

A Reconstructionist in Williamsburg

I am obviously not one of them. My girlfriend, Diane, and I are walking around Williamsburg in Brooklyn, shopping. I've flown out from the west coast – a blonde, blue-eyed, long-haired, Reconstructionist convert – the worst kind. I am wearing slacks and not only is my hair uncovered, it's not even tied back, flying free in the wind. Diane is wearing a mini-skirt with tights, a leather jacket, and short stylish purple-black hair.

On the street we see modestly dressed women, heads covered with a scarf or wig and often both. Their long skirts seem to hide half a dozen children as they stroll along pushing their anachronistic prams. Outside of a kosher butcher shop stands a man in a bloody apron, looking like he's just stepped out of a black-and-white photograph from the 1920s. Men, bespectacled and bearded, walk briskly in black hats and coats, their payis curls and tzitzit trailing behind them like threads of some elaborate sewing project that they were too impatient to allow their wives to finish.

We enter a housewares store to shop for dishes, as Diane has decided to *kasher* her kitchen. The kosher goods are color-coded here in Williamsburg: red edges for *fleischig*, blue edges for *milchig*. I'm always fascinated by housewares shops in foreign lands such as this; there is something unique and staunchly utilitarian about the aluminum pots and pans here.

I notice the store patrons and shopkeepers looking askance as we peruse the shelves. The men seem to avoid the aisles we inhabit lest we brush against and contaminate them. Diane is pleased to find the kitchenware she needs.

At the check-out, we are perplexed by a pointedly un-American sales practice: we have to bring our goods to a window where one person writes up the receipt, and then bring the receipt to the cashier who will take our money. It seems so Eastern European that it would be quaint, if it weren't so annoying. The man in the receipt booth disappears as we approach and we have to wait several minutes for a suitable female to serve us. She eventually writes up our purchases and gives us the bill but, when we take it to the cashier, the man there has also abandoned his post and we must wait for another bewigged, long-sleeved matron to take our cash. Although we are safely of the same gender, she nonetheless places the change on the counter rather than touch our evidently unclean hands.

Next we head into a bookstore. The shop is empty except for the merchant. He smiles and greets us with a thick Yiddish accent and, as we move into the store, he directs us to the section containing cookbooks, children's books and tomes on keeping a Jewish home.

“Here is vare you vill find books for you.” He smiles hopefully.

As we thank him for his assistance we move stealthily toward the books on Torah and Talmud. Diane and I are reading the *Daf Yomi* – literally “page-a-day” – wherein, over the course of seven years, many Jews worldwide read - one page at a time - the entire 70-plus volume set of the Babylonian Talmud, the ancient Jewish rabbinic commentary. Not surprisingly, most of the Jews who do this are Orthodox men and the concept of a couple of Reconstructionist women studying Talmud is likely both laughable and abhorrent to most of them.

The shop owner is mentally wringing his hands as he watches us touch the holy books. I can see the discomfort and inner turmoil on his face as he tries to weigh the offense of allowing a potentially menstruating *shiksa* to handle a sacred text, against the possibility of making a sale on such a slow day. He again tries to guide us toward the cookbooks.

Fortunately for us, a couple enters the shop and he is distracted in greeting them. The man is dressed in a short-sleeved shirt which covers his ample belly. His head is bald and bare, and his companion wears no wig – evidently more tourists. The man is loud enough that we can hear him at the other end of the store.

“We’re just up from Florida? Doin’ a little shopping, ya know?”

“I see,” says the shopkeeper. “How is it I can I help you?”

“Well, we’re lookin’ for one of them *mezuzahs*,” he says. “You have those here?”

“Ov course,” says the owner, and reaches below the counter for a wooden box.

He places the box on the glass-topped counter and opens it to reveal a velvet-lined interior full of tiny slips of parchment with even tinier Hebrew lettering hand-scribed upon them.

“Vee haf seferal different levels of qvality, depending on how much you are villing to pay,” he says as he points to the scrolls.

The large man looks first confused and then annoyed.

“What is this? I said I want a *mezuzah*, not some scrap of paper!”

“Dis IS da *mezuzah*. Deze are da finest *mezuzot* in Villiamsburg. Da best vuns run about one-hundert-fifty dollor, and den depending upon da qvality... vell, you can get

dem for as liddle as thirdy-fife.” The shopkeeper is pointing at the scrolls of various prices.

“Nah, nah!” says the tourist, “Nah! A Meh-ZOO-zah!” articulating and bringing it up a decibel, like he’s talking to a deaf moron instead of being one himself. “Ya know, like you put on the door? The little thingies on the door. Ya know...” and he looks around, scanning the room. Suddenly in the case below the glass he sees what he is looking for.

“There! That’s it!” He points at the metal, wooden and blown-glass scroll covers in the case. “Show me that wooden one down there. The wooden *mezuzah*!”

By now Diane and I have made our selections and have come to the counter where the misunderstanding is proceeding at full volume.

The storekeeper rolls his eyes. “Dat’s da *mezuzah* CASE! Da *mezuzah* is here,” and he points back to the parchment in his special box.

Now the man from Florida is angry. He looks at his companion and us as if to say the merchant is crazy. “Lemme see the wooden one,” he says.

“Okhay. I show you da wooden *mezuzah* CASE!” the owner spits as he reaches below the glass and lifts out a thin intricate box with the little letter ‘*shin*’ emblazoned with inlaid wood.

“Now, that’s a nice *mezuzah*,” the man says, admiring the craftsmanship of the woodwork.

“Sir!” the owner says with measured words, “Da *mezuzah* is HERE!” gesturing with both hands back to the scrolls, clearly at his wits’ end.

“Um, yes,” I feel compelled to interrupt, “You see, the word *mezuzah* literally means ‘doorpost’ and refers to the commandment from Deuteronomy that “you shall write them upon the doorposts of your house and in your gates” and it actually refers to the little piece of parchment that you roll up with those commandments written on it. Then you can choose a beautiful cover for it, like the one you’re holding, to affix it to the doorpost. But the cover without the scroll isn’t actually kosher...” I trail off.

Florida man is staring at me, slack jawed. He looks me up and down, flummoxed. He turns back to the shopkeeper and hands him the wooden *mezuzah* cover.

“Okay, tell you what I’m gonna do. I’m gonna go do some other shopping around here. Then maybe I’ll come back and get that there *mezuzah*.”

“Sure. Right. Vatever,” says the vendor waving his hand and putting the box of scrolls back under the counter, in a place safe from all this foolishness. The bell above the door tolls the couple back out onto the streets of Williamsburg, and we are left with the proprietor.

He takes our books, no longer concerned about their sanctity or our impurity, and rings up our purchases.

“Can you believe dat guy?” he says conspiratorially. “Doesn’t even know da difference between da *mezuzah* and da case?!”

We nod and shake our heads in solidarity.

“I mean, vat kind of Jew is dat, who doesn’t know from a *mezuzah*?!” says our new comrade in spirituality.

We leave the shop elevated in holiness, accepted for a moment for the Jews we really are.