Excerpt from

Typically Jewish

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The Art of Jewdar

In desperation the awning salesman flapped his arms this way and that, trying to convey to my husband and me the contours for his proposed patio enclosure. Despite his exaggerated gesturing, we weren't getting it. He tried again, this time drawing imaginary lines in the air. Still nothing. Frustrated, he dropped his arms, sighed, and contemplated another approach. That's when it hit me.

"Do you mean it would look like a *huppah* [wedding canopy]?"

"Yes, exactly!" he said, raising his arm, but this time for a triumphant fist bump.

But my non-Jewish husband didn't join in the celebratory motion. He was too stunned by my response.

"How did you know he was Jewish?"

"I don't know," was all I could say.

To this day, I have no idea how I knew that the screen company representative standing on our back patio was Jewish. No mezuzah or Star of David necklace dangled on his chest. He didn't have a "typically Jewish name" and we hadn't exchanged any Jewish "code words." Yet, somehow I knew I was speaking with a fellow Jew.

This was not the first time my not-born-Jewish husband was flabbergasted at my use of "Jewdar" (Jewish radar)." No matter what you call it, in the more than thirty years Rod and I were together, he could never discern how I did it. And I could never provide him an adequate answer because I honestly haven't a clue. Somehow smiling and saying, "Nice to meet you," I can frequently "just tell" when my fellow hand-shaker is Jewish.

I am far from alone in my ability to sense out my own. Jewish thinker George Steiner claims Jews recognize each other "on a level that is not just that of rational reflection." On a blogpost discussing this radar-like ability, one person exclaimed to have a father who "can pick out other Jews with an accuracy approaching 100%. Within minutes of meeting some random person, they are talking about some JCC or synagogue."

A recent widower told me that he and his wife used to play what he called their "Was That Person Jewish Game." While heading home after a party, they would consider all the people they just met, each making a case for Jew/not-Jew. Invariably, upon learning the religion of the guests later, it would turn out that she—not he—was right. Women's intuition, perhaps?

Most non-Jews appear to be oblivious to this surreptitious scrutiny. The non-Jewish leader of the writing critique group who read an early draft of this section commented, "I never think about someone else's religion. People are people. Why does it matter to you?"

Jewdar and Gaydar

Perhaps it is no coincidence that both Jews and gays employ a mysterious sixth sense to identify members of each respective group. As columnist Jon Carroll notes in a blogpost, such detection ability may have evolved among members of both groups as a survival tactic. Especially in the dating arena, mis-identifying someone as gay could potentially lead to jail, torture, or even death. Likewise, for Jews, especially at certain times throughout history, confusing friend with foe could have dire consequences. The ability to sort out our own took "almost supernatural instinct," since Jews could look so different from one other and speak different languages. "Get it wrong, go to jail," said Carroll, "like Monopoly, only with real people and the Gestapo."

Feels Good

Today, in (ostensibly) safer times, discovering that you are among "your own kind" feels good. Studies have shown that engaging in acts of group cooperation can increase the levels of oxytocin, dopamine, and other pleasurable hormones in our blood. Much like using drugs, we actually get a little high from our social bonds.

In one of my Catholic theology graduate classes, I tried to describe the bond I felt for fellow Jews to my classmates. (As the only Jew in the program, I was often trying to explain things.) Avoiding the word "tribe," I described it as an intimate sense of kinship.

"I just get this feeling of instant camaraderie when I find out someone is Jewish," I stated. They nodded politely, said "uh huh," but their eyes told me they didn't get it. No one did, except the Nigerian priest with limited English who sat in the back row and rarely said anything. My comment finally inspired him to speak up. "Yes, yes, I know what lady mean. In my country, we feel same."

I appreciated his comment, but having an African support me did little to assuage my unease about experiencing tribal feelings. The very word "tribal" brings to mind racist images of barbaric savages waging war on each other. Besides, in our now more-enlightened times shouldn't we love all humanity equally and leave behind outdated and dangerous preferences for one group over another? Enshrined into US law at least is the notion that all people should be treated equally, regardless of "race, color, religion, sex, or national origin."

Nonetheless, I violate that law emotionally by giving Jews an "extra helping" of empathy. Or, as that classic *Animal Farm* quote puts it, I treat "some more equal than others." I remember reading in the newspaper that a ten-year-old boy had been killed riding his bike on a busy street. "How awful," I muttered, shaking my head and turning the page. Days later a friend mentioned, "You know that kid who got hit on his bike? Their family used to go to my synagogue."

"He's Jewish?" I felt like someone had punched me in the stomach.

Many of the Jury on Jewishness (aka a handful of friends I turned to as "typical Jews" (as if there is such a thing) agreed that they feel different—and yes, in some situations, better—upon learning that the stranger they've just met is Jewish. "There is a shared intimacy you get being with other Jews," one Juror says.

Even someone far removed from traditional Judaism can experience such an affinity. The writer Joyce Carol Oates, whose father's mother was Jewish, reported feeling a strange kinship to Franz Kafka, attributing it to her Jewish roots.

One Juror says she feels especially connected to Jews she encounters while traveling. "When I was in India, I met a couple who turned out to be Jewish and I felt an

automatic bond with them. There was a feeling of specialness and safety being with them."

Another Juror says it feels like being with family. "It's not that I necessarily even like them more," she explains. "Often I don't like them at all," she laughs. "But I accept them the way I would a relative."

Rejecting Racial Judaism

Her insight resonates, but I find it troubling, because referring to a family of Jews borders on a potentially perilous biologically based Judaism. Our "civilized" (quotes intentional) Western society has repeatedly demonstrated the dangers of defining Judaism as genetically inherited. As one scholar put it, "Using 'blood logic' remains repugnant to many Jews, even though the tenet of a physical Judaism lies deep in the subconscious." As Jews know all too well, one of the most fervent proponents of racial Judaism was Adolf Hitler. As Ari Feldman put it succinctly in the *Forward*, "Race is a word so slippery as to be meaningless, and the hatred it has inspired can in no way be scientifically vindicated."

Even if the term was not so precarious, race does not easily fit the amalgamation of individuals known as Jewish people. As Judaic Studies scholar Dr. Frederick Greenspahn explains, "Judaism at one point was a nationality, at another point it was a religion, at another point it was a race. All of these categories are much more fluid than we tend to think." The inaccuracy of defining a physical Judaism can be seen in the joke about the Jewish couple sitting at the kitchen table reading the newspaper. The wife reads

aloud to her husband, “It says here that Jewish women have a higher rate of breast cancer than non-Jews.”

“Quick. Go convert,” says her husband.

MOT

Jews by birth, Jews by choice—to me they’re all MOT, members of the tribe. To some, the word “tribe” is derogatory—problematic at best, if not outright racist—but in many ways it best describes my connection to other Jews.

Writing about his own Jewish bloodline, *Esquire*’s former Editor-in-Chief Lee Eisenberg defines a tribe as “a transactive memory system larger than a family.” In other words, your mother and father may hold memories for you on a small scale, but your tribe helps place your life story in a longer-term historical context. For many Jews, imagining the ancestral roots of our clan connects us to those who lived before us. And, when used as a code word, MOT allows us to identify others living here and now.

“Nice to meet another MOT,” I’ll often say upon discovering a fellow Jew.

Occasionally my reference falls flat—not because my detecting skills are diminishing; several Jews are unfamiliar with the MOT shibboleth.

The word “shibboleth,” by the way, comes from a biblical story. To determine if a fugitive was truly an Ephraimite, the captive was commanded to “Say shibboleth.” According to Judges 12:6, “Not being able to pronounce it correctly, they seized him and slew him.”

I, on the other hand, have never resorted to violence against anyone not knowing MOT. But you should practice, just in case.