

Chapter Six

Pinchas and the Pierced Penis

The call came from Jerusalem, it was Rabbi Grabzenbites, Dean of the Ner-Simcha Seminary, an institution dedicated to the capture, deconstruction and re-education of lost Jewish souls, especially those who have been involved with cults or cult-like groups.

“Rabbi Schreiber, I am sending you a graduate of our Yeshiva, Rabbi Pinchas Cohen. He’s moving back to his hometown; his parents, I believe, are well known to you. I told him to be in touch when he gets into town. He’s been an excellent student, learning with us studiously, for six years, and he’s really seen tremendous success, he received his ordination here last year. He will be representing our institution in your area, fundraising, teaching classes and so forth.”

“I’ll look forward to meeting him,” I said, waiting for the punch line. There had to be a punch line, if I merited a phone call from this distance and was not a solicitation for a donation, it could not be long in coming. It wasn’t.

“And, by the way, “ he continued. “When it comes to Shiduchin, it is important to know in advance that, for technical reasons, he may not marry a Daughter of Israel.”

“Do you want to be a little more specific?” I asked.

“No, not really. All I can say is that there is some damage to the genitalia, disqualifying him from a normal marriage,” he replied with obvious reluctance. “It would be improper for me to give you more information. Perhaps you can talk to the young man when you see him, if it is his wish.”

“Can you tell me who *Paskened*¹ the ruling that he is unfit to marry normally?” I asked. Something about the way he spoke was making me uneasy. He was withholding something.

“Someone qualified,” he snapped, and that was that.

Pinchas was indeed a nice young man, if you prefer your men the born-again, evangelical kind. He was definitely cast in the Ner-Simcha-deluxe, Eddie-Bauer[®], special-edition rabbi mold. He came equipped, with full beard, dark suit, broad-brimmed black Fedora and neatly trimmed lobotomy.

Chainik, my friend, I saw, grimaced on first meeting Pinchas, whose attitude on meeting Chainik was the perfect balance of deference and attentive sycophancy.

¹ P’sak: Decision on a question of Jewish law. Having someone ask you who *Paskened* a ruling, can, in certain circles, be construed as the equivalent of the question, “Who makes your dice for you?” or, in more bellicose ones, the equivalent of, “Nice scenery, eh, you don’t really *mind* about the shock-troops I’ve moved up to your border, do you?”

“How I hate the type,” Chainik said later. “Not for what he represents, but because of what it brings out in me. That variety of rabbinic brings all the most ignoble and prejudiced parts of my soul into sharp relief. Don’t you think?”

I confess, I had to agree with Chainik, I have never asked to see certificate of ordination issued by the Ner-Simcha Seminary, but I feel sure it will contain the following lines.

Every rabbi we ordain will give you complete satisfaction or you may return him for reprocessing. Our creed is to give you such outstanding quality, value, service, and guarantee that we may be worthy of your high esteem and continued financial support unto the fourth generation.

The new rabbi in town was certainly a hard and fast worker, and no one could accuse him of allowing the grass to grow under his feet. He was charming and personable; within a month or two there was a North American Friends of Ner-Simcha Seminary Inc. Annual Banquet, a Ner-Simcha Weekly Torah Bulletin publication, some major corporate sponsorship of Ner-Simcha Outreach Programs and Ner-Simcha - The Blogowitz.com, a website for Ner-Simcha alumni in the four, neat corners of their square, flat world.

We didn’t come to blows, but our first argument was a trifle acrimonious. It concerned dinosaurs. It’s difficult to say whether he was arguing that they do not now, nor ever did exist, per se, or whether he was arguing that even if they exist they are not proof of the universe being more than 5770 years old.

I take my hat off to Rabbi Grabzenbites, I’ve no idea how he does what he does. It’s not as though the young men passing through his seminary originate in orthodox Jewish homes where rigid thought control is a way of life. He attracts men from the most secular and materialistic societies on earth, people who have been taught to think in accredited colleges and universities, and he gets them, without any coercion or intimidation whatsoever, to surrender their critical reasoning faculties. It’s not a brainwashing technique as such, I would recognize if it were. And anyway, it’s not really likely that he would get away with brainwashing people who recognize the symptoms.

Chainik points out that if after spending any amount of time in the company of a Ner-Simcha Seminary graduate you feel a little icky, it suggests the presence of unwashed brains. That instead of brainwashing, Ner-Simcha encourages the opposite. He also gives it as his considered opinion, Rabbi Grabzenbites has hit upon a secret, brain-clogging technique involving an intellectual coagulant hitherto unknown to medical science. But that’s probably just some more Chainik-speak.

The second fight I had with Pinchas was sparked by his attitude to women singing in the synagogue during services. Traditionally, orthodox Jewish women are forbidden from singing in the presence of men², but I am a disciple of Shlomo Carlebach who considered singing and dancing as basic to human life, health and happiness as eating and breathing,

² Not strictly true. The actual prohibition is upon the men to refrain thinking holy thoughts in the presence of a woman’s naked voice as in the presence of her unclothed body

and no more disallowable. I had been invited to lead the morning services in the Vilna Shul on the festival. Naturally, we got to singing Shlomo's songs, and admittedly, things got a little raucous, the place was rocking on its foundations, there was dancing in the aisles. But that doesn't excuse Pinchas, who must, at some point have walked over to the screen separating men from women in the sanctuary and politely asked the women to keep their voices down. There was an exchange of harsh words, there in the Synagogue, with people looking on. He was white with tension, correctitude and contained rage at my leniency and flagrant disregard for Halacha³. I was in my element. It's one of my less endearing qualities; compulsively kicking at boundaries especially if it means challenging norms, questioning the standard, fighting the traditional way of doing things. I contend that challenging is part and parcel of the religious process, that no custom is sacred once it ceases to serve its original purpose, no fluid tradition remains holy once it solidifies.

I'm in the minority.

Pinchas retained his polite manners when we met in public, but I knew he no longer treated me as a kosher resource, nor referred people to me. I was displaying signs of an arrantly unorthodox theology⁴.

We almost came to blows over the Eruv⁵. There are strangely complicated circumstances around the Eruv in our town, and one requires a whole slew of background information to make head or tail of it all, but to cut a long story short: Walking home from Shul one Sabbath morning I saw Pinchas watching a woman struggling to get her child's buggy up the stairs from the street to his apartment building. He waited all polite and noncommittal, behind her, while the poor woman puffed and panted at the steps. It was useless to pretend everything was normal, the day was a sweltering, summer scorcher, her sheitl was all askew and tempers were running short.

"Why can't you help me, again?" I heard her ask him plaintively.

"I don't hold from the Eruv here," he replied. "I'm sure you understand. I can help you once you're inside the house, but not out here."

"How can you watch me struggling like this, that's what I don't understand," she said. He only pursed his lips. After I'd lent a hand, it only took five seconds to help her lift the

³ Halacha: The Way. Sometimes referred to as the Jewish Tao, albeit with retaliatory consequences for failure to maintain full compliance.

⁴ Not that unorthodox theology has no legitimate place in Orthodox Judaism. It's just that the phrase, 'cut and thrust of debate' takes on special meaning when sharp metal objects are used to emphasize a point.

⁵ Eruv: The laws of Shabbat are complex and manifold. They prove the rule that however *frum* you are you're sure to meet someone who can make you feel like a *shaygetz*. The Eruv is a conceptual structure representing an enclosure, usually a wire running over telephone poles surrounding a Jewish neighborhood. By creating an enclosure it enables those dwelling within to imagine they're in a courtyard, permitting them thereby to carry in the streets on the Sabbath. There is no more sure-fire way of inciting Jews to rabbicide than a discussion of the merits or demerits of their Eruv. Others imagine it is Sunday not Saturday, thus avoiding the prohibition against carrying in a public domain.

buggy up the outside steps, I turned my back on him without saying a word, and kept on walking.

“Rabbi Schreiber,” I heard him calling as he hurried after me down the street. When I stopped walking and allowed him to catch up he said, “Is it so necessary to let your feelings show, after all, you know how much controversy there is over the kashrut of the Eruv here in town? I’m only following the Torah Halacha as I was taught it, must you display quite so much contempt? Don’t I deserve a Good Shabbes?”

He had a point. I was doing the Good Samaritan to his Wicked Pharisee act. It’s easy to score points that way, and not very sporting.

Rabbis have to be discreet when they’re dating, and it can sometimes lead to awkward situations, so they do it out of sight of the hoi-polloi. But if it’s news it eventually leaks out, it has to. People still talk about a certain Time Square Cinema that used to show Disney cartoons and full length, animated movies. Unfortunately it’s closed down now, but there was a time when you might have found it patronized by just two groups of viewers, habitués of the LSD drug culture who came for the trippy color experiences offered onscreen courtesy of cartoonists, and young rabbis and their future brides who came for a kosher movie and a place to date that was off the streets while still in public, sort of.

Rabbi Pinchas’s courting followed the predictable, Yeshivish pattern. Airport and hotel lobbies, public gardens and parks, any place where some level of anonymity may be assumed if not guaranteed. But striving for privacy while living in the Jewish community is a pointless waste of energy, an exercise in futility. Word soon got out, probably before the couple got home from their first date, but soon.

Whispers, whispers, whispers.

The call came from Jerusalem, again it was Rabbi Grabzenbites, Dean of the same Ner-Simcha Seminary, an institution still dedicated to the capture, deconstruction and re-education of lost Jewish souls.

“Rabbi Schreiber, Yuddl Grabzenbites here. We’re hearing disturbing rumors on this end about Pinchas Cohen. Have you heard anything about the current Shiduch in which he is involved, is it true that the girl does not know about his condition?”

I demurred. Truth to tell, I had heard nothing about it, I’m not in the loop. Gossip, be it ever so juicy, is not my drink of choice.

“I called you last year,” he continued, “with very personal and private information, with the expectation that you might help avoid just such a situation as is now developing. If the couple continues down this path, it can only lead to a deep disappointment and much pain for both the young people. Is there nothing you can do?”

I promised to do something, and immediately picked up the phone to speak to Pinchas. We arranged to meet, but there was more than a little strain apparent from the outset, our

previous contretemps were informing and inhibiting the conversation before it got off the ground. I attempted to bring up the subject of Rabbi Grabzenbites' phone call, but Pinchas simply told me to mind my own business and walked away from me in anger; I don't blame him, it was an awkward situation.

Someone else must have said something to the young woman or her parents, because, before long, the news was all abroad that she had broken off the near engagement. Pinchas was furious. I called him again and this time he shouted at me over the phone. He went on a trip to Israel, but when he came back, he was, if anything, in a worse mood than before going. I called him on the phone again.

"Let's learn some halacha," I said. "There's stuff we could be doing together."

"What did you have in mind?" He sounded very wary of me, but not so sure of his rage as previously.

"Let's learn the halacha of *Chrot Shofcha* - mutilated genitals," I said, jumping straight in at the deep end. "I think I may be of some help to you, but I need to know what's going on."

I could sense him bristling on the other end of the phone, all prepared to lash out at me. I'd decided I could only help him if he stepped beyond our adversarial relationship, into maturity. Sometimes a man just has to do what a man has to do. I heard him take a deep breath. He decided to think before opening his mouth. He'd come a long way. We made an appointment and started a serious study of the texts around this subject.

"I had a Dydoe piercing, when I was nineteen years old," he told me when we finally got around to discussing it over an open Talmud. "I was at 'burning-man' with a girlfriend, and it seemed like the cool thing to do at the time, you probably don't know how it is, being frum-from-birth, but I was pretty *frei*⁶ back then."

Burning-man. These days they don't put miscreants and virgins of either sex into a burning wickerwork man-shaped cage, but it's still a rather pagan festival by all accounts. Thousands of people of all ages gather at the summer solstice to take off their clothes, brag about their tattoos or piercings and fantasize about extreme body modification.

"Tell me, Pinchas," I said. "You know it says in the Talmud, that it wasn't really the Golden Calf we were interested in worshipping, we don't have a pagan bone in our bodies, that what we were really after was the orgiastic sex that goes with idolatry. Do you agree with that?"

Pinchas grinned, a little embarrassed. "The sages knew what they were talking about. When I was there, I felt I was the real burning man. What is it with us Jews, huh? Of course, it was the mid-nineties by the time I graduated from college, there was a lot of awareness about STDs, AIDS and stuff like that around, especially at happenings like the burning-man festival. But if you want to know what *this* Jew was doing there, I'd have to go

⁶ Frei: Free. Not Frum. It comes in three flavors. Frei, Deep Frei and Crisp Crunchy Goyish.

along with the Talmud. I wonder though if the sages would have understood the allure of body modification and the modern neo-tribalism fad, well, I guess fads are understandable in any culture at any time, huh?

“So, there I was at burning-man fantasizing about body modification. If you asked me at the time I would have said there’s something very alpha-male, you know, mean looking about the penis with a barbell through the end, but I may just have been picking up on the prevailing sentiment, the fashion statement of the fad, you know. And then my girlfriend of the moment dumped me at the festival to hook up with a bunch of crazy women. And then there were other people and new girlfriends to romance with, and this particular new one thought I should try this particular piercing ‘cos it enhances the pleasure of sex or oral sex, I forget which it was. It didn’t, it doesn’t, they none of them do, I don’t think. Well, not for me anyway.

“Anyway. I had a series of three Dydoe piercings with small 14 gauge barbells inserted the week after the burning-man festival was over. And that’s what’s screwing up my life now. Rabbi Grabzenbytes’ Rosh Yeshiva has a *T’shuvah*⁷ about it. He says that the one I have, the Dydoe, makes me a *Chrot Shofcha* and I’m not allowed to marry into the family of Israel.”

“You know,” I said thoughtfully. “I haven’t seen a written T’Shuvah about this subject anywhere. Let’s do our own research. But before we begin, can you tell me, what is a Dydoe piercing?”

The Dydoe, as I was to learn, is a piercing done through the ridged edge of the *glans penis*. And no search through the halachic literature could uncover any reference to it and piercing.

“Who’s Grabzenbytes’ Rosh Yeshiva?” I asked Pinchas.

“Rabbi Shaya Goetz,” he told me. “He’s the biggie in Jerusalem now that Wachsman and Moehlin are gone, apparently he’s something of a stringent Posek.”

“What’s to be stringent about?” I countered. “It’s a pretty simple case. Once you removed the piercing the holes closed over and the whole thing is no longer there, right?”

“Well, errr, yes and no. There were some complications you see. The barbell on the left side sort of migrated out.”

⁷ T’Shuvah: Legal Response. A rabbinical decision based upon scholarly readings of Talmud, medieval and later codes. The chief thing to remember when writing T’Shuvas is this: You may not permit what has already been banned by an earlier, popularly accepted decision, under any circumstances, but it’s fine to forbid what was previously permitted if you think the ban will be acceptable in the current religio-political climate. Once the race to publish new bans was on, it was discovered that successfully banning things for a career requires knowledge of just one, basic rule. Do not issue a ban if most people will refuse to abide by it. Body modifications such as rhinoplasty, liposuction or breast augmentation and reduction are hot topics in the T’Shuvah world of modern banning literature. Body-mod like heavy metal is not quite there yet.

“Migrated out, where, where to did it migrate to, to Poland? What are you talking about Pinchas?”

“Rabbi Schreiber, I don’t know how to say this in a simple way. Body modification, piercing, all that stuff is pretty complex, I don’t know how to tell it to you without diagrams.”

“On no, Oh no,” I sighed, wiping my brow. “Not the McClouds, don’t tell me we’re going to have to call on the McClouds again. I don’t think I can take another course of street-education.”

Pinchas only looked at me sideways, he was perplexed and unhappy. “The McClouds?” he said. “Who are the McClouds?”

“Good question, good question.” I answered. “Horse’s mouth. You’ve heard the saying, getting it straight from the horse’s mouth, right? Well, did you ever meet anyone who claims to have run into the horse, in person?”

“No.”

“Yeah, well brother, just you stick around, stick with me. Now, let’s go pay a visit to the McClouds.”

If I’d thought my initiation into the mysteries of the tattoo during the Chanele affair was an eye opener, then the body-mod and piercing arts burned me a whole new set of retinas. We tried making an appointment to visit the McClouds in the evening, but as it turned out, evenings are their busiest time at work, so we made a noon appointment. Visiting, during daylight hours, any commercial enterprise dependent solely on nighttime to obscure its tawdriness and on neon illumination for its glamour is bound to be something of a disappointment; the Violent Dragoon⁸ was no exception. Angelique and Sailor Sid McCloud were the very souls of helpfulness and discretion. I explained why we were there, that Pinchas my colleague had had piercings done when he was younger, which were currently affecting his career, that we needed a quick mini-education, Piercings 101, to help find a way through his difficulties.

When it looked as though I would be treated to another encyclopedic array of his bestiary and catalogues in full color, I asked Mr. McCloud whether there wasn’t some way of educating me that would not require me leafing through page after page of (poor quality) photographs. We were invited into the operations room, and Pinchas was instructed to remove his trousers and underpants. Life is just full of those funny surprises isn’t it? Sailor Sid, it seems, is more than a little queasy at the sight of blood and knows hardly anything about the practicalities of piercing and body-mod, it’s Angelique who’s the expert. To describe Pinchas as chagrined and embarrassed, doesn’t really do rabbinical justice to either of those two words. Angelique put on a very serious looking pair of trifocals with a

⁸ Even neon tube designers have mornings when they can’t remember how they came to do what they did last night. The Violet Dragon will have to wait for another day.

flexible light attachment and a loupe on an extendable arm, all very professional, a pair of businesslike latex gloves and an extremely senior-surgeon's bedside-manner expression.

The lecture began with a lesson in nomenclature. "This is the glans with the corona; and here underneath it is the triangular frenulum, some call it the frenum; the sulcus is here behind the corona; there's the keratosis I was telling you about, which is fairly common after circumcision, d'you see? And, look, here you see the holes, scars left over from the Dydoe piercings."

"Why is it called Dydoe?" I asked. "There wasn't some Greek hero, I've never heard of, called Dydoe, was there?"

"Nopes. It's just what it's called, that's all. Why, d'you have a thing against Greek heroes, rabbi?"

"You could say that," I answered.

"Didn't you have a hero called Moses?" she retorted. "And wasn't there some story in the Bible about his wife going at his penis with a sharp stone and calling him her bridegroom in blood, or something?"

"Er," I admitted. "There's certainly something along those lines recorded in the Bible text. But if you read the..."

"She wasn't circumcising him, was she though, when she was operating on his penis?" she interrupted.

Pinchas, naked from the waist down, squirming in the chair, while the dreadful woman handled and inspected his most private parts, looked at me. "Please get me out of here fast!" his mute appeal shouted.

"She wasn't circumcising him, was she though?" the woman insisted. "I mean, Moses was born circumcised, wasn't he, rabbi? I read up about these things, I do. In case you're wondering where I get the knowledge from."

"Knowledge indeed," was all I could bring myself to mutter in response. "But actually, I think if you read the text you'll find she was doing it to her son, not to her husband, Moses."

"I read somewhere," she responded swiftly. "That that's just some later editing done to the text, to hide what she was doing to Moses. I read somewhere that she was giving him a one of those dorsal-vent eurentrectomies to prevent him getting any other women pregnant. A bit like one of those deep behind the corona Apadravyas they do these days. It's what the Midianite women used to do to their husbands before they went out on journeys, you know, to stop them having families in other places. His wife was a Midianite woman, right?" she put it to me somewhat triumphantly, and what could I do but nod, Zipora was a Midianite woman, wasn't she?

“That proves it then,” she added. “And that’s why the Lord tells him not to go back to his wife, later in Exodus, isn’t it. Because after the Law was given to the Jews, Moses had damaged genitals, didn’t he, and that’s why he wasn’t allowed to marry a Jewish woman, wasn’t it?”

“I’ve read up about these things, it’s my field, you see. I know all about Jewish taboos against doing this sort of thing to men’s genitals.”

“You’ve certainly read a lot about the subject,” I admitted. She nodded, satisfied.

It’s a source of never ending amazement to me to see with what ease non-Jews will edit, emend and revise, ancient, sacred texts to prove the most banal of pointless points. And with what effortlessness they dismiss our claims to authentic custody of our own texts. It would be hilarious were it not so aggravating.

“Ahh,” she continued, triumphantly, “I can see where the problems might be arising, rabbi. They must have seen this. This is probably what they were looking for, wasn’t it?” she asked Pinchas. He nodded. She beckoned me to come closer to look over her shoulder while she drew my attention to scar tissue across the edge of the ridge around the corona of Pinchas’ glans penis.

“See that there? That’s where his piercing migrated. Now look here on this, the left side. See how the hole goes through from the front to the back, all nice and clean like, well this one here on the right side didn’t heal like that one did. The body rejected it. When that occurs the body has a way of thinning out the skin and tissue around the piercing so the hole doesn’t hold. The piercing falls out and the hole does its best to heal as it can. But what you’re left with is this scarring, and like in this case, you have a small V-shaped notch on the ridge in the corona, d’you see?”

“V-shaped notch of scarring?”

“Yeah, here, look, you can see it right there.” She pointed to the scar with her gloved finger, and true enough, it looked as though a tiny but unmistakable, V-shaped nick had been taken out of the corona.

“Of course,” she said matter-of-factly. “You can see his Prince Albert’s healed without much scarring at all.”

Pinchas, groaning with embarrassment, buried his head in his hands as Angelique showed me the healed scar on the underside of his penis, where another, and halachically even more problematic piercing called the Prince Albert had been removed and allowed to heal over.

“Can you tell me for sure,” I asked her. “Whether the scarring from the migration indicates a loss of tissue or just that the tissue grew thinner and thinner?”

“Ah well,” she answered. “That’s the sixty four dollar question, isn’t it? And no one knows the definite answer to that, do they? A lot of work’s been done in the last few years by researchers and experimenters in the field, like, to find out what causes and how to prevent migrations of piercings. Some say it’s tissue loss, some say not. No one knows for sure.”

The drive home from the piercing parlor was quiet.

“Tell me how Rabbi Grabzenbites’s Rosh Yeshivah got involved in all this,” I asked of Pinchas.

“Well, when I disclosed the matter of my piercings to the Rosh, he said that it was too serious for him to rule on. So we went over to his Rebbe’s house and I took my pants down there. He looked at it and said he saw it was missing that V-shaped notch, and the halacha is very explicit and unequivocal, he said, that unless the corona is completely intact the law of Chrot Shofcha applies. Tell me something Rabbi Schreiber, do you pasken differently?”

“Yes. Yes I do.”

I called Rabbi Shaya Goetz in Jerusalem. After introducing myself and asking whether we might discuss the matter of the damage to Pinchas’ penis I found the rabbi to be very cooperative. Up to the point when I said I have information that might possibly affect the ruling on the case. He asked me what the information was, and I explained the arguments concerning the nature of the thinning of the tissue which occurs in migration of piercings and that the notch shape may not be a sign of loss, but rather of a natural thinning brought on by the body’s rejection of the piercing.

He took offence at my suggestion. “A judge only has what his eyes can see,” he responded firmly. “I hear nothing in your argument to cause me to change the ruling. I saw with my own eyes how the young man’s penis is damaged. Unless you can prove that the V-shaped notch is not the result of tissue loss I cannot change my decision. Shalom and Goodbye.”

I tried other rabbis, but no one wanted to examine the case, after such an unequivocal and public ruling had been made.

Pinchas is a Cohen. Cohens may not marry anyone who catches their fancy, the laws governing Cohen marriages are strict. But once a Cohen has been disqualified from Temple service for having damaged genitals he may *only* marry those women who would otherwise be forbidden to him. Helpful people suggested quietly that Pinchas might begin dating women who were permitted to him, such as a convert to Judaism or Mamzeret.

Pinchas put in perspective when we met again. “Perhaps you didn’t realize what you were doing when you paskened for me that I’m a kosher Cohen. If I accept your ruling, then I may not date any of those women the halacha normally forbids to a kosher Cohen. But if I accept the ruling of my Rosh Yeshiva I may not date any of those permitted to a kosher Cohen. In fact, with the best of intentions, by trying to help me you’ve made it impossible for me to marry at all.”

“No, Pinchas,” I argued. “That wasn’t my intention at all. I was just arguing that by being stringent in the matter of the damaged genitals, Shaya Goetz’s ruling resulted in a leniency with regard to the woman you are allowed to marry. For if you really are still a kosher Cohen you would never be allowed to marry a convert to Judaism.”

Pinchas just smiled sadly.

“Pinchas, you don’t have to treat me as a Posek. I’m just rabbi nobody from nowhere, ignore my ruling, find a nice woman, one your Rosh Yeshiva allows you, get married, have a life.”

Pinchas just shook his head sadly again.

“Why,” I asked him. “Why are you doing this?”

“I don’t think you appreciate your significance as a scholar and a rabbi,” he told me. “You don’t have to be the top of your class in a field. This isn’t medicine or music. This is the Torah, and I really accept everything the Talmud and the halacha say about rabbis. I really do. This is not a zealot’s trip for me, not some short-term commitment to orthodoxy. This is where I have my faith. I believe rabbis, and you’re a rabbi. If you really think I am a kosher Cohen, then I may not marry ‘out’. If Rabbi Goetz really thinks I am not a kosher Cohen because of my condition, then I may not marry ‘in’. I’m not bitter or resentful. I feel I need to be stringent here and give attention to both of your rulings. It’s like sometimes the halacha creates *Agunot*⁹, and there’s no point in me, a rabbi, railing against it. If I start refusing and rejecting the power of rabbis to decide law, what does that leave me for my career?”

He smiled at me for the first time, and I was privileged to a full blast of his charm and candor. It bowled me over completely. “Thank you, for not being one of those other rabbis, though,” he continued. “Thank you for actually believing I’m alright the way I am, and please don’t change your mind. As for me, well, a man is surely entitled to his dignity, I’m not going to try convincing anyone I’m not a kosher Cohen, just to have the satisfaction of a married life.”

⁹ Aguna: One who is, for technical, legal reasons, bound not to marry. Someone sentenced to a celibate life.