn’t trained to be a yeshiva *bucher*.” (She uses the Yiddish word for “boy.”)

Later, she was also turned off by the class system in her family synagogue. “This is something I’ll tell you and you know it exists: In many temples, where you sit depends on how much money you give to the shul. And my parents went to the synagogue, Temple Beth El in Belle Harbor, Long Island—it’s right next to Rockaway. When my mother died and my father’s [furrier] business went down the drain, he was no longer able to contribute to the temple. And so their tickets for the High Holy Days were now in the *annex*, not in the main temple, although they had been members since the year they married. And I just—that whole episode was not pleasing to me at all.”

Neither was the time when she tried to enroll her son, James, in Sunday school at Temple Emanu-El on Fifth Avenue in New York City. “The rabbi told me to fill out the application for membership ‘as though I were my husband,’ ” she recalls with indignation. “I said, ‘Well I haven’t consulted him; I don’t know if he wants to be a member of Temple Emanu-El.’

“The idea was, as a woman, if you were not single, widowed, or divorced, you could not be a member. If you were married, then your husband was the member. I was still teaching at Rutgers—it was 1972. And I remember how annoyed I was. Still, I wanted James to have something of a Jewish education. So I said, ‘I will make a contribution to the temple that is equivalent to the membership, if you will allow my child to attend Sunday school.’ ”

I ask her if these bouts with sexism were what kept her from embracing Jewish observance. Again she’s not expansive. “Yes,” she answers softly. “Yes.”

Despite giving up synagogue attendance, Sabbath candle-lighting, and fasting on Yom Kippur, Ginsburg did go to her husband’s parents’ home for Passovers. “That was always a great time for the children,” she says. “I think even more for my children than it was for me.” Her husband, Martin Ginsburg, a respected tax lawyer and an accomplished cook, occasionally dabbled in Jewish ethnic cuisine. “In his very early days he made his mother’s chopped liver,” she says with a smile.

Her children were bored with Sunday school, and she didn’t urge them to stick it out. “James was not bar mitzvahed,” she says of her younger son, “and that was his choice. He didn’t want to do the studying. We were liv-

ing in California at that time—we were at Stanford [where she was a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences]. James did not like the Sunday school there, and I didn't want to have one more issue in his life."

Her daughter, Jane, ducked Sunday school more cannily. "She made a deal with us." Ginsburg smiles. "We were then going to a much nicer Sunday school at Shaaray Tefilah on East Seventy-ninth Street in New York City, but Jane didn't like it very much. She is ten and a half years older than her brother. One Sunday morning, when he was an infant, I overslept; she took care of him and didn't go to Sunday school. And I was so glad that she did such a good job. So she said that she would make a deal with us: If she didn't have to go to Sunday school anymore, she would take care of James every Sunday morning. That was an offer I could hardly refuse. So that's when she stopped.

"But Jane became very Jewish again when she married a Catholic boy," Ginsburg continues. "First, she wanted to have a rabbi reassure her that even if her children were baptized—which they were because it was important to my son-in-law's Italian-Catholic mother—that it could still be a Jewish baby. And I thought that would be easy." Ginsburg shakes her neatly chignoned head. "But it was very, very hard to find a rabbi who would say that. Ab [Abner] Mikva was my chief judge on the D.C. Circuit Court. His daughter is a rabbi and she said, 'No, I won't tell her that.'"

I remark that this must have been very upsetting. "Yes," Ginsburg says with a nod, "but I said to Jane, 'This woman [the Italian-Catholic mother-in-law] is thinking that if her grandchild isn't baptized, *this child's soul will never go to heaven*. So it's just to put her at ease.'"

Did it matter to Justice Ginsburg that her children marry Jews? "No. Jane is married to a very fine man who is perfect for her. And she had anticipated all kinds of difficulties that didn't arise. There was a question of Sunday school and I said, 'Wait till George—my son-in-law—finds the church that he is going to enroll Paul and Clara in.' And he never did—to this day he hasn't. My granddaughter, who will be thirteen in October, is this summer—for the second time—going to a Hadassah-run camp on the French side of Lake Geneva. So now she knows more about Judaism than I have forgotten."

Ginsburg seems comforted by a sense that her grandchildren know what's at the heart of their birthright. "I think they have enough of an

understanding that, when you are a Jew, the world will look at you that way; and this is a heritage that you can be very proud of. That this small band of people have survived such perils over the centuries. And that the Jews love learning, they're the people of the book. So it's a heritage to be proud of. And then, too, it's something that you can't escape because the world won't let you; so it's a good thing that you can be proud of it."

So what does it mean to be Jewish without rituals? "Think of how many prominent people in different fields identify themselves proudly as Jews but don't take part in the rituals," Ginsburg replies. She adds that even without observance, being Jewish still matters greatly to her. "I'll show you one symbol of that which is here"—she gets up—"if you come." We walk across her office, which is surprisingly ordinary—no dark paneled walls, in-laid desks, or library lamps. It looks more like a civil service office with gray carpeting, tan puffy leather chairs, and a round glass table (with a stuffed Jiminy Cricket doll sitting on top). The only clue to Ginsburg's personality is the profusion of family photos propped on her bookshelves—pictures of son, James, who produces classical music recordings from Chicago; daughter, Jane, who teaches literary and artistic property law at Columbia; the two grandchildren; and of course, the requisite Ginsburg-with-Presidents Series—Carter, Clinton, Bush Sr., George W.

She guides me to her main office door, where a gold mezuzah is nailed prominently to its frame. "At Christmas around here, every door has a wreath," she explains. "I received this mezuzah from the Shulamith School for Girls in Brooklyn, and it's a way of saying, 'This is my space, and please don't put a wreath on *this* door.' "

Her barometer for religious insensitivity rises not just around Christmastime, but at the beginning of each court term. "Before every session, there's a Red Mass [in a Catholic Church]," she says. "And the justices get invitations from the cardinal to attend that. And not all—but a good number—of the justices show up every year. I went one year and I will never go again, because this sermon was outrageously anti-abortion. Even the Scalias—although they're very much of that persuasion—were embarrassed for me." (She and Justice Antonin Scalia are close friends who have celebrated many New Year's Eves together, despite their profound ideological differences.)

Clearly, Ginsburg takes symbolism seriously. Though others might view it as nitpicking, she's always deemed it worth her effort and prestige

to challenge small inequities, in addition to working toward large-scale reform. Thus, the changed language in the lawyer's certificate, the jettisoned wreaths, the boycotted Red Mass, and most recently the blacked-out First Monday in October: "We are not sitting on the first Monday in October this year and we will not sit on *any* first Monday that coincides with Yom Kippur," she says proudly. "Now, this is the *first year* that is happening. The first time Yom Kippur came up, it was an ad hoc decision—we were not going to sit that Monday. But now, this is the way it's going to be from now on." Having her comrade Jew on the court, Stephen Breyer, lobbying alongside her was crucial, she says. "In this great Yom Kippur controversy, it helped very much that there were two of us."

Her final show-and-tell items are framed, calligraphic renderings of the Hebrew command from Deuteronomy: "*Zedek, Zedek, tirdorf*"—"Justice, Justice shalt thou pursue." Ginsburg says it was her mother who put Jewish tradition in the context more of doing justice than of observance. "My mother had mixed memories of her Judaism because her father was ultra-Orthodox; she remembers her eldest brother worked very hard to ride a bicycle and then his father caught him riding on the Sabbath and broke it to pieces. So that type of fanatic observance my mother did not appreciate. On the other hand, she has very pleasant memories of the Sabbath and the smell of the bread; and it was the one day that her mother wasn't working—wasn't cooking all the time."

Ginsburg's mother, Celia Bader, pushed her daughter hard to succeed. "My mother told me to be independent. She thought that meant I'd be a high school history teacher." Does Ginsburg consider that emphasis on achievement to be Jewish? "Yes," she answers definitively. "I loved my mother dearly and she was constantly supporting my reading, sometimes pushing me to do things that I didn't really care about, like math. And she cared in a way that other mothers didn't. Our neighborhood was divided three ways—it was Italian, Irish, and Jewish in equal parts. And the Jewish parents were much more concerned about how their children were doing in school."

When Ginsburg stood at President Clinton's side during her nomination ceremony in 1993, she discussed the hurdles she faced at the start of her law career. "I had three strikes against me," she recalled. "I was Jewish, I was a woman, and I was a mother. So if a door would have been open a crack in either of the first two cases, the third one was too much." One of

her first jobs—between college and law school—was in a Social Security office working for a man who'd never met a Jew before. "He wasn't entirely sure I wasn't hiding horns somewhere in my head," she says with a half smile.

In her first year at Cornell, she says, the anti-Semitism was visible but unspoken. "In the dormitory, all of the girls on both sides were Jewish," she recalls. "That didn't happen by chance. The houses were arranged so that we would not contaminate all the others. We were contained." She adds that this made for lasting bonds. "We are friends to this day—it was a wonderful group of people."

I ask if the "outsiderness" she felt over the years proved to be a motivating force. "Oh, it certainly is," she replies without her usual hesitation. "You've got to be sure you were better than anyone else."

So I ask the obvious question, "Does being Jewish affect the way you approach cases on the Court?"—expecting her to wave it off with some boilerplate version of *Justices can't let personal experience color their judgment*. Instead, her answer is more nuanced. "I don't think that I approach cases in a particular way because I am Jewish any more than I do because I'm a woman. I have certain sensitivities for both. You know the old expression, 'Is it good for the Jews?' For example, a lot of people want to have crosses in front of their town hall or whatever. They say, 'It doesn't hurt anybody.' We had one case where I was in dissent—it was about a cross in front of the Statehouse in Ohio. And to me, the photograph of that statehouse told the whole story of the case: Here is the Capitol in Columbus, and here is this *giant cross*. And what is the perception of a Jewish child who is passing by the Capitol? It's certainly that this is a Christian country. A person's reaction could be: 'There's something wrong with me.' *It's not a symbol that includes you.*"

The theme of exclusion runs through so many of her stories: the sting of being sidelined, legal cases about people who are made to feel unwelcome. A sad irony occurs to me, as she talks: As other institutions marginalized her for being a Jew, her religion made her feel left out because she was a woman and thus lost her early on. When I ask if she misses Judaism, there's a long pause. "I wish that I could have the feeling for it that I once did. I don't think I ever will."