



My Two Diasporas On being Jewish and Chinese

Diaspora. A fine word, a Greek word, full of grandeur and romance. It sounds desperate and aspirational. “I am the product of... diaspora.” In my particular case, two diasporas: Jewish and Chinese. My father, a Chinese immigrant, met my mother, the descendant of Ashkenazi Jews, in the United States, a place that neither was native to but, that both had been dispersed to, by various historical forces, both political and economic.

Growing up I had limited contact with both cultures, learned languages of neither, and, in a rather peculiar turn of events, was unaware that I had Jewish heritage at all until the age of 21. How and why this part of my ancestry was hidden from

me is an entire story unto itself, one that I’m not entirely clear on. For the purposes of this tale, what is relevant is that my mother is descended from Galizian Jews, but I spent most of my life thinking that she was a curious blend of Cajun, Welsh, Irish, and German.

After I found out the truth, I considered my Jewish roots a curious foible of family history, but didn’t quite understand that this particular foible makes me a Jew. It took me some time to come to the realization that I was now part of some sort of ancient, global, proto-tribal brotherhood that accepts me as one of their own unconditionally – I didn’t have to convert or pray or even believe in God. No matter what I do, I am and

always will be a Jew in the eyes of the Jewish people – because it's my mother who is a Jew. That's the catch - apparently it's kind of an all-or-nothing situation.

Some people will tilt their heads and squint and tell me they can see the Jew in me – usually in profile – but it's not what people think when they first see me. They mostly only see someone Chinese. I remember being teased for being Chinese, but at least I was always accepted as Chinese by Chinese people because of the Chinese surname I inherit from my father. This makes me “Chinese” in a way that a half-Chinese person with a foreign surname is not.

I was interested in my Chinese heritage from a young age but never had any friends who were Chinese or even Asian. I was interested in kung fu and Chinese art and Taoism, but I didn't learn the language growing up and, besides eating a lot of Chinese food, I didn't have a very traditional Chinese upbringing.

The Middle Kingdom

In 2009 I received my economic stimulus money and two tax returns at the same time, amounting to about \$1100. I used the money to buy a one-way ticket to China and 8 months later, armed with half a Rosetta Stone's worth of Mandarin, moved to Chengdu, hometown of the Giant Panda and capital of Sichuan province. I lived there for two and a half years, learned to speak Chinese, and did research for an environmental NGO among a slew of other odd jobs. I visited my relatives in Hong Kong and traveled all over the Southwest. As intended, I learned lots of neat things about China and my heritage along the way. I learned that most Chinese people don't actually eat dog but that donkey is incredibly delicious. I learned that you can make a lot of money in China if you're foreign, even if you have no talent, provided you also have no self-respect. I learned that I, as the oldest male child in the family, am to inherit a book of names of all the family patriarchs going back through history for dozens of generations.

Hebreeeen

Less predictably, it was also in China that I became interested in Judaism. This is another story for another time, but suffice to say that it involved my much more, shall we say, Jewy cousin

visiting and taking me to a Purim party held at the local Chabad house. I went dressed as Communist Mario - all I knew about the holiday is that it is kind of like Jewish Halloween. We read the Megillah Esther and ate hamantaschen; I shared my unusual story, everyone found it very interesting indeed, and then we all drank- heavily.

Without getting too bogged down in the details of my past, it is important to note that I was raised Christian, in Texas. I rejected that religion when I was 16, long before I knew I was a Jew, and ever since I have had a deep suspicion of anything I perceive as proselytizing. If someone comes up to me and starts telling me about the “good news,” it had better not be something that happened 2,000 years ago.

So Purim was a nice, gentle introduction to Judaism for me because it first and foremost satisfied my “animal soul” with the three C's – Costumes, cookies, and the consumption of alcohol. I became fast friends with the young rabbi, Dovi, and his wife Sarale, who had just moved to Chengdu a week or two prior. He was the first person to drive home to me the idea that I AM a Jew, completely a Jew, without having to do anything religious. It was a fact before I even had the knowledge of it. Had he been preachy or tried to immediately draw me into an observant Jewish lifestyle, I probably would not have gone back. But he didn't; he was more interested in drinking and dancing and singing songs, which are all things I can get behind.

The Accident of Birth

I went back to the Chabad house every day that week, not out of a newfound sense of religious zeal but because I wanted to hang out with my friend Dovi. We drank and smoked cigarettes. I talked to him about my life and he talked to me about his, which, because he is a rabbi who was raised in a Hasidic household, ended up being mostly about Judaism. He never tried to tell me what I “should” do as a Jew, but rather made me aware of what he “should” do as a Jew and also reinforced to me that that world, his world, is fully accessible to me, should I choose to embrace it, simply because of the accident of birth. Having lived my whole life in a world of halves – half Chinese, half American, never having a distinct cultural identity or peer network – it was nice to be fully included in something.

Over the next few weeks I spent a lot of time at the Chabad house. I learned a little bit of Hebrew, learned to say Shema Israel, learned to lay tefillin, and even got Bar Mitzvah'ed (nearly 30 and a man at last!).

A few months later, I was in Israel.

The Land

My decision to travel to the Holy Land had little to do with my nascent Jewish identity and more to do with my innate love of travel, and my desire to visit my family. I say little, but not nothing – as much as 5% of my motivation had to do with being a Jew who had never been to Israel. I felt like I had given a fair shake to discovering my Chinese roots and that I owed my Jewish half at least a few weeks on my way back to America. My long-held fondness for Israeli women may have also played a small role. Mostly, however, I wanted to visit my relatives, most of whom I had never met or even heard of, and one of whom is an octogenarian Holocaust survivor.

My time in Israel was brief – two and a half weeks to my two and a half years in the Middle Kingdom – but what it lacked in duration it made up for in intensity. I spent the entire time traveling with my young cousin Eli, who speaks Hebrew and spent his high school years in Israel. We visited his friends and our mutual relatives all over the country, beginning in the West Bank and backpacking to Jerusalem, Haifa, Tzfat, and everywhere in between. We spent a lot of time hitch-hiking, sleeping on sofas, floors, and occasionally outside. We spent two nights in the empty dormitory of a Yeshiva. I met relatives who were frum and relatives who were settlers in the West Bank and those that were human rights lawyers providing pro bono counsel for Palestinians – first cousins from the same branch of the family. We went hiking in the Golan, mikveh'ed in every body of water we could find, and attended a Hasidic wedding

in Bnei Brak. We went to the only mixed supermarket in the West Bank, where groups of curious Palestinians shopped side by side with settlers in a modern American-style grocery with air conditioning and frozen dinners. Over the course of my visit, I acquired a kippah, tzitzit, a siddur, and was given a beautiful set of tefillin by my rabbi at his brother's wedding, which my visit just happened to coincide with.

I can't say I've seen all of Israel, but I've seen a lot of different sides of Israel, and as many different expressions of Judaism. Understanding my diasporic roots is a journey that I am still on, both literally and figuratively. At the moment I'm in New York – I'm writing this article in a McDonald's, huddled away on the second floor with my luggage. I am literally across the street from the Empire State Building. New York is a beautiful city and the whole world is here, including both my ancient, inscrutable diasporas. On this leg of the trip I have stayed in Crown Heights, just down the street from 770, and visited the Lubavitcher Rebbe's tomb. I've spent as much time at tea shops and temples in Chinatown as I have at shul, I've eaten fried chow fun and I've eaten chopped liver and pastrami on rye. Rather than having one foot in either culture, I have both feet in both, and at the same time I'm completely an American. In that sense, I have six feet, like an insect. And as I continue to crawl the surface of this earth I learn more about what it means to be all of the above. The main thing that I know now, that I didn't know before, is that Jewishness and Chineseness aren't things that you can go and simply pick up and put on, like a hat – you have to create them, and it's a process that never ends. ✧

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