

DAVE MARGOSHES

The Wisdom of Solomon

THERE HE WAS IN CLEVELAND. My father liked to use this expression for his life in those days: “I was still chasing the donkey, trying to pin the tail to it.” The donkey had led him away from New York and now, at last, he had his first real job on a newspaper, though it wasn’t quite what he had expected, and was beginning what he hoped would be a glorious career. If not glorious, then at least exciting, interesting. He saw himself as Don Quixote, the hero of the famous novel he had recently read, tilting at windmills—righting wrongs—not with a lance but a pen. First, though, he had to learn to type.

And he held in his hands the hearts of thousands of readers. That was his chief concern.

“My husband beats me and the children. What should I do?”

A reader had posed this question in a letter and my father considered his answer with gravity. If he advised her to be a dutiful wife and bear what her husband meted out, he might be sentencing her to a life of drudgery, frustration and pain, and possibly even worse for the children. On the other hand, what if he suggested she leave the man—what sort of life would she and her children face, without a roof over their heads and a source of food, clothing and protection? Even the middle ground was fraught with danger, he could see: should he urge her to talk to her husband, to try to mollify him, she might instead provoke him into even more extreme acts of violence. Lives might well hang in the balance.

How to respond?



It was 1920, and, my father was twenty-seven; as he liked to say, he was always a few years older than the century.

The *Cleveland Jewish World—Der Velt*—had a grand title, but the paper itself was somewhat less than grand. Its circulation was barely 50,000,

just a fraction of that of the big Yiddish dailies of New York City, but it saw itself playing a role just as important in the lives of the Jews of Cleveland and other cities in Ohio, bringing them not just news but education, entertainment and literature. It was that part that most interested my father, who had been writing a novel and poems, but he was assigned more mundane tasks at first, not the least of which were obituaries. He got a crash course in the history of Cleveland as he succinctly documented the lives of its Jewish residents as they died. “People are dying to get into our pages,” my father’s boss, Everett Heshberg, told him. “It’s the last time most of them ever will. Some of them, the first time too. Treat them with respect.”

My father’s chief job, though, was as newswriter, another grand title that was somewhat less than it sounded. *The World* subscribed to the Associated Press newswire, which, of course, came in English. First thing in the morning, Heshberg, who as managing editor was the heart and soul of the paper, went through the overnight dispatches, selecting stories he thought would be of interest to his readers. This included local items of government, politics, human interest and even crime—the same stories which that day would appear (or already had the previous day) on the front pages of the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*, which had, in fact, originated most of the local and state AP items. He also selected many stories from Europe, which was still recovering and reorganizing from the ravages of the Great War. Cleveland’s Jews came from many parts of Europe—Germany, Romania, Russia, Hungary, Latvia, Galicia and elsewhere—and were hungry for news of home, even if they no longer really considered those distant countries their home.

My father and another young man, who was somewhat senior to him, shared the translation duties, which he enjoyed. The trick was not so much to literally translate as to read the story, absorb it and write it fresh in Yiddish as if the story was his own. My father was ideally suited for such a task, as he was fluent in both English and Yiddish, and could write quickly, though his two-finger attack at the typewriter was the cause of much amusement in *The World* newsroom. When he had time to spare, he practiced ten-finger typing but it seemed hopeless.

There was little spare time, though. *The World* was an afternoon paper, meaning it appeared on the street shortly after noon. My father reported for work at 6 a.m. and wrote news till the 9:30 deadline. Then he turned his attention to the death notices sent in by the Jewish funeral homes. As Heshberg had explained it to him, “Each death represents a life, and each life is a story.” Again, my father’s job was to translate, taking the bare essentials of those lives—the facts provided by the families for the mortuaries—and turn them into interesting stories, occasionally taking liberties.

“Do not fabricate,” Heshberg counseled, “but bend.”

This suited my father fine, for he was attempting, as he saw it, to tailor the soul of a poet into the mind of a journalist. Each obituary, in his hands, became a poem.

News and obituaries occupied almost all of my father’s time—after that day’s paper was put to bed, as the expression went, the process would immediately begin again for the next day’s edition—but they took up only a small part of the paper, which was mostly filled with articles by real writers on all manner of subjects: essays on philosophical and theological subjects, usually written by learned rabbis; treatises on history, civics and politics; and educational articles that helped the Jewish immigrant community of Ohio in establishing their lives in this new world: how to apply for citizenship, how to get a driver’s licence, the rights of a tenant, and so on. Then there were poems, short stories, condensed novels, literary criticism. This is what my father aspired to write but he knew he had to earn the right to it. So he was both thrilled and chagrined when Heshberg asked him to write the advice column.

The newspapers of New York were filled with such columns, which were wildly popular. Abe Cahan, the great editor at *The Forward*, the Socialist paper, had invented the form, which he called the *Bintel Brief*, but all the other Yiddish papers had followed, even the religious papers, which at first considered themselves too serious for such a seemingly trivial feature. But readers demanded it. Regardless of what paper they read, they had questions, often much the same ones. Even the English papers, like the *Sun* and the *Telegram* in New York, seeing all the fuss, were quick to follow.

Native-born readers and well-established immigrants, though, were less likely to pose the utilitarian questions of the recent arrivals, so the columns established by the English papers quickly narrowed their focus to the lovelorn. Heshberg made it clear to my father that his column would involve much more than just letters from unhappy lovers. This was just as well, since my father, who was still a bachelor then, was one of the least likely men on earth to give advice on affairs of the heart, as soon would be evident.

“There should be nothing to it for a smart fellow like you, Morgenstern,” Heshberg said. My father recognized the flattery as a ploy, but he was flattered just the same. “You have the intelligence and sensitivity for the job,” the editor continued. “Just as in the obituaries, every life is a story. Every letter is an opportunity for you to influence those lives. Think of yourself as having a conversation with the readers, a conversation about their deepest concerns, worries, fears. Think of yourself as a rabbi.”

That was exactly what was frightening my father. The last thing he wanted to be was a rabbi, a calling that his eldest brother, Sam, had followed, but the notion of a conversation with the readers was appealing to him.

Heshberg had already determined that my father's own identity, and that of any subsequent writers assigned this task, would be concealed. To this end, he had concocted a fictitious advisor called Yentel Schmegge, a name which, he hoped, would convey a combination of humour and seriousness readers would find appealing. My father would assume the persona of Yentel as he composed replies to the letter-writers. When he tired of the assignment, "after six months or a year," Heshberg said, another writer would take his place and consistency would be maintained.

My father agreed to all this—he was relieved that he would not have to put his own name on his replies—and even agreed to Heshberg's plan to prime the pump during the first days that the column would run, although he objected at first.

"Make up letters?" He realized immediately that his aghast tone might be offensive to the editor. "What I mean is . . ."

"You're concerned about the ethics of the situation, Morgenstern?" Heshberg looked at him with a frank expression, but he didn't appear hostile.

"Well, yes."

"Ethics don't really enter into it, don't you see? This isn't news, it's what in the English papers they call features. What if it were a short story or a novel you were writing?"

"That would be fiction," my father said.

"Lies, you mean?"

"No." My father hesitated. He recalled a definition of fiction he had heard from a well-known novelist during a heated discussion over coffee at a crowded table at the Café Royale in New York. "Made up, yes, but in the service of truth."

"Exactly," Heshberg said. "You see my point exactly."

"I see."

"Just make them believable," Heshberg said. "Don't worry, in a week's time your desk will be covered with letters. Real ones."

My father thought long and hard, taking long late-night walks on deserted streets near his rooming house, staring thoughtfully into his glass of beer at the nearby tavern. As it turned out, the first few questions and answers he wrote proved to be so sensational they immediately helped make the column a success, but one of them—the very first—also returned to cause my father some discomfort later on.

For his first column, he wrote this letter:

Esteemed editor—

Please help me!

I am a nineteen-year-old woman, in good health, well-proportioned, attractive, or so men have told me. I come from a good, religious family. My blessed parents and my precious brothers and sisters love me. But now they have threatened to disown me!

I am in love with a Red Indian man, a member of one of the Ohio tribes. He is a good man, educated in a government school, and refined, not a wild savage. He claims that his people are one of the Lost Tribes of Israel, that he is a Jew! I have no reason to disbelieve him.

He knows little of Judaism but he seeks to learn. I love this man and want to marry him and together make a good, devout Jewish family. But my family say he is a charlatan and that I will be dead to them should I follow my heart.

I cannot give up this man, but I cannot bear the thought of losing my family. What should I do?

—A distraught reader

This was followed by a painstakingly careful reply, written with Heshberg's admonition in mind: "Avoid extremes. Take the middle ground whenever possible. Provoke but do not enrage":

Dear distraught reader—

Your dilemma is certainly a profound and unique one, though it points to a more universal problem, namely: how shall Jewry interact with the world? Shall we seek to preserve our unique identity, as the Chosen People of God? Or should we attempt to take our part among the larger Brotherhood of Man, in which all are equal?

This is a question for the *rebbinim* to ponder and debate, for philosophers, not politicians, and certainly not journalists. It is an old debate, and shows no sign of abating. As to your specific problem, we can only advise you to follow your heart, and wish you well.

As he'd been instructed, he finished the letter with the words, "With love, Yentel Schmegge."

My father stood nervously beside Heshberg's desk as the editor read his typewritten copy, filled with the inevitable XXXd-over typing mistakes.

He raised his head, a broad smile on his usually placid face. He had a thin moustache that was several shades darker than his unruly salt and pepper hair, as if he had run the tip of a pencil back and forth against it a number of times.

“Brilliant, Morgenstern. Or should I call you Solomon? This is the stuff.”

On the spot, Heshberg decided to change the title of the advice column from “With Love from Yentel” to “The Wisdom of Solomon,” though the former would remain as the signature. My father went back to his typewriter with his heart soaring.

“The Wisdom of Solomon” was indeed what the column was titled when it appeared the following Monday and in days to come, always prominently displayed on the second page, above the obituaries, although within the offices of *The World* it continued to be referred to as “the Schmegge.”

The letter from the woman in love with the Indian ran that Monday and others that my father had concocted in the days that followed, but the week was not even out before the first real letters began to arrive, by hand and then through the post, and, as Heshberg had predicted, by the following week a steady stream of letters was arriving and my father no longer had to concoct lives wracked with heart-breaking dilemmas. Instead, the time allotted to this task was more than taken up by reading through the letters, selecting a couple of good ones for each day, and writing the replies.

The replies, he found, were considerably easier to write than the concocted letters, but, though he had felt ambivalent about writing those letters, when they were no longer necessary, he missed them.

Many of the real letters were considerably more mundane, dealing with disputes with landlords, employers and bureaucrats, like the man who wrote to complain about the barking of a dog in the night. My father’s replies were instructive (“What is more important, the good will of a neighbour or a few extra minutes of sleep?” he inquired rhetorically), and thus played an important role, as Heshberg frequently reminded him, but they took no imagination or creative powers. To the question from a woman about the proper handling of garbage being put out for collection, for example, he merely telephoned the appropriate clerk at City Hall and quickly had the answer, just as the letter writer herself could have done, except that, perhaps, her command of English was not up to it.

“You are the reader’s agent.” Heshberg had instructed.

There were also questions relating to child-rearing, education, career choices, immigration, housing and a variety of other issues as well as, always, those of a romantic nature. There was never any telling what the day’s mail would bring, and my father was often hard pressed in producing answers

that were both informative and entertaining, which was what his editor expected of him.

Despite the ordinariness of the majority of the letters the column received, there were always some letters, “gems,” my father called them, that echoed those of his own creation during the first week.

“Most worthy editor,” one man, who signed himself “Tormented and Torn,” wrote, “I have been unfaithful to my beloved wife. Should I kill myself? Confess all and suffer the consequences? Or keep my own counsel and let God deal with me as He will?”

My father was delighted. “My dear Tormented, By all means, put thoughts of suicide far from your mind. But at the same time, mend your ways. Being unfaithful once does not give you licence to be unfaithful again,” he replied in a column which quickly became known and was often quoted. “Bad enough the unfaithfulness to your wife. Do not compound the sin by being unfaithful to God.”

He wrote more, jabbing furiously at the typewriter keys with the index fingers of both hands, but, on consideration, crossed the rest out. He was learning that the best answers should be brief. To matter-of-fact questions, factual answers were required, of course. But to questions of the heart, my father was realizing, it was best to be a bit enigmatic.



In matters of the heart, my father already had some experience of his own. He had been involved in a love affair or two, and his heart had been broken. He had observed envy and jealousies cause rifts within his own family. He himself had been the victim of betrayal by a friend. He was no Solomon, he knew, but he felt confident and stimulated. And he felt the first stirrings of what soon would become a new novel moving within him.



The envelope immediately announced itself as different from most of the others that crossed my father’s desk. For one thing, it was neatly typed—whereas most he received were hand-written, often crudely so, and in a mixture of English and Yiddish—and addressed fully to Yentel Schmegge/*The Wisdom of Solomon*, *The Jewish World* and the complete address. Of even more interest was the return address: Prof. M.E. Bell, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Ohio, Columbus,

Ohio. Columbus, my father knew, was some 150 miles away. He examined the envelope front and back and slit it open with interest.

The letter was addressed not to “esteemed editor” or “worthy Yentel Schmegge,” but to “My dear Mrs. Schmegge (or is it Miss?).” Now my father really was interested.

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Madelaine Bell. I’m an assistant professor of anthropology here at the University of Ohio, in Columbus. Some of your columns have been forwarded to me by a friend in Cleveland, with rough English translations.

I’m particularly interested in the letter from the woman who was in love with the Indian man. Do you recall it? I believe it was one of the early letters, and your reply was indeed Solomonic. I’d very much like to know what course this woman followed. Do you know how I can get in touch with her? I’d very much appreciate any help you can give me.

My father, flabbergasted, paused in his reading to rub his eyes. Then he continued:

As it happens, I will be in Cleveland next week for several days. May I call you at the *World*? I realize ‘Schmegge’ may be a pseudonym, but I will call and ask for you and hope for the best.

Until then, my very best regards.

The signature intrigued my father. It was just the name, “Madelaine Bell,” with no title, neither “Professor” nor “Miss” nor “Mrs.” Bell, he knew, could be an English name, or it could be a shortened, Anglicized version of a Jewish name like Belzburg or Belowitz. In New York, he knew a number of Jewish men who called themselves Bell. He looked closer at the signature. The hand was feminine, yet clear and somehow bold, he thought. He imagined it was the signature of a woman who was independent—a professor!—who would yield to no man on matters of principle yet might happily yield to the pressure of arms and lips. This was exactly the sort of woman he himself was seeking. He read the letter again and a third time, and studied the signature further. He imagined the author of this letter was an attractive woman—but not wildly attractive—with long brown hair and intelligent eyes that could hold and return a gaze. Assistant professor meant that she could not be too old, and he imagined she would be no more than thirty, perhaps younger.

Of course, what would such a woman see in a man who had dropped out of school after the fifth grade, whose education was mostly self-acquired? A man who fabricated letters for a newspaper column of dubious value? A man who she thought was a woman!

My father shook his head and chided himself for his vanity, laughed at himself. Then he took a look at the date on the letter: it had been written on a Thursday. His eyes flicked to the calendar on the wall above the city desk: it was Tuesday, next week already. He went to the front office and told them he might be receiving a call, and if so to put it through immediately. Should he be unavailable for any reason, ask the caller to come down to the paper and ask for him.



Madelaine Bell turned out to be very close to my father's ideal. She was attractive—but not wildly so—with long brown hair that was done up neatly in what my father thought was called a French roll. She had an aquiline nose and dark, intelligent eyes, but her thick eyeglasses masked the intent of her look. She was shorter than my father liked, but well built, and very well dressed in a brown tweed suit, something my father had never seen on a woman. She was, he guessed, about thirty-five, just a few years older than my father. She wore no make-up or jewelry, including no wedding or engagement ring, but her fingernails, he noticed, were long and well cared for, and covered with a purplish-red polish. She didn't look or sound even remotely Jewish.

They sat across from each other in a delicatessen a block away from the *World's* offices, cups of tea in front of them.

"You really thought I was a woman," my father repeated, still amazed.

"You're very convincing," Professor Bell said.

"So convincing as to fool even someone as learned as you, a professor of anthropology! I'm pleased to know that."

The professor explained her interest in the correspondent in love with the Indian. She was involved in a study of the integration of immigrant Jews into American society. Inter-marriage between races and faiths of course played a large part. "This woman is exactly the sort of person I'm most interested in. I don't have to tell you the symbolic value of her predicament. In love with an Indian, an original inhabitant of this land. Then there's the lost tribe element, the possibility that, in terms of both faith and ethnicity, there is no actual inter-marriage. This is invaluable. It could be emblematic for my entire study." After a moment, when my father didn't immediately

reply, she added: “And the man’s desire to study Judaism, to return to roots he didn’t even know he had ...”

My father had thought hard about what to tell this woman. Much as he hated to lie, it was unthinkable to admit the fabrication. “I’m sorry to say I can’t really help you,” he began reluctantly. “The woman wrote no more than what we printed. There was no name on the letter, no return address on the envelope.”

“And she hasn’t been in touch again?” Madelaine Bell asked hopefully.

“No.” After a moment, my father added: “It’s been almost four months now, so it’s doubtful she will be. Who knows what may have become of her.”

“Ah,” Professor Bell said. “I would dearly love to interview her.” She took off her eyeglasses and gently rubbed the bridge of her nose with her thumb and forefinger, a gesture my father found endearing. When she removed her hand, her eyes, a lighter shade of brown than he had first thought, were warm and inviting. “I wonder if I could impose upon you for a favour?”

“If I can be of service, of course.”

“Perhaps you could insert a sentence or two in your column inquiring as to this woman’s whereabouts, ‘will the woman who wrote the letter on,’ I’m sorry, I’ve forgotten the date, ‘will the woman who wrote about her love affair with the Indian man please be in contact ...’ Something along those lines. Would that be possible?”

“Ah,” my father said. Professor Bell had not yet put her glasses back on and he found himself gazing into those warm brown eyes. He felt a moment of panic, as if he were being drawn into those pools of liquid, chocolatey brown, where he would surely drown, but it quickly passed. What harm could such a subterfuge do—other, of course, than to compound the original fabrication? Heshberg, if he even noticed, would find it amusing.



In matters of the heart, my father found, each situation was different. His experience was useless for the situation he soon found himself in.

After some weeks had passed, he was able to imagine writing this letter:

Esteemed Yentel Schmegge—

I find myself unexpectedly in need of your sage ad-

vice. I'm enmeshed in an impossible love affair. In fact, I have inextricably entangled myself in a web of deception for which I have less and less stomach every day. The Americans have a phrase for it: 'painting oneself into a corner.'

I am a young man from a good Jewish home. Our family was not religious—I would characterize myself as an agnostic—but Jewishness, if not Judaism, is important to me. Yet I am involved with a Gentile woman, a *shiksa*, for whom ethnicity and faith are merely subjects of interest, to be examined and studied rather than adhered to.

She is a professional woman, a woman of learning, for whom education is of the highest importance. I have very little formal education, though I have done much to improve myself. She is part of a profession that follows a strict code of ethical conduct, that draws a sharp distinction between theory and data. I follow a trade that has high ideals but is essentially amoral.

I love this woman and we are involved in a passionate affair that has gone beyond my wildest dreams. But, in order to advance this affair, I resorted to a number of falsehoods; now, to preserve the affair, I must pile falsehood upon falsehood. There is, I fear, a void at the centre. It is only a matter of time, I'm certain, until this woman, who is no fool, will see through the facade I've erected.

So, I implore and beseech you, tell me, dear, wise Yentel Schmegge, what am I to do?"

My father had not really written the letter, but the situation and the question were real enough.

He considered the question, and the one contained in a letter which had come that day, a real question, in a real letter, from a real reader: "My husband beats me and the children. What should I do?"

He had been sitting at his desk in the *World* newsroom for an hour or more thinking of how to answer this question. It was late, and the newsroom was deserted. There was a bottle of whiskey in the bottom drawer of his desk. He opened the drawer, took out the bottle and a small glass and poured himself a drink.

The only answer my father could think of for either dilemma—his own and that of his distressed correspondent—was the one he had written so often in the newspaper: "Follow your heart." In the dim light of the empty newsroom, the inadequacy of the answer—and its falsity—loomed enormous.

