

Doug and I met training for the AIDS Ride—  
a bike trip from NY to Boston that raised crucial  
funds for AIDS organizations.  
It required discipline,  
early mornings,  
and a commitment to something bigger than ourselves.  
From the start, we felt like we came from the same place.  
We started dating quickly. In our late 20s,  
we already had a sense of how relationships  
worked and what we wanted.  
The ride was in August—I met his parents,  
he met mine, and by the High Holy Days,  
things were serious.

And then... just before Rosh Hashanah,  
Doug said, “I feel like I have to admit something I haven’t shared yet.”  
I braced myself.  
He insists this isn’t how it went—but he’s wrong.  
“I guess the easiest way to explain it is... I don’t fast on Yom Kippur.”  
At the time I was in my 5<sup>th</sup> and final year of rabbinical school –  
a fact he certainly knew.  
And, I had known that he had grown up in a nice  
Reform Movement household in Andover, MA.  
I said, “What are you talking about?  
Everybody fasts—even my non-Jewish friends fast!”  
That’s when his true identity emerged.

Doug explained that since age 11,

he'd been an atheist.

He believed religion caused more harm than good—wars, hatred, division.

He didn't need a made-up God to be a good person.

To say I was surprised is putting it mildly.

I'd brought him to lovely Shabbat dinners,

taken him to B'nai Jeshurun—this was the late '90s, we all went there!—

It was musical and he had sung in an a capella group in college!

and apparently, all of it had made his skin crawl.

Over the next 8 months, we dove deep into this conversation.

Often ending in me yelling, "I was in rabbinical school when we started dating!"

We talked about the whats of religion, the whys, the whos.

We talked about my family and his –

about the joy Shabbat brought to our weekly table,

the Jewish summer camp at which I was raised –

my father being the director –

imbuing every single thing we did with a Jewish Neshama.

We talked about his family and how their Judaism was practiced –

lovingly, but, not as core.

He told me how, when he didn't want to become bar mitzvah,

his rabbi gently explained the consequences—

especially how hard it would be for his bubbe.

He went through with it because he loved her.

And then he told me how he went on to stay in

Hebrew school through confirmation  
because he didn't want to say  
he didn't believe something if he didn't know why –  
a trait I appreciate in theory,  
but has become quite irritating in practice.

At one point, we considered breaking up.  
Perhaps – this divide was too big to bridge –  
religion and its 4000 years of history,  
might in fact be more than what  
little Leora Kaye and Doug Gordon could work out successfully.

But—boo hoo—we loved each other.

And that leads me to this evening.  
How pray tell, you may be asking, have you,  
over 23 years of a relationship made this work  
between an atheist and a rabbi?  
And, how – might we in our family or friendship  
or work environment find ways to bridge the chasms that exist for us?

Well, we realized we were never going to  
convince the other that they were wrong.  
The odds of me convincing Doug—possibly the most objective person alive—  
that religion should be part of his life  
were as slim as him convincing me, a kid raised in a house

that may as well have been a radio station - WJEW all-Jewish-all-the-time - to give it up.

We called a truce. I stopped poking him during services to listen to “this part that isn’t hell and damnation.”

He stopped dragging me into the other room to listen to Sam Harris spouting his atheism on late night talk shows.

But the fun parts were the challenges.

Like during the beginning of the second intifada, when Doug called and asked me to hang a mezuzah.

He didn’t believe in the God part—but felt it was time to identify publicly as Jewish.

I told him to pick one out himself—to connect with it. Hiddur Mitzvah at its finest.

I’d buy the klaf, I said, the scroll inside, since they can be pricey.

“Oh no,” he said. “I don’t want the klaf.

That’s the text I disagree with most—teaching your children to believe in one God before they can consciously choose for themselves?”

“So... you want me to hang an empty mezuzah on your door so you can identify Jewishly?”

“Yes.”

“Alright,” I said. “But if we stay together, we’re not hanging an empty one on *my* door.

And we’re not writing a new scroll. There are limits.”

Or the time, soon after moving in together,

Doug said he couldn’t keep kosher

(even though he had said he would when we first started dating.)

The climate disaster of running the dishwasher  
twice for half as many dishes,  
the lost cabinet space, the horror of using margarine—it was too much.  
I said, “Keeping kosher is part of how I think about values all day long.”  
He replied, “OK – but on the dishwasher alone –  
Isn’t part of kashering about boiling water?  
Isn’t a dishwasher boiling water? And since you’re a mystic –  
I know you don’t believe in a third person God,  
meaning your God isn’t watching you like a hawk anyway...”  
The kid who stayed in Hebrew school  
until confirmation had learned just enough to be dangerous.  
So, we keep kosher—  
but run both kinds of dishes at the same time.  
Though I’ve been known to go in and separate them—  
like a mechitzah. I mean, they really shouldn’t be touching.

And there have been other stories along the way –  
Like how we had kippot made for our wedding –  
Where none other than Debbie Friedman sang –  
I mean, he didn’t wear one, but agreed that they  
should be there for those that *chose*.  
How he fought for a baby naming on the 8<sup>th</sup> day  
when I was due with our first child  
no matter the gender, because if we  
were going to do “ some kind of ooga booga ceremony”  
for a boy at 8 days, we should do one should the baby be a girl

as well. Would she not be as important?

We also realized this wasn't just about us—

it would shape our future family.

Doug's mom ran an early childhood center, so he understood child development.

And agreed we needed to send consistent messages early on.

Luckily, he was fine with Shabbat.

Who wouldn't want a weekly reset and a family dinner?

I did the blessings, and he added a "best thing of the week" ritual to our table.

And to his credit when I'm not home—he still does it all.

We agreed that once the kids were older,

we'd be honest with them about our beliefs and let them choose their practice

in the best Reform fashion—

through education and thoughtful autonomy post-b'nai mitzvah.

This week's Torah portion begins the book of Numbers—

or B'midbar—in the wilderness.

And we've definitely had wilderness moments.

But we've also found our way.

That's what I wanted to share tonight.

I had a few choices about what

I would share tonight and in asking various people –

I finally received an answer that resonated.

I should do this topic – the melding of these two seemingly

very different dare I say opposite world views –  
because it seemed... hopeful.

And that we could all use a bit of optimism this week –  
so – it really is less about me and Doug –  
and more about this idea.

That you all are likely in relationships even right now  
where you are not seeing eye to eye –  
(you can imagine the Israel/Palestine conversation we have are lively) –  
but that there is a way to have those  
conversations that they are possible to navigate. Even crush.

And, should you wonder how it's all going now?

Well – our 15 and 12 year old have become very  
involved in the synagogue, playing guitar, becoming madrichim,  
sometimes even being invited to lead services  
which means that Doug...

as a good father

has had to come to services

far more often than he ever imagined he would.

And, our daughter decided after she became bat mitzvah

that she was no longer keeping kosher and

just yesterday fought me on whether or not she could

make a turkey and cheese sandwich with my dishes in my house –

arguing that she should be allowed because we

had taught her to make her own Reform Movement

choices and she had.

So... I would say we are doin' alright. We're all doin' alright.