

## From Secular to Chassidic Judaism A Grinnellian's transformation

Becoming a Chassidic observant Jew was the furthest thing from my game plan as a free-spirited, liberal-minded Grinnellian back in the '80s. I loved walking barefoot around campus, diving deep into philosophical discussions at the Forum, and hanging out underground at the Pub Friday nights. Here, in the middle of the vast cornfields of Iowa, lay fertile ground for an adventurous and meaningful life. Meeting people from across the globe, taking classes about any and every subject under the sun, and having professors who cared to give time and attention to each student was such a gift. My young mind opened to questions and controversies, always focused on making the world a better place.

After graduating, I moved to Berkeley, Calif., where I received a letter (life before the Internet) from my College boyfriend, **David Feldman '90**, who was visiting Israel. He spoke about miracles, G-d, eating kosher, and learning from ancient texts. My once-partner in liberal-secularism had taken an unexpected detour — he was embracing religious Judaism.

Since I had never heard of a secular Jew becoming an observant Jew, I brought the letter to a rabbi that I found in the Yellow Pages. He told me that David was in a cult and advised that I go to Israel and get him out, as he was being brainwashed. Wow. That threw me for a loop — hopefully it wasn't too late.

I boarded a plane for Israel, armed with a slew of antireligious books, feminist books, evolution books — whatever I could read and carry, I brought. When I met up with David, he already wore the traditional knotted fringes (*tzitzits*), covered his head with a *kippa* (*yarmulke*), and donned black boxes called *tefillin* every day. He was learning traditional Judaism based on an educational movement started by the Lubavitcher Rebbe to increase Judaic knowledge and practice among Jews worldwide.

Upon lengthy discussions with David, I realized that it was not a cult that he was following, but the ways of his ancestors, a tradition of strict laws carried down for centuries.

I enrolled in classes myself and spent my days and nights learning and arguing the authenticity of the Torah (Old Testament) with my teachers, rabbis and rebbetzins — as female teachers are called. My experience at Grinnell taught me how to meet intellectual challenges head on, with courage and open-mindedness. While the concepts were foreign to me as a secular-minded individual, I was open enough to explore the possibilities of this significant spiritual reality. It was such a paradigm shift that it was a several-year transformative journey.

Today, David and I are married and living in Chicago as committed Lubavitch Chassidim (a mystically minded form of traditional Judaism). As much as this faith-based, traditional path differs from the liberal path that I walked at Grinnell, I still consider myself a Grinnellian. I lead an adventurous life raising six children and engage in deep, philosophical discussions around our guest-laden Sabbath meals. Although I'm not dressed in the same clothes that I wore on campus, preferring a head covering and modest clothes instead, my Grinnell values have never waned. From Grinnell I learned the importance of making the world a better place, doing acts of kindness, and living life true to one's values. These core traits I carry with me on my journey through life. 🌱



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# That's So Grinnellian

Photo by Justin Hayworth

