



The Beard Crisis

“I hate my beard,” I complained to Rebecca during one of our regular hour-long phone conversations between Brooklyn and Singapore. Rebecca was still a professor at the National University of Singapore, and I was two semesters shy of graduating from Brooklyn College with a bachelor’s degree in psychology. It was 9 o’clock on a cold November night, and I was pacing the floor of Bubby Ruth’s small kitchen. I kept warm by wearing a brown plaid shirt covered by a black fleece, both hand-me-downs from Uncle Jeff’s wardrobe.

“What is it about your beard that makes you hate it?” Rebecca gently probed.

I thought for a minute. “I was always taught that Jewish law forbids men to shave or trim their beards, and that this prohibition is as binding as the prohibition against eating pork.”

The prohibition against cutting the beard is based on a verse in Leviticus (19:27) that states, “Ye shall not round the corners of your heads [the sidelocks], neither shalt thou mar the corners of thy beard.” Although historically some rabbis interpreted this verse to afford leeway so their followers could shave their beards, Hasidim in general and Lubavitch in particular rejected this approach. According to the third Lubavitcher Rebbe, the Tzemach Tzedek, the prohibition against shaving is based on the biblical law against men resembling women, and

Excerpt • Temple University Press

thus any means of removing the hair (even indirect ones, such as with the aid of chemical depilatories) is strictly forbidden.

I told Rebecca, “I was also taught that according to kabbalah the beard has thirteen parts, and these correspond to the thirteen attributes of God’s mercy and that a beard is a source of spiritual blessings. But I don’t believe that. I think it just marks me as an ultra-Orthodox Jew, even though I’m really not one anymore.”

When I finished my answer, Rebecca didn’t respond. I realized the call had disconnected. This happened so frequently to us that we used to joke that either the Singaporean government or Lubavitch headquarters was dropping our calls because they were too subversive. I redialed Rebecca. “They’re at it again, dropping our calls.”

Rebecca laughed.

“Where did I lose you?”

“I heard you say something about your beard marking you.”

“Oh, OK. I was saying that the beard just marks me as an ultra-Orthodox Jew even though I’m really not one anymore.”

“If you’re so dissatisfied with your beard, why do you still keep it? There must be something that keeps you from just shaving it off.”

“I guess. I know that shaving my beard would be considered scandalous in my community and all the yentas would be squawking about it. But I would be OK with that if I knew that I was going to marry a woman from outside and leave the community. But if I was going to end up marrying someone from inside, then I would need to grow it back and somehow pretend that I was sorry for shaving it off. I wish I knew which way my life would play out in order to know if I should shave or not.”

“The thing is, Zalman, your story will end up differently based on how you appear. In other words, people will respond differently to you if you have a long beard and they think you are Orthodox from how they will if you are clean-shaven and they realize you aren’t.”

Rebecca paused to catch her breath. “I think you would get a lot out of Borges’s short story ‘The Garden of Forking Paths,’” she continued. “Borges describes Ts’ui Pên’s intricate novel where a universe is imagined that contains all the contradictions of limitless unfolding possibilities. Every fork in the road of life leads to other forks in the road, to other options, and still others. But in the finite world we inhabit, it’s impossible to know all the different permutations in advance. We only

Excerpt • Temple University Press

come to know the options that result from the paths we choose—not the ones we decided not to take.”

For weeks, I returned to Rebecca’s words. They made sense. But my thoughts would inevitably fixate on the pain I would be causing my mother, in particular, if I did something so extreme and so public as to shave my beard. Even elephants show compassion for their parents and try to protect them from harm. *Was I less feeling than these hulking beasts?*

Walking around with my untrimmed reddish-brown beard brushing past my collarbones and my large black velvet yarmulke, I felt like an ornate synagogue adorned with marble pillars and fine stained glass—but devoid of worshippers. My insides did not match my outsides.

I thought about the story of the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe, the Rebbe Rashab, who lived in the town of Lubavitch, in Russia. He had a follower who lived in St. Petersburg who would visit him on the high holidays. The follower used to wear a long black coat in Lubavitch, but in cosmopolitan St. Petersburg he wore a short, Western-style jacket. Eventually, the follower felt uncomfortable switching back and forth, so the next time he visited Lubavitch he wore the short jacket. When the Rebbe Rashab saw this, he commented, “I always thought that you were fooling Petersburg. Now I see that you were fooling Lubavitch!”

One Friday afternoon I tried to prepare my mother for the possibility that I might shave. Armed with what was, in my judgment, literary dynamite, I came into the kitchen holding a copy of Kahlil Gibran’s 1923 book, *The Prophet*. My mother was sitting, chopping carrots and onions for chicken soup. Chop, chop, chop. I began, like a rabbi quoting the Talmud, with the following passage from Gibran:

Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life’s longing for itself. . . .

You may give them your love but not your thoughts, for they have their own thoughts.

You may house their bodies but not their souls, for their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.

How could she possibly counter the beauty and power of Gibran’s words? She didn’t look up from her cutting board or even stop cutting. Chop, chop, chop. Her only reply was, “Did he have any children?”

Excerpt • Temple University Press

A quick Google search revealed the unfortunate news that the only progeny he left in this world were books of poetry and paintings. With that, Gibran was disqualified. So much for easing the blow of my imminent shaving.

My beard caused me constant pain. It wasn't just when I looked in the mirror or when I touched my face. I felt like I was living a lie. A few weeks after the Gibran debacle, when I could no longer bear it, alone in Bubby Ruth's house I took a sharp pair of scissors and walked into her small, creaky upstairs bathroom.

I trimmed the edges of my beard. My hands shook. I couldn't imagine going any further. I left the beard mostly intact, but for the first time since it grew in when I was a teenager, it looked neat. I trimmed the bottom so it looked rounded, rather than scraggly and uneven.

I returned the scissors and went to bed, terrified of the fallout that awaited me. My college classmates would see what I had done. Although only some of them were Orthodox, and even they didn't have beards, I worried that they would be critical of my decision to openly change my religious status. Plus, when I visited Crown Heights my face would betray that I had transgressed one of God's fundamental commands.

And I was a coward. I couldn't shave it all off. I felt like a surgeon who freezes under the pressure and takes out only part of the tumor, knowing he'll have to reopen the patient later and remove the rest, enduring the pressure and dangers all over again.

The next day I went to class at Brooklyn College, expecting to get a tongue lashing. But much to my surprise, not a single person noticed what I had done. I was shocked and relieved. A possible explanation came from my psychology class: People see what they expect to see rather than what is actually in front of their eyes.

The surgery had to be completed. I took up the scissors again a few days later and started chopping off huge chunks, like a forester trying to clear away the underbrush in a dense jungle. Snip, snip, snip. The small sink was filling up with trimmings. I hadn't realized just how much hair there was on my face. Even after chopping away for ten minutes, my face still had clumps of hair. It was not the polished look I had fantasized about.

I looked in the medicine cabinet and found the package of disposable razors and shaving cream I now remembered buying a few months earlier, kicking myself at the time for thinking I had the courage to use

Excerpt • Temple University Press

them. I had only seen people shave in the movies, but it seemed simple enough. It wasn't. By the time I finished shaving off the last patch of stubble, I had nicked myself so many times that my twenty-four-year-old face looked like a war zone.

Beneath the wreckage, I had also discovered a birthmark on my right cheek that had lain dormant for so long that I'd forgotten it was there. I felt like my body was floating up into the air now that the tonnage of my beard had been removed. I was dizzy with joy.

The mirror kept surprising me. I had to familiarize myself again and again with my own face. I looked younger. I had a jawline. I didn't look Lubavitch anymore. My beard had covered up more than a third of my face for a decade. I was a child before that. This was the first time I was seeing my own face as an adult. It took a while for it to stop seeming like a stranger's face.

My hand would continue grasping for my missing beard, surprised that there was nothing past my chin to hold on to. But my beard had been like a limb that was no longer getting oxygen, so it needed to be cut off or it would jeopardize the rest of my healthy body.

I wasn't the only one who didn't recognize me. On campus the next day my best friends walked right past me. When it dawned on them and they realized what I had done—when they overheard me talking to someone—they came running over, screaming:

“Oh my God! You shaved your beard!”

“Dude! What happened to your beard!”

“Whoa, Zalman!”

Most of my friends and acquaintances, even the Orthodox ones, were supportive. The only exception was Anna, an attractive Russian Jewish woman who was involved in Jewish cultural programs on campus. Anna said, “You shouldn't have shaved. You're changing who you were born to be.”

I was furious at her. She wasn't even Orthodox. She didn't have to carry the burden of Orthodox Jewish law. And now she was lecturing me? The best response I could come up with was, “You shouldn't have left Russia. You're changing who you were born to be.” She walked away. That was the last time we spoke.

Anna had rattled me, but I knew it was nothing compared with what lay in store for me from my mother. Since I was planning to go home for Shabbos in a few days, I decided I needed to tell her the news on the phone. I didn't want her exploding at me in person.

Excerpt • Temple University Press

I called her on my cell as I paced outside of James Hall and watched my fellow college students rush to class. I got straight to the point. “Mommy, I need to tell you something.”

“What happened?”

“I . . . I . . . shaved . . . my . . . beard,” I fumbled.

“*Dammit jerk, why did you do that?*” she screamed. Then I heard a click, and the line went dead. My mother had hung up on me. I stood there in shock. She had never hung up on me before. No one had ever hung up on me before. How was I supposed to deal with this, and what did this mean for our Shabbos plans?

Several minutes went by. I heard my phone ring. It was my mother again. I hoped that maybe she had been able to get hold of her emotions and apologize for hanging up on me. “That’s it, Zalman. I’m so angry with you I don’t want to see you again. I want you to take your stuff out of the house on Sunday when I’m not home and I don’t want you to come back. You want your own life—*mazal tov*, you’ve got it. Good luck with your new life.” Click.

I stood in front of James Hall. Tears rolled down my cheeks. My body was shaking. I felt like a Lubavitch mitzvah tank, one of those converted Winnebagos, had just rolled over my chest. As I walked the mile and a half to Bubby Ruth’s house, my mind raced.

I knew Mommy would be angry that I shaved my beard. But I didn’t think she would try to disown me. Would she ever let me back home? Would she prevent me from contacting Tatty and my siblings? Now I hate, hate, hated Mommy. What kind of mother throws out her son because he decides to be a little less religious than her? I was not on drugs, and I didn’t kill anyone. I just wanted to make decisions about my own life. Was that such a horrible thing to want? How could Mommy just turn on me and throw me out like a bag of garbage? I wish Mommy had never joined this fanatic community that caused her to throw out her own son just for shaving his beard. Mommy wanted me to stay Lubavitch so that somehow her sacrifice of becoming Lubavitch, giving up on a career as a psychologist and instead bearing and raising nine children, would be worth it. It was not my job to make Beth Robin Janus from a broken family in Queens feel as if she was now a real Lubavitcher, a true Lubavitch matriarch at the head of a tribe of upstanding Lubavitch children.

As the child of *baal teshuvah* parents I understood that my siblings and I represented the fulfillment of our parents’ religious hopes and dreams. I understood that it must be extremely painful for my mother

Excerpt • Temple University Press

to hear that I had rejected the religious life that she envisioned for me and had worked tirelessly to inculcate. But still, what kind of parent throws her own child out of her house over a religious infraction? What kind of Lubavitcher does that?

Thousands of Lubavitchers around the world welcomed non-Orthodox Jews into their homes, and now my own mother—who was herself once welcomed into Lubavitch homes when she didn't observe Jewish law—threw me out just because I had shaved?

January and February were bitter cold that year, but they didn't compare with the frosty silence that set in between my mother and me. As I completed my last semester of college, I regularly talked to my father on the phone. He was pleasant and even-tempered, as usual. I knew that my father would have allowed me to come home but was unwilling to stand up to my mother and insist on it. I was thankful that my father was still talking to me but was deeply hurt that he didn't protect me from my mother's religious zeal. What kind of father allows his wife to kick their son out of their home? What kind of man allows his wife to walk all over him without a peep of protest?

I used these conversations with my father to gauge my mother's temperature. The signs weren't good. When the holiday of Purim arrived, it had been two months since I'd seen her, and I decided it had gone on too long. I called up my father and said I wanted to come over for the Purim meal. He said he would have to speak to my mother and suggested, "Since everyone puts on costumes on Purim, maybe you can put on a fake beard. That way it won't be so noticeable that you shaved." I think he was joking, but I also understood that my parents just wanted to cover over what had happened rather than deal with it.

A few days later, my father reported, "I mentioned to Mommy your idea of coming for Purim and she didn't say anything. She didn't accept it or reject it. I think you should come."

On the day of Purim, I arrived and was greeted warmly by my father and siblings. We stood in the dining room and talked for twenty minutes. My mother was in the kitchen preparing the holiday feast. No one said anything, but I felt as if there was an invisible line—one that separated the dining room from the kitchen—beyond which I shouldn't pass for my own sake. Eventually my father called out gently, "Mommy dear, we have a special visitor."

My mother emerged. In honor of the holiday, she was decked out in a pink wig and a colorful Mexican poncho. She took one look at me and

Excerpt • Temple University Press
 said with a smirk, “I heard Zalman’s voice, but I don’t see him. Where’s Zalman?”

“Very funny, Mommy. I’m right here,” I said and kissed her on the cheek. She didn’t flinch but accepted it with as much warmth as a cold marble statue would accept a kiss.

She looked me over again. “I really don’t recognize you. I want to grab you and shake you out of this. This is not who you really are.” As if I were an Etch A Sketch on which a child had scribbled a messy set of mistakes, I just needed a few good shakes.

Although my Purim visit broke the ice, it had hardly resolved anything. My mother told me, “I love you, but I don’t know if I should let you keep on visiting. Every time I look at you, it hurts me. And I’m worried about the negative effect you could have on the younger children.” I had shaved my beard four months after Yossi shaved his, and my mother blamed him for my transgression. Now she was nervous that our corruption would spread to our younger siblings.

She started to push the idea that Yossi and I should go with her to a rabbi who would “set us straight.” Every time she used that phrase, I thought of conversion therapy for gay people and felt that both forms of “therapy” were equally doomed to fail and equally unethical. Still, I wanted to be welcomed in my childhood home, and she wanted this, so I agreed to go see Rabbi Minsky, my former middle school teacher.

On the appointed day, as we sat finishing our breakfast of bagels and cream cheese in the kitchen, my mother exclaimed, “Remember, Yossi and Zalman, not to say anything embarrassing or inappropriate when speaking to Rabbi Minsky.” Yossi and I could discuss our “problems” with our Lubavitch upbringing as long as we didn’t say anything heretical or scandalous. Gazing down at us from the walls of the kitchen were three 8 × 10 framed black-and-white pictures of the Rebbe.

When Yossi and I made a last attempt to wiggle out of this meeting, my mother, whose headscarf was slightly askew, revealing a few escaped strands of her brown hair that now showed signs of graying, raised both hands as if to push back with physical force any opposition. “Stop this *nareschkeit*. We need to go to Rabbi Minsky because,” she said, tears flowing down her cheeks, her voice quivering, “you are not acting like proper Lubavitchers. I can’t talk to you boys about this stuff. It’s tearing at my heart. I already lost Shimmy to cancer, now you two . . .”

I was horrified by my mother comparing our religious evolution to Shimmy’s death. I wanted to scream at the top of my lungs: *Mommy, we*

Excerpt • Temple University Press

are still alive! We are standing right in front of you. Why can't you see that we are the same people you loved and nurtured all those years. But I couldn't say a word. Fighting back tears, I kept my silence.

My mother blew her nose and wiped her eyes with a tissue. "I can't answer all your questions, but it's obvious that you boys are in serious trouble and need help. That's why we are going to Rabbi Minsky. End of discussion."

I suddenly felt a deep connection to my mother's father, Pops. His mother also schlepped him to a rabbi to straighten him out of his secular activities, instructing him not to mention in front of the rabbi that he danced with women, which he promptly did as soon as he got talking with the rabbi.

My mother, my father, Yossi, and I piled into our family's champagne-colored Chrysler minivan for the hour-and-a-half trek from Brooklyn to the Hasidic hamlet of Monsey, in Rockland County, New York.

No one said a word the whole trip. Rabbi Minsky met us at the door with a smile and ushered us through his silent house, past the rows of bookcases groaning under the weight of classical rabbinic texts and through his kitchen, with its requisite twin sinks for meat and dairy dishes, and onto the back porch, where a table and chairs were set up.

Rabbi Minsky sat at the head of the table, my mother and father sat on one side, and Yossi and I sat on the other. I was shocked to notice that Rabbi Minsky's brown beard had turned mostly grey. Was this transformation due to the passage of years or to the stress of multiple confrontations like this with his former students?

After brief pleasantries, Rabbi Minsky asked: "Tell me, what's on your minds?" My mother began, "We are here because Yossi and Zalman are out of control. They shaved their beards, they don't *daven* [pray] anymore, and who knows what else they're up to."

Rabbi Minsky stroked his beard for a moment and then said, "Every illness has a source that causes it. Sometimes it's viral, sometimes it's bacterial. In order to understand how to treat the illness, the doctor has to determine the cause. What do you think is the cause of these behaviors?"

"I know the cause," my mother said in triumph, like a schoolgirl who is convinced she knows the answer to the teacher's question. "It's those *goyishe* books the boys keep on reading."

Rabbi Minsky turned to Yossi and me and, in a supercilious tone, inquired, "Velcher bichelach laynts du [What little books are you reading]?"

Excerpt • Temple University Press

I was shocked that he would be so dismissive of our reading without even knowing what it was. “The little books I’m reading are from Aristotle, Spinoza, and Karl Marx,” I said coldly. “I’m attracted to how they make sense of their world through physical observation rather than supernatural explanations.”

“Nu [So]?” Rabbi Minsky retorted.

“So the point is,” I began, trying to hold back my hurt feelings, “I’ve read a lot and I’ve come to see things differently. Just because I was raised a certain way to believe in *Hashem* and his Torah doesn’t mean that I always have to believe this way. It’s a free country, and I’m free to believe and act as I see fit.”

“You’re right, Zalmy,” said Rabbi Minsky, calling me by the same diminutive form of my name that he used when I was twelve. “It’s a free country, and you’re free to choose what to believe and how to act, but true freedom is when you master your base instincts and accept the *oyl malchus shamayim* [yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven]. This ability to master our base instincts is what separates us from animals. A dog feels the urge to relieve itself in the gutter, so he does. Is that the kind of freedom you want for yourself?”

I sat there speechless and stared at Rabbi Minsky. I was so mad I could have put my hand through a glass window. I could not believe his chutzpah to compare my thoughtful rejection of Orthodox Judaism, based on years of reading and reflection, to a dog shitting in the street.

And to imply that my rejection of my Lubavitch upbringing was all due to rampant base desires! This strategy of the pious to malign free-thinkers as enthralled to lust is nothing new. Epicurus, the rationalist ancient Greek philosopher and the origin of the Hebrew term *apikorus* (heretic), was and is often wrongly portrayed as a proponent of hedonism just because he encouraged his students to focus on happiness and peace in this lifetime.

Rabbi Minsky saw I was stung, so he changed course: “Tell me, do you believe in God?”

“No.”

“Do you put on *tefillin*?”

“Sometimes.”

Suddenly Rabbi Minsky got excited. He felt that he had caught me in one of his mental traps he was famous for springing on his unsuspecting students. “Wait a minute,” he said with obvious relish. “If you believe in God, it makes sense why you would put black leather boxes with

Excerpt • Temple University Press

leather straps on your arm and head—because God commanded you to do so. But if you don't believe in God, it's a crazy thing to do."

"I do it because I find putting on *tefillin* a meaningful way to connect with past generations of Jews who did it—not because I believe in God."

"How can you find it meaningful to do an absurd thing?"

"Rabbi," I shouted, "how dare you tell me what I can and can't find meaningful!"

I didn't tell Rabbi Minsky that part of my motivation to keep putting on *tefillin* was out of a sense of solidarity with Jews of the past who were mocked by non-Jews for wearing *tefillin*—especially those bearded Jews draped in prayer shawls and wearing *tefillin* surrounded by young, jeering German soldiers in the grainy black-and-white Holocaust photos. I felt as if these Jews were telling me: "Do it for us. Stick it to the Germans!"

Rabbi Minsky pressed me on my *tefillin* practice because it touched a profound disagreement between us. My decision to put on *tefillin* even though I didn't believe in God meant that Judaism was something that I controlled and not something that controlled me. I thought of Judaism as a cultural treasure to enrich my life, not a master that held me hostage. I embraced the formulation of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of the liberal Reconstructionist form of Judaism, that the past "should have the right to a vote, but not the right to veto, in the determination of what we have to do to achieve salvation." Ultimately, I got to decide which parts I did and did not accept from the Jewish tradition.

For Rabbi Minsky, this was unfathomable and unacceptable. He viewed Jewish law as a "yoke," as something that must be borne regardless of one's personal feelings—just as the yoked oxen in the field don't choose where or when to plough.

After an hour of impassioned volleys back and forth, Rabbi Minsky said, "It's a terrible thing to fool oneself. Let's be honest. This is about you guys trying to take the easy way out, throwing off the yoke of Torah."

These words enraged me. I started to tear up. "You think this is about making my life easier? For God's sake, my life would be a lot easier if I stayed with the Lubavitch program and did what I was told to do. I wouldn't have to wake up every morning and struggle to figure out who I am. I wouldn't have to get kicked out of my parents' home. And I wouldn't need to deal with the shame of having everyone I grew

Excerpt • Temple University Press
 up with pitying me: ‘*Nebach*, he’s a *meshugener*.’ The life I chose isn’t easier. It’s much harder, but it’s the only way I can live.”

The salvos continued for another hour. The rest is a blur. It became obvious eventually that we were speaking different languages and that it was not possible to have a meaningful dialogue. My mother and Rabbi Minsky were trying to rewind history and force a different outcome. But such efforts were as futile, and as destructive, as trying to prevent a child’s physical development by locking him up in a form-fitting iron suit.

One good thing to come out of the meeting was that Rabbi Minsky said my mother should allow us back in the house. But while we were at home, we were obliged to respect her religious sensibilities. We had to go to shul, wear a yarmulke, and not discuss our heretical ideas with anyone. Don’t ask; don’t tell.

When I was in yeshiva and a holiday break approached, I would feel a sadness descend upon me. Going home from yeshiva, I missed my buddies and longed to be back together with them. Once I returned to yeshiva, the sadness went away. But now, as I was graduating college and struggling with my religious identity, I started to feel completely enveloped by a sadness like a soaked blanket that clung to my body and pulled me down.

I felt terribly conflicted and uncertain—not about my belief in God or the Rebbe, but about whether I should leave Lubavitch, the only religious community and social circle I had ever known. Would I find another Jewish community where I would feel at home? Would I be forced to disconnect from my mother and my siblings? Would I be able to live as a person without a community, without a family? Maybe it was better to stay in Lubavitch even if I didn’t believe any of it than to venture out and pay the price?

My mother fueled my anxiety and inner turmoil. She would constantly report to me that she met such and such friend of mine and he looked like a proper Lubavitcher. “I saw Dovid at the Hershkowitz’s wedding last night. He has such a nice long beard and he’s going to be a rabbi in Florida. What a mensch. I bet his mother is very proud of him.”

Each time she made these comments I felt a barbed hook digging into my flesh. When I was visiting her one night after she came home from a bar mitzvah, she reported that she had just met the mother of

Excerpt • Temple University Press

my friend Aryeh, who had also stopped being Orthodox. “Aryeh’s mother told me that she accepts Aryeh for who he is. ‘He’s my son. I must love him even if I completely disagree with the choices he makes.’” My mother looked me straight in the face and said, “Just so you know, I will never accept you the way you are.”

My mother would often taunt me with, “Are you happy now? Do you feel like your life is perfect since you shaved your beard?” These were unfair questions. It was like asking someone in the middle of getting a wisdom tooth pulled, “Do you feel happy now?” I was in a lot of pain but needed to go through this process. I looked forward to being happier once I settled down in my new life.

But at the moment, the pain from separating from my Lubavitch life and the anxiety of having no clear path ahead seemed unbearable. I thought of killing myself. For me, the thought of suicide was like an escape hatch in a dark and gloomy tunnel. Once I knew of the existence of the escape hatch, it proved difficult not to fantasize about availing myself of it whenever the pain of existence overwhelmed me.

The unthinkable had become a constant thought. I felt like the Hebrew letter *aleph*, whose two arms are pulled in opposite directions. I also thought of *kaf bakela*, the punishment the kabbalah says awaits people after death. In this torment, the soul is violently thrown back and forth through various mystical realms. I felt as if that was what I was going through at that moment—being thrown between my mother’s love and the life I knew I wanted to live. I couldn’t give up either.

I was physically healthy, employed by a social services organization that helped others, and the proud holder of a bachelor’s degree, but none of that seemed to matter. Being in extreme pain narrowed my focus the way that a throbbing ingrown toenail makes you forget about the rest of your body. I was aware of only the immediate pain tearing me apart. It played tricks on me. Trapped in an endless dark void without even a glimmer of light, suicide seemed like the only option to escape the pain.

I didn’t believe in God or an afterlife, so I didn’t fear being punished for checking out early. I just felt that by ending my life I would put an end to all the turmoil in my soul. I never hatched a complete plan, but I did fantasize about it a lot, weighing the benefits of one stratagem versus another.

I thought of suicide as a means of getting away from the pain and suffering of religious turmoil and from a mother who rejected me. I also

Excerpt • Temple University Press
 thought of it as a way to get back at her. I thought if I killed myself, then she would regret not accepting me.

Ironically, it was also because of my mother that I felt I shouldn't go through with it. It would be too cruel to pile on another dead son after Shimmy's death had already torn off a chunk of her heart.

During one of my phone conversations with Rebecca, I mentioned my thoughts of suicide. Rebecca suggested that I see a therapist. Although I had just graduated with a bachelor of arts in psychology and was planning to become a clinical psychologist, for some reason it had never occurred to me to see a shrink for my own problems.

I arranged to see a therapist through a Jewish social services organization. They set me up with a Modern Orthodox therapist named Jonathan. In our initial session, Jonathan asked me many questions, including the standard, "Have you had suicidal thoughts in the last month?"

I hesitated for a moment, then answered truthfully, "Yes."

Jonathan looked up from his notepad and with perfect calm said, "We should talk about that." I was shocked that he didn't freak out or immediately call for the ambulance to whisk me off to a psych ward. We just sat in his office and talked.

Jonathan, a graduate of Yeshiva University, wore a small black leather yarmulke atop his well-coiffed pompadour hairstyle, which is known in Lubavitch as a "chup." He exuded an attitude of "I'm Orthodox because it works for me, but I'm not here to try to convince you to stay Orthodox. I'm here to help you feel at peace with whatever choices you make." When he smiled, which was often, a bulging vein appeared running down his forehead, which added an exclamation point to his kindness.

Over the following months, and eventually over the next three years of weekly therapy sessions, Jonathan helped me to understand that I could not control what my mother thought any more than she could control what I thought and that I should not wait for her to accept me. That it was probably a fantasy that she would one day acknowledge that she was wrong to treat me the way she did. Jonathan helped me see that I would need to feel OK by myself, without her acceptance.

As I started to get a handle on my thoughts of suicide and generally started to feel much more positive about my life, I felt that if I could find a life partner to build a family with, I wouldn't be dependent on my mother's approval. I would be able to feel good about my own life choices. But where would I find someone who wanted to marry a person with so much religious and family baggage?