

A Jewish Ambassador

1/7/2020

By Wendy Cohen

“Wendy, I have a real problem with you.”

I looked at Deanna, surprised. It was a month before our high school graduation, and we were doing math homework sprawled on the back lawn of a classmate’s house, the bright equatorial sun and thin air of Quito, Ecuador making every feature of her flushed face stand out in relief. She was the quintessential missionary kid, with out-of-style clothing and a perpetually earnest expression. We had been good, but not close, friends for my two final years of high school at Alliance Academy, the only accredited English speaking school available to me in Quito. The school consisted mostly of the children of American fundamentalist missionaries from churches with lofty names like Assemblies of God or Word of Life. My own father was a diplomat with the American Foreign Service and worked at the American Embassy.

Deanna’s statement threw me. What could I have possibly done wrong to make her have a problem with me?

I had spent two years on my best behavior. I was the only Jew any of the missionary kids had ever met. Almost all of them had grown up in Ecuador, and many boarded at the school while their parents missionized to the Indians in the jungles of Ecuador, Peru, and Colombia. I suspect I was also the first Jew many of their parents, and even the Fundamentalist evangelical missionaries who taught at our school, had ever met. Many of them came from the Bible Belt states of the mid-west.

So, from age 15 to 17 I was representing all those of my faith, a self-appointed Jewish ambassador, if you will. As such, I studied hard and even dutifully memorized the New Testament verses we were assigned in Bible class. I averted my head respectfully during weekly Chapel prayer services, only raising it discreetly just before the “in Jesus name we pray.” I smiled diplomatically when classmates expressed surprise that my nose wasn’t big and gave a non-committal shrug when asked if my parents were rich. I was friendly to everyone and took on leadership roles such as secretary of the student council, editor of the yearbook, etc.

“Uh...what bothers you about me?” I asked, my curiosity overcoming my reluctance to have my heretofore unassailable reputation sullied.

“Well, if I had to choose a friend, I would choose you over many of my Christian friends. How can you be such a nice person and not have accepted Christ into your life?” Deanna looked deeply distressed. I was so astonished, I could only babble out a vague reference to friends having differences, and differences being important.

Deanna’s quandary secretly thrilled me. Her anguished query was a sign that I had achieved a diplomatic coup. While I had not pressed my advantage like a true tactician, and expounded on the importance of open-mindedness, her discomfort showed that I had proved myself worthy of my classmates’ admiration on their own ground: morality.

I had succeeded in opening my classmates’ eyes to other possibilities through my exemplary behavior as a Jewish ambassador. But in all fairness, I have to admit that their beliefs, some of which I had accepted and some of which I had rejected, had opened me up to new ideas as well. I suppose, in the words of diplomacy, it had been a true cultural exchange. We had reached an uneasy détente.

And this was enough for me to hold my head high as I walked down the aisle at graduation a month later, totally secure for the first time in two years in the knowledge that, despite my classmates’ beliefs, I was NOT destined for hell.