Congratulate me.

I have just reached an important milestone in life: five years in Israel. I realize, of course, that this short span of time pales before those reached by people who have lived in this country for decades—who built houses amidst sand dunes, who ventured out to establish communities in the middle of vast orange orchards, and who fondly remember their now-bustling cities back when they were miniscule moshavim, lacking traffic lights or even paved roads.

My unique milestone draws its significance not from the amount of time I have spent here, but rather from the sheer irony of my being here at all. I hold the distinction of being perhaps the least likely human being on this planet to have made aliyah. Five years in Israel is no mean feat for a guy who spent most of his life swearing that he would never, ever, set foot here.

I was Bar Mitzvah’ed almost 40 years ago in a Conservative synagogue on the outskirts of Boston, where my famously non-religious parents piously attended services for an hour or two every Yom Kippur. That Bar Mitzvah, attended by my large family of Kennedy-style super-liberals, proved to be my last brush with Judaism, in any shape or form, for more than three decades.

I walked out of the synagogue and into the 1960’s. Following a rather colorful Flower Child adolescence, about which the less said the better, I went on to college—in New York’s Greenwich Village—where I majored in anthropology and minored in East Asian studies. My subsequent graduate school years saw me in Indonesia, doing my doctoral fieldwork on the island of Borneo, where the only Jewish face I saw in two years was my own reflection in the turbid, slow-moving water of jungle rivers and streams.

Those two years in Indonesia were followed by thirteen in the Philippines, where I lived with a hill tribe in a remote mountain village for three years, lived and worked among Indochinese boat people in a refugee camp for six years, and then hopped around the country’s 3,500 islands teaching and consulting for a year or two after that. I met, chased and eventually married a hard-working provincial social worker, had two beautiful children, and quickly learned to enjoy the life of an "expat" American in the lush Philippine countryside. Judaism was, at best, a distant and irrelevant memory.

Then, when I least expected it, life’s Great Referee flashed me a yellow card. An unexpected job offer with the Philippine government’s Department of Education brought us out of the boondocks and into Manila, where I soon heard faint but persistent rumors of the existence of a small but viable Jewish community. Intrigued by the image of Jews in the Philippines, I set out one Saturday to find them.

After I had wandered around Manila’s business district for more than an hour, a small, squat, gray building adorned with a large iron menorah and topped with a golden dome loomed sharply into view. Cleverly camouflaged amidst the
jar, which Superman kept on a lovely walnut Queen Anne side-table at the end of an upstairs hall. When Superman felt that he needed to be with his fellow Kryptonians, speak a little Kryptonese, eat a bit of heimische Kryptonite food and just generally reconnect with his Krypton roots, he would enter the Bottled City. Emerging from this sentimental journey a few hours later, a refreshed, recharged and re-motivated Superman would leave the North Pole and fly back to Metropolis, back to his never-ending battle for truth, justice, and the American Way—and his somewhat complicated relationship with Lois Lane.

Well, the little synagogue in Manila—nestled amongst the towering office buildings and five-star hotels of the city’s business district—became my Bottled City of Kandor, a weekly haven from the stress of life and work, and a revitalizing return to my roots. I went every Saturday morning to surround myself with Jewish faces, recharge my mind with Jewish conversation, and stuff myself with Jewish food.

But the trouble with having a bottled city, as Superman no doubt discovered after he finally broke down and married Lois Lane, is that sooner or later your wife wants to go into the bottle with you. After several weeks of wondering where I was sneaking off to every Saturday morning, my non-practicing Catholic Filipina wife decided to accompany me to shul.

You can imagine, of course, what happened next: as it has so many times before, in places scattered throughout the world, the synagogue cast its irresistible spell. My wife found a seat in the women’s section, and I spent the next couple of hours discreetly watching her watch Judaism as it unfolded...
before her. I watched as she opened a prayer book and slowly became engrossed in portions of the English translation. I saw her eyes widen as the ark was opened and a huge ornate Sephardi-style Torah, with gleaming polished silver crowns, was paraded around the sanctuary and taken up to the bimah. I caught her faint smile as the congregation began to sing. And later at the kiddush I noted, with little surprise, her evident fondness for kugel and chopped herring.

As we walked home I said, "Well, that's what I've been doing every Saturday. No big deal, right?" To which she replied, "Next week, we'll bring the kids."

Bring them we did—the next week, and every week thereafter. It soon became apparent to me that we were well on our way down a long new road I had never expected to travel. Regular synagogue attendance, involvement in the Jewish community, the beginnings of Sabbath observance, some tentative stabs at keeping kosher, weekly study sessions with the Rabbi, Hebrew lessons for the children—a gaudy kaleidoscope of Judaism flashed around us at dizzying speed and soon enveloped us completely.

When, after a year or so of this, my wife announced that she wanted to formally convert and raise our children in an authentically Jewish environment, I knew that it was time to leave the Philippines and make aliyah to Israel. My relatives in the U.S. simply sighed, shrugged, and pronounced this as fresh evidence of the sort of bizarre behavior they have always expected of me.

As no one from the Philippines had made aliyah since the end of World War II, a helpful young first secretary at the Israeli Embassy in Manila appointed himself as our sheliach, faxing Jerusalem almost daily with questions about how to do the paperwork. The Ambassador summoned us to his office, to satisfy himself that we were, as he put it, "for real." A stamp for our immigrant visas had to be sent by diplomatic pouch from the Israeli Embassy in India, as no such stamp was to be found any farther east then New Delhi. After more a year of planning, processing and paperwork, we were on our way.

We arrived at Ben Gurion Airport, dazed but excited. In due course my wife was converted, the children studied and flourished in religious schools, and we slowly but inexorably became "Israelis."

Life, I have learned, is something that goes on while you are planning something else. Or, as my grandmother used to say, "Man plans, God laughs."

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