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## Mistaken Identity

>> **By David Berreby**

Am I a Jew? Generally, I say no, but others have disagreed. One of them tried to kill me once, biblically, with a pale stone from the ground east of Jerusalem.

He was a Palestinian boy of about 10 or 11, standing by the road in the shut-up village I was driving through on the West Bank. I didn't see him; I heard a crack and the whumpf of crumpling metal and I knew I was falling out of the ordered universe, into the space where anything can happen. I was scalded by terror and thinking, oh, no, as people will, not from any hope, but from astonishment that the world ends, just like that. I swerved. We were going to explode. We were going to crash. Oh, no. My last thought.



But we kept going. The universe knit back together and as I sped up and looked left I saw him near the road, in a slight crouch, big brown eyes assessing the throw. He'd aimed a little low, and struck just under the window.

Mistaken identity, that state everyone passes through now and then, is where I live. This time, I'd rented the car in Jerusalem, to drive south with my half-brother. It was 1992, the fifth year of the Palestinian revolt against Israeli occupation on the West Bank.

Am I a Jew? The boy had seen yellow Israeli license plates and decided he knew. This is what it is to have one Jewish parent. The question keeps coming up. And everybody knows the answer. Except you.

They pose it, they answer it. When I was eight or nine, for instance, I was invited to a friend's family's Hanukkah celebration. They had big menorah, fancy-wrought and brassy, that glimmered on a long, glass-covered table. My friend's grandmother shambled up to it and said, in a Mittel Europa accent, "light, light the candles. It is no shame to be a Jew." No, indeed, I thought. She went on: "It is a shame to be a Catholic."

Well, ouch (and congratulations, mighty lady, who avenged the Shoah on an eight-year-old boy). My face was hot, as

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if I'd been slapped. Yet I was confused: Did I belong with the slapper or the slapped? In such a moment, the self divides into a simple animal that hurts and rages (ouch), a more complex creature that senses its pack has been attacked, and a mirror image that feels its pack has just scored a win. And in order to make sense of the confusion, yet another shard of mind floats off and watches it all from a distance. You learn to hide that distance, though, because the simple-minded are annoyed by it, and the simple-minded-who like their boundaries crisp and neat-are many.

So there you are, watching yourself watch yourself. He seems ill at ease, the simple minded say then; and, like a man who blames his wife for provoking him into beating her up, they place the blame for their own conduct on you. Tsk-tsk. Mixed marriages. They don't know where they fit in.

How many of us, the partially Jewish, have coined cute terms to explain ourselves, like Semi-Semite, Jewlatto, Jew Lite? Give me a moment, I'll launch into longer explanations. Mine is: "Well, my father's Jewish, but my mother wasn't, so I'm not Jewish according to most traditions, though Reform Jews would say that I am, and of course Neo-Nazis wouldn't make a fine distinction about it, either. And under Israeli law, I could claim a right to live there, though I didn't actually know Yom Kippur from Succoth until I was . . ."

People who have not inherited a divided self are impatient with this kind of thing. Foolishly, at a dinner party I once started in by saying, "it's complicated," which made the man who'd asked me snort with impatience. He was a Native American from the Southwest. "It's complicated for everybody," he said. I didn't say, no, sir, you proud member of an U.S. Government-certified Grade A tribe, you leather-fringed, pony-tailed, Navaho-pot-selling smug trader on an identity that Americans love (do any children take out their toy guns to play "Poles and Jews"?). No, my fine befeathered friend, it isn't as complicated for you. You must be hell on your own half-breeds, I didn't add.

What would have been the use? Half-Jews learn young that undivided people don't get it. Raised on identities that can't be mistaken, they pity us our confusion. Raised on identities they can't escape, they envy us our liberty. It wasn't just the yellow license plate that marked my brother and I for stoning. It was our grotesque freedom to zoom across a landscape where Palestinians were locked down. Right-wing Jewish settlers, Israelis, Europeans, or Americans, what difference did it make? Any man who could drive through the village on his way to somewhere else could choose to be something other than a part of the Intifada. The boy could not; he was stuck. If we were not trampled down and hemmed in as he was, we could not be on his side. So we were on the other.

And, in fact, we were. With our yellow license plates, we were automatically under the imperfect protection of Israeli

soldiers, whose outposts we'd passed -- a high-flying white and blue flag encircled by dusty sandbags and jeeps. Yet we were no more in favor of Jewish settlers on the West Bank than the boy who threw the stone. We were physically on one side, morally on the other, our position kinked up and complex and, obviously, foolishly unthought-through.]

To the undivided person, I suspect, this gives us half-Jews an aura of the slippery, the unreliable. In times of crisis, when nations fall into the space where anything can happen, the ground we stand on doesn't exist. The rock flies from one side and lands on the other. There are only two choices then. Yes or no. Can we Half-Jews be counted on? As Tiger Woods learned when he told the world he was Asian as well as African, what feels to us half-breeds like a simple statement of fact will sound to the mono-identified like an effort to slip away from what they have to face.

Yet the unease we cause runs deeper than doubts about our personal loyalties. Our existence is proof that life is lived mostly in the times when rocks don't fly. There are no atheists in foxholes, sure, but nobody wants to live in a foxhole all her life, if she can help it, and most people can. Our parents certainly did. To those who prop their psyches up with a single identity, we aren't supposed to exist. Yet here we are.

That causes an unease we half-Jews cannot salve, even if we try. It isn't about us, personally. The problem is we make the world seem less trustworthy, because it allowed us to exist. Hence the Question, which begs for an answer that will make this unease go away: Yes, they're really Jews. No, they're certainly not. Or, a third strategy: Look at these sorry people, who can't answer this question. They're a mess. Let them be an example to you. Follow the map that tells you this is a foxhole-ridden world.

We have our psychic countermeasures. For a long time, for example, I flattered myself that Half-Jews are closer to Nature; we're what happens when men and women are free to let their human feelings guide them, as opposed to following a lot of arbitrary rules. Aren't mutts healthier than the certified breeds? Aren't rules just pieces of paper? Let Nature take its course, and you get us. I liked to quote illegitimate Edmund in King Lear, whose first words on the stage are:

Thou, Nature, art my goddess. To thy law  
My services are bound. Wherefore should I  
Stand in the plague of custom and permit  
The curiosity of nations to deprive me  
. . . Why 'bastard'? Wherefore 'base',  
When my dimensions are as well compact  
My mind as generous, and my shape as true  
As honest madam's issue?

And so on and so forth, until he walks off saying, "Now, gods, stand up for bastards!"

But Nature is a tricky master, as hard for a thinking person to stick with as that Old Testament God with his smitings and smotings. The birds and bees and bears don't drive to offices; don't surf the Web or even the ocean. Any human being who claims to be more "natural" invites the question: How come you wear clothes? Or obey traffic laws? Or cry when you hear the national anthem? Being a human being involves all kinds of artifice, and all kinds of rules. No human being is more natural than another, because all of us-Half-Jews, Orthodox Jews, Aryan nutjobs, wilderness buffs in tents held up by aircraft aluminum, Yanomami tribesfolk-are a long way from the natural state. We Half-Jews appeal to Nature in reaction to the claim that there is something wrong with us, but the appeal is a trap. It leaves in an endless maze of arguments about what natural means. (Maybe what's most "natural" to human beings is to live in closed-off villages and cling to tradition, like the Hutterites or the Jews of Mea Sharim.) Better to answer the Question, then, in human terms.

We drove on through occupied territory, a rolling plain of rubble, shuttered villages and grim sandbagged buildings flying Israeli flags. This was a foxholed place, not like the ordinary parts of the world where I had had the luck to grow up, where the choices are more than Us or Them. That I'd been given the emotional and political room to be Half-Jewish, I realized, was testament to the decency of the places I'd been raised. The pure of breed might pity us mutts, but as I drove through the Negev desert, it was I who felt sorry for them.

At the town of Be'er Sheva, where Isaac made peace after fighting the Philistines for water, we stopped to report the incident. The official "I have been stoned by Palestinians" report had to be filed, to satisfy Hertz. And there the question came up again, this time posed by a businesslike police sergeant with blue eyes in a deep-tanned face, like twin swimming pools in a desert. It was routine details. Date. Name? Address?

Brooklyn, I said.

"Lubavitch!" said a milky Slav in another police uniform, a couple of desks away. The Lubavitcher Rabbi and his followers had made a strong impression in Israel. Somewhere in my travels I had passed a perfect replica of his Brooklyn mansion, a big townhouse erected where no town stands, in the middle of empty fields. I had a full beard. I was pale. I came from Brooklyn. Outside the squad room, in a dusty corridor, worried voices bounced off bare walls and a family of Ethiopians in bright cloths sat, still as statues, on a bench.

I knew Lubavitchers. They pose the Question, out of the blue, on the street, as you're walking along with your mind on whatever.

42nd Street, across from the big library: Excuse me, says the Lubavitcher from the Mitzvah Tank. "Are you Jewish?"

"No," I say. But he isn't having it, because he looks like me. Exactly. We could be twins.

"Really?"

"Really."

"You look Jewish." Cheery songs pour from the Mitzvah Tank, a large camper, parked on the street behind him. He wants me inside it. I shrug, as in, what can I tell you? It occurs to me that this makes me look even more like a liar.

He squints, silent.

"Well," I say, "it's complicated. My mother isn't Jewish, but my father is, so whether I am depends on . . ."

But he's looking away, on to the next quarry. Now, he doesn't want me inside. Which should be fine with me, after all, but the fall from twin to living object of no interest is stinging me.

No, amiable officers. Not a Lubavitcher.

The sergeant went down the form.

Jew?

Pause. Pen poised over two boxes. Check one. What's so hard? I thought. I was raised by a Catholic, according to the protocols of the elders of Ryan. When news of war over Israel broke out in my largely Jewish New York school in 1967, as children and teachers rushed about as if we ourselves were about to be bombed, I felt myself rooting for Egypt, and said so. I think I escaped getting beaten up because that was considered a harmless fool, who had to ask what a dreidel was, can you believe it? I'd imbibed the casual and mostly unspoken anti-Semitism of the American Irish-Catholics who were getting me up for school and giving me my Christmas presents-Jews are pushy, Jews are vulgar, but smart, give them that. Why else would we be living in a neighborhood that was 90 percent Jewish. The schools, my mother would say. The schools are superb.

Why isn't it easy, then, to say no? People will ask that, as if we half-Jews were simply trying to be difficult. But the problem is imposed on us, by people who think they know where to put us. Am I a Jew? Who wants to know? My Lubavitcher doppelganger? Or a Conservative Rabbi? For them, the answer is: No Jewish mother, no conversion, he's not. A reform Rabbi? One Jewish parent, he is. The cynical, atheistic mother of a Jewish girlfriend? He looks it, he sounds it, close enough. "As a neighbor of mine once said," she told me, "nowadays, you're just grateful they're white."

To the parents of the woman I was married to for a while? Again, close enough. To my wife's brother, who had turned from their comfortable Conservative strain to a rigorous

and rather self-righteous Orthodoxy, which he wielded like a club over the heads of his elderly parents? Absolutely not. He skipped the wedding.

My late mother's sister, the religious one, took part in the ceremony, but confessed it later to a priest, for to be part of a wedding performed under a chuppa must be a sin. "Giving scandal," I think is what the nuns taught her. Her answer would be a big fat no.

Not so the Klan. Nor the Aryan Nation. Nor the black lunatics who call themselves Israelites and scream on street corners about murdering and raping the "false Jews." Anti-Semites adore the Chosen People story; they want to star in a remake. They want to kill Jews so they can be Jews. In that project, they make no fine distinctions.

Am I Jew? The answer, actually, the human and humane answer, is perfectly obvious. Sometimes I am and sometimes I'm not. Half-Jew reader, I commend this answer to you.

Do not, of course, expect a good reception among those who believe in an Us-Them, foxholed world-especially not from those who pay their mortgage by policing the boundaries. We Half-Jews are a perpetual irritant to the certain. Like the Bad Son in the Passover Haggadah, we say, "What has all this to do with me?" instead of assenting to the required fiction that life is always an identity emergency.

Against such traditions, we should make room for ourselves. We Half-Jews should be talking to and about one another without apologies or explanations. We don't have 5,000 years of tradition to claim, so we must-as all peoples do-invent some. We have given enough ground, been tutted-tutted over, pitied, bullied, had our human, complex answer to that inhuman question dissed. Enough.

Am I a Jew? Sometimes I am and sometimes I'm not. It depends on who asked, and why. Don't like that answer? I don't care, I say, and I say: Now, gods, stand up for bastards.

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