

# Go forth: Seek the lesson of the Other

I pressed the intercom button. The guard responded, “*Nihau!*” Mustering whatever courage lay buried in my gut, I spoke into the machine, “*Wo chu tshichukishuihua ershiyi.*” The guard laughed and said in a thick Chinese accent, “Okay.” While I thought I had ordered a taxi to come to house 21, according to my Cantonese phrasebook, it seems I ordered 21 rotten eggplants—or something like that. Nevertheless, the taxi came and I went forth.

Such was my experience in Beijing last year when I led the Jewish New Year holiday services. For a month of hilarious cultural bumps and profoundly meaningful spiritual adventures, I wandered Beijing’s *hutongs* in awe. I had never imagined myself in China, this massive giant on the west coast of the Pacific. I had never imagined gawking at Starbucks, that aromatic representative of globalization, foaming away in the center of the Forbidden City. I had never imagined meeting Ryan McKim, a junior here at Wheaton, in the middle of that huge city. I had never imagined learning firsthand what it means to be a Jew on the other side of the world.



These opportunities are illustrative of how my studies in international relations at Wheaton College shape my future. I was an eager yet naïve student from Seattle when I arrived on campus in the early '90s. Full of piss and vinegar, I wanted to tackle the world's problems and show those adults just

how things can and should be done. But how? That question plagued me then as it does today.

Of all the incredible academic resources Wheaton offered, international relations promised the most rewarding possibilities for my interests. The far-reaching scope of the discipline forced me to study a range of issues I thought only tangentially relevant to the future I wanted to help construct. Each course and professor, like the indomitable Professor Darlene Boroviak, enhanced my skill in analyzing the complex reality confronting me. Together, they were a powerful toolbox of skills with which I could encounter global Others, understand them, and appreciate our interdependencies. But more important than understanding the Other, the matrix of classes and experiences instilled in me the practice of self-reflection. To analyze another necessitates analyzing oneself.

With these powerful skills, I could better reflect upon my own worldview. I could better understand how and why I take others into consideration in my own decision-making processes. Learning how to read newspapers, ask pointed questions, and appreciate the differences I encounter every day teaches me that indeed we are not alone in this world. And as such, my opinions or way of life or value system cannot—ought not—be the ultimate arbiter of what is true or fair or just for the whole world.


A second characteristic international relations engenders in me is curiosity. The Other always has something to offer, be it the innovations of a micro-finance institution for illiterate women in Ahmadabad, India, or a different way of healing from history in Oswiecim, Poland. Others have so much to teach me: I only need the curiosity to inquire.

And a third characteristic is optimism. By learning inside the classroom and outside the campus around the world, I have come to understand that there are powerful tools available out there to change the world according to our visions.

So that is what I have done since my days here at Wheaton. My interest has always revolved around how societies think about and engage in meaningful social and political change. In recent years I have focused less on the manifest behaviors and policies of communities, social movements and nation-states, and more on internal issues. How and to what degree do religions motivate or prohibit justice? What methods do they promote? What rationales do they provide? How does Judaism inspire Jews to engage in meaningful social change?

These are not easy questions to ask, and virtually impossible to answer. Yet they must be asked, particularly in today's volatile world where politics and religion so often fuse and confuse. My passion is to work for a world where people of good faith can infuse political decision-making processes with religious sensibilities, which means helping religions to defuse their often extremist political agendas. I could not have appreciated the importance of these questions had I not studied international relations at Wheaton.

Jews around the world read a bit of the Torah each week. One portion is called *Lech-Lechah*, the story of God's call to Abraham to go forth from his native land to a place only God knows. In a way, Abraham was the first international relations activist, venturing from the confines of his comfortable world, confronting peoples and ways of life he had never imagined. Abraham acted out of conviction, unsettling himself from complacency to experience other cultures. He formulated a new way of thinking about humanity's place in this awesome world that would revolutionize humanity forever.

We may not be Abrahams here, but we certainly can be inspired by him. Whatever inspires you, let it. Empower yourself with tools appropriate for your role in the world you want to experience. And, above all, “Go forth.” 

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