



## **RICHARD HO**

### **CONVERT, EDUCATOR, AUTHOR**

Richard Ho is an acclaimed author of books for children, including *Two New Years*, which was a Sydney Taylor Gold Medalist and a National Jewish Book Award Winner. A graduate of Harvard University, he is a former journalist who currently works as a scriptwriter and editor for a leading edtech company, creating educational resources for students and teachers.

After growing up as a first-generation Chinese American in the suburbs of New York, Richard converted to Judaism as an adult and is a proudly observant Orthodox Jew. He lives with his wife and children in New Jersey, where he continues to craft stories about diverse cultures and the magic of everyday life.

You can learn more about his work at [www.richardhobooks.com](http://www.richardhobooks.com)

# Think or Feel?

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I was on my way to the Western Wall, and I was an utter mess.

For many, a visit to the remnant of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem carries special significance. It's a holy site in multiple religions—a place where thousands gather daily to seek God's presence and pour out their hearts in prayer. Those who go invariably walk away with a smorgasbord of feelings: humility, inspiration, even euphoria.

But me? I was worried that I wouldn't feel anything at all.

Not that I wasn't religious. I believe in God, and a way of life infused with meaning and purpose beyond our earthly existence. And as an Orthodox Jewish convert, I willingly chose to adopt Judaism's tenets in their strictest form. In many ways, I'm as religious as they come.

I'm just not very spiritual. At least not in the walking-on-air, "I've seen the light!" kind of way.

Maybe that comes from growing up in secular American society. For me, the mysteries of life and the universe were squarely in the realm of the intellectual: problems to be decoded through logic and scientific rigor. Truth carried the certainty of mathematical solutions, while otherworldly musings were relegated to the realm of emotion and the abstract. My upbringing had trained me to be a thinker, not a feeler.

But when I started to explore religion as an adult, I suddenly had to reckon with my inexperience in all things spiritual. Faith was a muscle I had simply never flexed before. To suddenly start believing in miracles and prophecies required a massive shift in perspective that did not happen overnight.

Then again, I learned early in my conversion process that there is more than one way to be religious. Over the years, I encountered countless believers who believe in both God *and* science. Proponents of rational thought who say forging a connection with the divine requires more than blind faith alone. Soul searchers who understand that fervent prayers uttered in a house of worship do not preclude investigations of "how" or "why" in an observatory or laboratory. Through them, I realized that my intellectual and religious sides could live in harmony.

Still, doubts lingered as I walked those final steps to the Western Wall. Would I feel what so many others had described as an out-of-body experience? Would I ascend to an ethereal plane far above the physical structure in front of me?

Or would I simply see a wall?

Not surprisingly, my experience fell somewhere in the middle. As I placed my hand on the ancient stone, I felt the rough surface of an edifice that had stood through so much history. My soul stayed tethered to my body, but my heart savored a warmth that only comes from returning home. And looking around at the crowd of truth-seekers who were there for the same reason as me, I knew that I would never be alone.

And as I walked away, I had the distinct feeling of walking on air.