

## INTRODUCTION

### **Strategy, Strength, and a Seat at the Table**



If you're holding this book, there's a good chance you're asking the same questions so many Americans are asking right now. From the moment President Trump took office for his second term, we've witnessed a flurry of executive orders and policy moves. The speed of change seems so dizzying and the scope so unprecedented that many Americans wonder:

*Are all these changes truly going to make America great again—or will they jeopardize our future security?*

*What exactly is President Trump's idea of diplomacy—and*

*what's his view on dealing with China?*

*Does President Trump really have a plan—or is he just winging it?*

These are fair questions. After all, the world is volatile, the stakes are high, and the challenges we face today are deeper and more complex than ever before. But I can answer without hesitation:

Yes—President Trump has a plan. He knows exactly what he's doing. His approach is focused, strategic, and aggressive. From day one, his actions have *focused* on key campaign promises, such as government downsizing, foreign policy realignment, reduction of the trade deficit, energy independence, and border security. His approach to the problems that face us, particularly China, is not only serious; it's proven, pragmatic, and *strategic*, and it puts America first. And his use of execu-



tive orders is intentionally *aggressive*, issuing an exponentially large number of EO's with full knowledge they will face legal challenges.

This book is a story about returning to the table—not only in the diplomatic sense, but in the economic and strategic one. It's about how the Trump Administration, in its first term and now again in its second, reclaimed America's place at the global decision-making table. And it's about how I, a Chassidic Jew with humble roots in the Eastern European shtetl of Nadvorna, found a seat at that table—first as a lawyer, then as a senior Treasury official, and ultimately as someone entrusted to assist with implementing a vision that could restore American strength, growth, and influence.

### **The Trump Doctrine: Order Beneath the Boldness**

Many commentators mistake President Trump's diplomatic

style for a lack of strategy. The President Trump that I know does anything but improvise; rather, he games out. He moves on instinct, yes, but his instincts are grounded in a lifetime of negotiation, risk-taking, and above all, results. He approaches policy like a grandmaster playing three-dimensional chess. Every tariff, every handshake, every tweet—it's all part of a broader, calculated effort to reshape the global order in a way that benefits the American economy and restores national sovereignty.

I saw this approach first-hand when I served in the Trump Treasury. Take charting a course to liberalize our overly complicated system of financial regulation, including optimizing the rapidly changing landscape of the fintech and crypto-currency revolution. Trump aimed to cut through the jungle. Or, take navigating the unprecedented double-crisis of a worldwide pandemic and economic shutdown. In both areas and

many more, President Trump steered our country confidently towards ever-greater prosperity, freedom, security and opportunity. At Treasury, we followed his lead. The mission: make markets freer, make the economy and workers stronger, and reduce the red tape.

Nowhere was this clearer than in our approach to China.

### **The China Challenge—and the Trump 45 Response**

By 2017, the US-China economic relationship had become highly unbalanced. Worse, it was unsustainable. For decades, the United States had tolerated intellectual property theft, cyber intrusions, unfair subsidies, forced technology transfers, and a growing \$500 billion trade deficit. The conventional wisdom was that engagement would liberalize China. That engagement would modernize China. That engagement would pacify China.

That conventional wisdom was wrong.

President Trump understood what others refused to admit: China wasn't converging with the liberal world order—it was systematically undermining it. And, so, he chose a different path.

He imposed tariffs—not as an end, but as a means. A means to bring the Chinese to the table. And they came.

I was there for those negotiations. I helped craft and deliver the tools of economic pressure and strategic opportunity that made them possible. Our efforts culminated in the 2020 Phase 1 Trade Agreement, a milestone that secured real commitments from China on purchases of American agricultural, energy and other goods and commodities, provided greater US access to China's vast services markets, and ensured protection of US intellectual property and currency practices. For the

first time in recent memory, America didn't blink. We didn't cave. We led—and we won.

### **Rolling Back the Belt and Road**

But tariffs were just one dimension. We also knew that China's influence wasn't only about trade. It was about infrastructure. Through its Belt and Road Initiative, the Chinese Communist Party was flooding developing countries with opaque, state-directed capital that locked governments into unsustainable debt dependency and handed Beijing control over ports, power generation plants, and key minerals.

The Trump Administration's answer? Build something better.

We launched America Crecé in Latin America and AsiaEDGE in Asia, and then adopted similar programming elsewhere in the world, including in the Middle East. These transformative

programs delivered healthy growth through impactful energy and infrastructure projects capable of being financed with private capital solutions. They employed strategic partnerships built on US private capital, technical excellence, and transparent and competitive tendering. They provided a market-based, transparent alternative to Chinese debt traps—enabling our partners and their utilities to stand on their own two feet financial, delivering profitable, more efficient, and more accountable infrastructure, energy security and regional stability across the world.

In Panama, we mobilized \$2.455 billion in private investment, helping refinance utility debt and catalyze new energy projects. In Vietnam, our work helped promote the \$1.4 billion Son My LNG terminal, which will feed a 2.2 GW gas-fired power plant. These weren't pipe dreams—they were pipelines, power plants, ports, and growth.



### **Leveraging US Capital Markets and Regulatory Common Sense**

We recognized something else: The United States has the deepest and most sophisticated capital markets in the world. Why not use them to advance our foreign policy and economic goals?

Under Trump 45, we integrated infrastructure finance with trade, diplomacy, and investment promotion. We worked across agencies to reduce red tape and led the private sector to support projects aligned with American strategic interests.

Another critical facet of President Trump's vision for America-first growth involved our paradigm for fintech and financial regulation. At Treasury, we adopted a hands-off, innovation-first and technology neutral approach to fintech and digital assets—encouraging breakthroughs while maintaining security and consumer protection. Rather than regulating with a heavy hand, we promoted an ecosystem where

technologies like blockchain, tokenization, and decentralized finance could thrive. This wasn't deregulation for its own sake—it was a recognition that leadership in financial innovation is a 21st-century national security imperative.

### **Trump 47: A Vision Reaffirmed**

Fast forward to 2025. President Trump is back—and he's wasting no time.

With the stroke of a pen, he signed executive orders to reignite American energy independence, expand US LNG exports, and remove artificial constraints on production. New directives support the revitalization of coal as a reliable, base-load energy source for domestic use and international demand, unlocking jobs and reinvigorating entire communities. These moves restore competitive energy pricing and secure long-term supply chains for industrial growth.



He also issued new Executive Orders promoting fintech and cryptocurrency development, aimed at reducing regulatory burdens, clarifying digital asset classification, and promoting blockchain-based infrastructure. These policies are designed to foster capital formation, streamline compliance, and ensure the US remains the global hub for financial innovation. Together, they promise to enhance market stability, expand economic inclusion, and accelerate domestic growth.

And yes, he's returning to tariffs—again, not as punishment, but as leverage. He's not winging it. He's setting the 3D chessboard—and moving first.

We are now witnessing the early execution of a long-calculated strategy. America Crecé 2.0 is being reactivated. A whole-of-government approach to global infrastructure finance is taking shape again. And the President is focused—more than ever—on reducing China's influence, restoring American com-

petitiveness, and protecting US interests in every theater: energy, trade, finance, and diplomacy.

### **A Personal Lens, A National Moment**

My journey from washing dishes in a Chinese restaurant to negotiating trade agreements in Beijing gives me a unique lens. I've seen the subtle art of Chinese diplomacy. I've studied the nuances of Confucian hierarchy and face-saving. I've watched as America gave away its leverage piece by piece—and I've had the privilege of helping take it back, in a manner informed by my heritage and delivered with a personal touch. Throughout my work, I have been guided by what I call “the Four Ps”: Providence, Personal touch, Perseverance, and Progress over perfection. These four values have helped me overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles with humility and humor. Along the way, I learned the importance of leveraging the power of



a seat not just at the negotiating table, but also at the dining room table over a home-cooked meal.

President Trump gave us the mandate to do things differently. To use every tool available—strategic tariffs, capital markets, bilateral investment frameworks, private-sector leadership, and regulatory reform—to pursue peace through strength and prosperity through partnership. Not all of it made headlines. But it made a difference.

Although I share many of my personal experiences and stories, this book is not a memoir. It's a roadmap and a call to action. It's an inside look at Trump's economic principles and strategies through the lens of my Treasury portfolio, to help illuminate what Trump really stands for. It's for skeptics who think our country can't compete anymore. It's for believers who want proof that the vision is real—and working.

You will read about how America clawed back leverage from

China and how we brought allies closer by treating them as partners rather than charity cases. I will recount how we rewired the global conversation around fair trade and healthy, impactful infrastructure finance, leveraging private capital in place of public subsidies. You'll also read about the political courage it took to take on these fights—and the moral clarity it required to win them.

So, does President Trump have a plan? Absolutely. And this book will show you how it was developed, how it was battle-tested in Trump's first administration, and how it is currently unfolding, step-by-step.

As for China, you will read exactly why and how President Trump believes it must be challenged, constrained, and ultimately countered with something better.

Trump 45 set the stage for a global economic revolution. Today we're at the beginning of a new chapter—Trump 47

—and the global 3D chessboard is once again in motion. As Americans, we can either step back from the table—or pull up a chair and lead.

President Trump has chosen to lead. And I was blessed to have a seat at that table.



CHAPTER 1

**THE GOOD LORD SENT ME TO A  
CHINESE RESTAURANT**

The movement of a single blade of grass in the depths of a forest, on a stately mountain, or in a deep valley where man has never passed...is determined according to Divine providence.

—BAAL SHEM TOV

The military plane carrying the official American negotiations team to Beijing felt like a Marriott with wings. Steven Mnuchin, secretary of the Treasury and the head of our dele-

gation, had his own private suite, which featured a bed, a couch, and a large conference table. Other senior people, such as Secretary of Commerce Wilbur Ross and Director of the National Economic Council Larry Kudlow, enjoyed their own designated area, with large and sumptuous chairs facing each other, separated by tables and a long couch. The rest of the entourage, including the Secret Service, sat in the back, waiting patiently as we stopped first in Anchorage and then at Yokota Air Base in Japan to refuel before heading to China.

It was, to put it mildly, a bit of a tense flight. Our trade deficit with China had hit \$500 billion, an unfathomable number betraying an imbalance that was wreaking havoc on the American economy. We were losing jobs, losing productivity, losing our ability to compete. If that wasn't bad enough, the Chinese government had shown an abysmal record on respecting foreign intellectual property rights that another



member of our delegation, Ambassador Robert Lighthizer, the US Trade Representative, had just detailed in a highly critical report published shortly before the trip.

Add to that a slew of cyber threats and non-tariff barriers that were making it very, very difficult for American investors to penetrate the Chinese market, and you'll begin to understand the magnitude of the challenge that awaited us when we touched down in Beijing. These were not going to be easy negotiations: The financial and security conflicts between the US and China were profound, and President Donald Trump had taken a stance. His position was simple: He wasn't having any of it.

With such tensions simmering, it did not come as much of a surprise to anyone on board that security for the delegation was extremely heightened. Even before departure, we received constant security briefings and were subject to rigor-

ous security protocols, and once we were on board the flight, a large and high-level detail was looking after us, with senior members of our security detail holding ranks equivalent to military generals and yet treating all of us civilians with respect. I felt very safe.

We spent the flight going over myriad details and talking strategy, and by the time we finally landed, everyone on board was exhausted. Thankfully, the Chinese made things pleasant enough by offering not only a red-carpet welcome on the tarmac but also expedited arrival formalities at a diplomatic terminal. From there it was on to a motorcade, featuring a very rare full police escort. We zipped out of the airport and made our way to Beijing.

The scenery we saw out of the car window could've sucked all of the immense and nervous energy out of the air. The best way to describe what Beijing looks like near its massive airport





is “nondescript.” Large highways. Lots of trees on each side, with housing and commercial developments dotting the landscape and absolutely nothing changing from season to season, from year to year. But as we hit the Ring Roads, the seven massive highways encircling the city, the urban action began, with buildings and developments and more highways sprouting from the ground like weeds. Not that we had much time to admire the view. The drive to our hotel, normally an hour or so in snarled Beijing traffic, took all of twenty minutes. In my thirty-five years of traveling to Beijing, I had never seen anything like it. I was impressed.

The festivities continued at our hotel, where management had cordoned off a walkway for us in the lobby, keeping the throng of reporters already gathered there behind ropes. I did my best to avoid the constant flashes of cameras, as well as the barrage of questions being shouted at us: “How are the talks

going?” “What is the US position on trade?” “What is your comment on the negotiations?” None of us dared to set foot in the lobby for a drink, though all of us could certainly have used one.

After a too-short stretch of getting settled in our rooms, we were on the move again, this time to the US embassy to prep for the first round of meetings. Given the size of the delegation and the senior ranks of some of its members, every single logistical detail was highly coordinated and meticulously orchestrated. And, given the tense nature of our relations with our hosts, everyone was walking on tiptoes, and every mundane turn felt urgent.

After a short and extremely tense meeting at the embassy, we left for Diaoyutai. The ancient royal garden has graced Yuyuantan Park for more than eight hundred years, when Emperor Zhangzong built himself a fishing shack there. By



1774, a lake had been added to the site, which then became an official imperial hangout. When the Communists took over China, they turned Diaoyutai into a guesthouse for dignitaries, briefly running the Cultural Revolution from one of the compound's buildings. It was there, in Chairman Mao's favorite old haunt, that we would meet our adversaries.

The Chinese are no newcomers to playing hardball, and they made sure to gain the upper hand even before we arrived at Diaoyutai: At the very last minute, just prior to our arrival at the embassy, they had delivered a lengthy draft agreement—in Chinese—for us to consider. It was a ploy to rattle us a bit since we had agreed to use the US draft delivered to the Chinese long before we boarded our flight, but we were determined to keep our cool. I was instructed to get into the car with Secretary Mnuchin and translate the document as we drove.

I barely had time to make it through the first few pages,

however, before our car sailed through the entrance to the largest and most ornate meeting compound in Diaoyutai. By the time we arrived, negotiators and subject matter experts, administrative people, drivers, translators, and protocol people from both sides already filled the cavernous greeting area. In addition, no fewer than ten Chinese ministers and a slew of vice ministers awaited us, matched by a goodly number of secretaries and under secretaries from our side. As state affairs went, this Beijing opera was the big leagues, with the highest levels of diplomatic protocols enforced. This meant that everything was carefully considered, mutually discussed, and begrudgingly agreed upon, from who gets to attend which meeting to who should sit where. That last detail, in particular, was crucial: In a meeting like this one, each person is assigned a chair according to his or her rank, making it clear who's who in the hierarchy of each side. And so, when the

doors of the meeting room opened, all of us, Americans and Chinese alike, filed in, quickly finding our designated spots.

And then, suddenly, our diplomatic dance came to a screeching halt. Something was wrong. There was nervous movement in the back of the room. It took us a moment or two to figure out the problem: One member of our delegation was missing a seat.

How, some of my colleagues muttered under their breath, could this happen? I half-smiled to myself, because I knew the answer: It couldn't. Unless, that is, it was done on purpose.

Surveying the members of the American delegation that chaotic day in Beijing, you wouldn't necessarily pick me as the resident China expert. I am, after all, an Orthodox Jew, and was dressed in a dark suit and a black felt hat—the same traditional style my *zeyde*, “grandfather” in Yiddish, favored when he moved to Chicago from the little shtetl of Nadvorna, in

what is today western Ukraine. He, in turn, dressed just like *his* grandfather, a *Talmid Chacham*, a notable Torah scholar, and a follower of the town's renowned Chassidic master, the Rebbe Reb Mordechai. After watching Cossacks brutally murder his grandfather, my *zeyde* escaped to America, where he raised his family and became a community leader fighting for justice and human dignity. He taught his family to always do what's right, no matter the consequences; so, when his daughter, my mother, found herself with three children in a marriage that wasn't working, she picked up and left for a new start.

We had moved to Florida not long before the separation, and for my mother—an only child of first-generation Americans, Eastern European Jews from the shtetl—striking out on her own back in the early 1970s was virtually unheard of. But my mother was an independent and strong-willed woman, and so I found myself, a little boy from a rather homogeneous Jewish

community in Chicago, in a sprawling secular school, fending for myself while my mother worked double shifts most days to make ends meet.

Being away from the nurturing, warm, and tightly knit Jewish communities I'd known as a small boy in Chicago was hard, and I missed my zeyde and my other family members terribly. My loneliness was somewhat relieved when I met two brothers who came from a very similar background to my own. They, too, were the children and grandchildren of newly arrived immigrants. They, too, believed that family mattered most, which meant everything from respecting your elders to taking every possible meal together. They, too, were unremitting about getting the best education possible. That I was a Jew whose ancestors hailed from Eastern Europe and they, Chinese who'd recently arrived from Hong Kong, mattered very little. Before too long, I was a permanent fixture at the Cheng

household. There, I learned my first profound lesson about Chinese culture.

In my own Jewish tradition, food is very much at the heart of everyday life. We sanctify virtually all our religious observances—the Sabbath, festivals, and major life events—through the sharing of wine and various foods that we bless reverentially and eat joyfully. Indeed, according to Jewish tradition, since the destruction of our holy temple two thousand years ago, our dining room table was transformed to take on the role of the temple in so many different dimensions. “Every home a temple,” the Talmud teaches us, “every family a sanctuary; every table an altar; every meal an offering.” The Chinese, I soon realized, had similar ideas. Nearly two thousand years ago, Confucious’ *Book of Rites*, one of China’s Five Classics, outlined intricate and ornate rules and strictures on food ingredients, seasoning, and presentation.



The Chengs loved to eat, and they loved to cook, and they took food very seriously, an emotional and cultural touchstone rather than a mere means of sustenance. They soon taught me a few choice facts about their native Cantonese cuisine: What flies in the air that the Cantonese do not eat? they asked. An airplane. And what has four legs that the Cantonese do not eat? A table. I chuckled at these aphorisms and felt grateful for my new friends and their culture, so similar to, yet so distinct from, my own.

The family's father, whom I referred to as "Yi Sok"—literally, "Uncle"—had been an acclaimed chef back in his native Hong Kong. His cousin, who owned a Chinese restaurant in Florida, sponsored Yi Sok to come and cook at his kitchen. You didn't need to watch him work for more than a few minutes to realize this was a very good decision: Like a painter carefully choosing the precise hue on the palette, Yi Sok was a true cu-

linary artist. He'd spend a long time fretting over his ingredients, washing and prepping with care, cutting and trimming with meticulous patience and astonishing precision. And he cared as much about how a dish looked as he did about its taste, serving intricately wrapped dumplings, large and gorgeous steamed fishes, and other delights. Though the kitchen was a hot, hectic place, Yi Sok neither yelled nor criticized. He always kept his cool.

His wife, whom I called "Ah Ma," or "Mom," was the exact opposite. She was a small woman, but she was fierce and unwavering; she had opinions about everything and the vocal range to make them heard loud and clear. If you messed up even slightly, Ah Ma would let you know.

The Chengs had four boys, three of whom were around my age. They started school immediately upon landing in America, and we met because the school administration asked me to



shadow them and make sure they learned both the lay of the land and the English language. Meeting the Chengs changed my life, but back then, in the moment, it felt more like arbitrary proximity brought us together, not divine providence. Now I know better.



I soon became close friends with Ko Ming, who went by Ricky, just a few months younger than me and a real live wire. He appeared to be perpetually in motion, always moving and always working. So when the Chengs asked me if I'd like a job at their restaurant—named, ironically in retrospect, Wuhan—I happily agreed. The job, I thought, would let me spend more time with my friends, and also earn me a few extra bucks my family direly needed. If I could buy my own clothes—and, maybe, someday, my own car—it would be a big help to my mother. With that in mind, I showed up for my first evening shift at Wuhan.

My first job—could it have been otherwise?—was washing dishes. When I close my eyes, I can still see the dishwashing machine, a large and powerful contraption with gleaming, stainless-steel counters where the busboys would pile pans full of dirty dishes. It had a four-sided door that I would push up and down, up and down, countless times during each dinner shift, each time releasing a huge puff of white-hot steam into the already impossibly hot and humid Florida-in-summertime torpor. It was hard and tedious work, but it taught me a few valuable lessons I still reflect on regularly. It taught me that everything in life takes hard work, and that preparation is key for tasks large and small. It also taught me the power of seemingly small things to have much larger consequences: The Chinese phrase 小处不可随便 means “one may not be lax with small details,” but it becomes 不可随处小便 (one should not pee just anywhere) by moving just two characters around.



Similarly, if I missed just a tiny spot in my dishwashing duties, then no matter how delicious the dish that Yi Sok prepared, the customer was going to send it back and complain about the dirty plate.

But if washing dishes was hard, helping with prep was downright Sisyphean. Each afternoon, Wuhan would have hundred-pound bags of onions and cabbage delivered to the restaurant's back door, and because we were turning out Chop Suey by the metric ton, my job was to chop them by hand, work that left me tired and teary-eyed. So when I was offered a promotion to the front of the house, I was thrilled. For one thing, it was a testament to my hard work and dependability. For another, it had air conditioning.

I soon learned, however, that while the physical labor was much easier out in front, the emotional labor was tenfold more demanding. I had to wear a uniform. I had to deal with

the customers, many of whom were retirees who delighted in complaining about each small imperfection. I had to deal with Ah Ma, who was watching my every step like a hawk, and with the cooks in the kitchen, many of whom were the temperamental sort and did not take kindly to a dish being sent back. And when a cook felt slighted, he could easily express his simmering resentment by making you wait forever for your plates to come up. In short, I was getting an advanced degree in international protocol.

I was also learning Cantonese. Without it, I could hardly do my job, as most of the restaurant's staff spoke little or no English. But no sooner had I started my studies than I realized that I was grappling with one of the most linguistically complicated of the Chinese dialects, with almost twice as many sounds as Mandarin. With no internet to turn to or official teacher to instruct me, I drove the Chengs crazy, pestering

them to tell me how to say different phrases and then repeating those phrases, again and again and again, until I got the pronunciation just right. I would also ask any Cheng I could corner to show me how to write things, and practiced whenever we had downtime. I was fascinated by each and every nuance.



I was just as fascinated by the customers. Working in the front of the house taught me that most people are pretty easy to deal with as long as they don't feel ignored. Sure, some people can be difficult, and a handful are outright rude, but most of the customers were reasonable enough, and even if the problems they complained about didn't really exist—which, alas, was the case most of the time—they were perfectly satisfied once I catered to their needs. If they complained the food was too cold, I rushed it back to the kitchen and had it reheated. If they complained their drink was too

warm, I'd add some ice. It wasn't rocket science. All it took was acknowledgment, a little attention, and accord, a lesson I later put to good use when dealing with countries that lodged diplomatic complaints on my watch.

The difficult, downright rude customers were another story, because each was unique, and there was no universal method guaranteed to confront extreme rudeness. The situationally difficult were far more specific than the chronic complainers, and required personalized care. I once waited on an old woman who was ready to go to war over a take-out container and a ten-dollar lunch special. When I failed to wrap up her food the way she wanted, she got so offended she launched a tirade at me and then stiffed me on the tip. This is the incident that caused me to recognize my inherently very low threshold for unfairness and injustice, a trait I'd inherited from my



zeyde. It's also when I learned to recognize petty tyrants, even when they appear in the form of seemingly sweet old ladies.

Respect. Reassurance. Food. A place at the table: It all came together in Beijing the day of the trade negotiation. As China's Vice Premier Liu He offered his formal welcome, and as Secretary Mnuchin responded in his usual impressive and compelling style, the talks in the hallway were on the verge of chaos. The deputy chief of mission at the US embassy in Beijing and his senior protocol officer got into a very heated discussion with the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs' head of protocol and his team just outside the entrance to the meeting room, shouting about chairs. Our side pressed for the number of chairs that had previously been agreed upon. The Chinese stonewalled, insisting that they had set out the agreed number of chairs for both sides. One chair, our team requested, just one. That's all we needed. The Chinese said no. Our protocol

negotiators were getting furious. Decibels were getting high. And, chair-less, one poor soul from our delegation, having traveled all this way and put in all the work, was effectively barred from attending the meetings. He loitered in the hallway, nervous and angry.

It took some poking around, but we eventually learned that the Chinese were miffed about a perceived diplomatic slight that they claimed their vice premier had been forced to endure when visiting Washington a few weeks earlier. Apparently, President Trump had not received Vice Premier Liu during his visit, and this was taken as a grave insult. It was all about saving face. This made sense to me: Public honor and respect, I knew, are paramount in Chinese culture. In retaliation, they had shorted us a chair on our visit. It was an international tit-for-tat in the midst of one of the highest-stakes and contentious negotiations between the US and China in recent history.

It was almost farcical. I might have laughed if matters hadn't been so deadly serious.

When we took our first break more than an hour in, the chair debate was still in full swing. At this point, I walked over and asked our embassy team what the problem was. They brought me up to speed, and I went over to the chief protocol official from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and asked him very politely in Mandarin whether all this fuss was really necessary.

He stonewalled me. I appealed to his sense of fairness, then to his common sense—it was only one chair, I said, come on now. He stonewalled me a second time. I considered diving into a full-blown argument, but then I remembered the wise words of my rabbi: “Never get into a debate with an imbecile, because he will drag you down to his level and then beat you on experience.” And so I tried cajoling the man, and then

insisted some more, but nothing seemed to work. He simply would not budge and deliver the required seat. It was then that I saw Yi Gang walk by.

The governor of the People's Bank of China and my friend from years of working with the Chinese, Governor Yi, a US-educated PhD, was most likely the only person who could help to sort out this petty diplomatic scuffle. He'd visited Washington shortly before the talks, and we received him warmly at the Treasury Department. I explained our predicament to Governor Yi, and asked if he could please somehow intervene.

I was hopeful for a short spell, but it didn't seem like the governor of China's central bank much impressed the men of the Protocol Department of the People's Republic of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Obviously, the diplomatic umbrage the Chinese took to their perceived wrongs in Washington ran deep. They felt slighted by President Trump, they were doing

their best to embarrass us right back, and if Governor Yi intervened on our behalf, he, too, would be slighted.

With that, I felt it was time to end the conversation.

The first, and most obvious, option would have been to come out swinging, to march right over to Mr. Protocol and inform him, Wild West-style, that this was now a showdown and that he'd better deliver a chair or else. But I'd had enough years of dealing with Chinese people, starting with those hot-headed cooks in the kitchen of the Wuhan restaurant, to know that such an approach was doomed to fail. If attacked, Mr. Protocol would only dig in his heels deeper.

I could also ignore the situation altogether, pretend that it was all just an annoying but inevitable part of doing business, and leave my poor, unseated colleague out to dry in the hallway. But that wouldn't be right. For one thing, we'd come to Beijing to stand up for American interests. For another, my

zeyde always taught me never to let injustices, great or small, slide. There was another option, I realized, and, like so many things Jewish and Chinese, it involved talking about food.

I turned to Governor Yi and addressed him in the most honorific and polite Chinese possible. "Mr. Governor," I said, "allow me to invite you to my house, Palazzo Seta" (the playful Italian name "Silk Palace" I used for my home in Washington, DC's Kalorama neighborhood), "for dinner the next time you are in Washington." I knew full well that Mr. Protocol could hear me loud and clear. "I will prepare a feast of delicacies especially for you. And you know what? You can have as many chairs at my table as you like." I shot one more pointed glance in the direction of Mr. Protocol, then walked away.

After the break, the missing chair magically appeared, just as I expected it would. The damage had been repaired. The perceived diplomatic slight had been made right through a

diplomatic honor, and the Chinese could go back to meeting us on equal terms. We may not have prevailed on *all* of our substantive points that morning, but at least we all had a seat at the table.



## CHAPTER 2

### TRAVELING THE WORLD TO FIND A NEW HOME



If you've read this far, you're probably asking yourself one key question: Just how did I get into government in the first place? I am, I'm proud to say, the first Chassidic Jew ever confirmed by the US Senate for a senior administration position. How did I get here?

It's a question I still ask myself, and frequently. And when I do, I think back to a warm spring day in 2017.

I was just heading out from a very long meeting in the conference room of the law firm Allen & Overy, where I was a part-

ner. Our offices were in Manhattan's legendary McGraw-Hill Building, and as I sauntered back to my office, I could see Sixth Avenue writhing with traffic and life beneath me, and the sun casting its rays like long, divine fingers, caressing the Hudson River. I was working on closing a highly complex multibillion-dollar international transaction, and I was feeling the usual mix of excitement, exhaustion, stress, and gratitude that I'd become accustomed to over decades as a hard-working and handsomely rewarded attorney. I was just about to enter my corner office when I heard the phone ring.

Ros, my wonderful assistant, picked it up. I heard her recite the usual greeting—"Allen & Overy, Mitchell Silk's office"—warm, yet professional and standard. Then, I saw the smile fade from her face and watched her grow perfectly still.

"One moment please," she told whoever was on the line. Then, she looked at me, and in a voice that was very slow and



almost as quiet as a whisper—a wild departure from her usual fast clip—she said, “I have the chief of staff of the secretary of the Treasury on the line.”

I wasn't entirely surprised. I'd been talking to people at Treasury for weeks, entertaining the possibility of putting my legal career on hold and going into government service. But it doesn't take a political scientist to realize that a possibility like that is, at best, remote, as there are only so many high-ranking positions in an administration and, hallelujah, no shortage of wildly competent, successful, and committed people eager to step in. And so, as I stepped into my office, shut the door, and picked up the phone, I had no idea what to expect.

“Hello?”

The person on the other end didn't waste any time on niceties.

“This is Eli Miller, chief of staff to Secretary Mnuchin at the

Treasury Department,” he said. “I understand that you've had discussions with several of my colleagues over the past few weeks about the possibility of coming to work here at Treasury. I'm calling to offer you the position of deputy assistant secretary in International Affairs. But—first—I must ask you a question.”

At this point his already amplified voice became positively booming: “WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS?”

Good question.

I don't recall exactly what I told Eli that day—I was too nervous to be all that coherent—but it was probably some true yet not entirely eloquent explanation about wanting to serve the country I so deeply and truly love. But Eli's question stayed with me, because it is, really, an invitation of the sort we all can use, an invitation to think about my life, the choices I made, and the values that brought me to where I am. And in

thinking about these values, four in particular come to mind. Call them the Four P's: Providence, Perseverance, Personal touch, and Progress over perfection.

It may sound corny, but the more I think back about my life, the more I realize that without these four virtues, things likely would have turned out very, very differently for me.

By the time I graduated from high school, I had several years' worth of experience in my friends' Chinese restaurant, and the benefit of being fluent in Cantonese. I loved Chinese culture and was a bit frustrated that I only spoke a dialect common with a small minority of Chinese people. There are about 55 million Cantonese speakers in the world today, which is not nothing, but it's a drop in the ocean compared to the 933 million who speak Mandarin. Without hesitating, I enrolled in an intensive summer course at Vermont's Middlebury College, and in just nine weeks had crammed in an entire academic

year's worth of Mandarin pronunciation, grammar, syntax, and vocabulary.

When I graduated, the program's director, Dr. Ta-tuan Chen, a seasoned linguist and the head of Princeton's Chinese department, gave me some very good advice. It was 1979, and mainland China was just emerging from ten years of isolation after the Cultural Revolution. This meant that China would soon be opening up to Western partners seeking to do business; but it also meant that, for the moment, there were very few opportunities for any Westerner who wanted to spend time in China in order to hone his or her language skills. If you want to get serious about studying Chinese and understanding the culture, Dr. Chen told me, you have to go to Taiwan.

With Dr. Chen's wise guidance, I applied to National Taiwan Normal University's Mandarin Training Center, a university-level program that specialized in Chinese-language and China

studies in Chinese for non-native speakers. I was fortunate enough to be accepted and soon found myself in Taiwan, not a place many nice, young Jewish boys frequented back then.

My academic year in Taiwan was exceptional. I was fully immersed in the language and culture and finished the program with honors, having completed a number of courses in Mandarin, Chinese history, Chinese philosophy, classical Chinese literature, and modern Chinese literature. I also took advantage of the great cultural exposure that Taiwan offered. Whereas mainland China was hard at work erasing the regional variations of China's rich culture in line with the prevailing policy of the Chinese Communist Party, Taiwan offered most, if not all, of China's vibrant regional variations of language and culture in one concentrated geographic area.

In the afternoons after class, I studied Chinese kung fu and lion dancing, a form of martial arts performed at various

Chinese festivals. In addition, I was captain of the Mandarin Training Center's dragon boat team, which competes in a crew-like sport on *Duan Wu Jie*, the Dragon Boat Festival holiday. My year in Taiwan laid an excellent foundation for a career involving China. It also paved the way for one of the most important relationships of my professional life, with my future mentor at law school, Professor Hungdah Chiu.

I had learned and experienced so much during my year in Taiwan that when I returned home to Florida, I was sure the future was bright and the possibilities endless. I applied to Columbia University and didn't bother looking for backup options. I was, after all, motivated, talented, and hard-working; the Ivy League school, I thought to myself, would be fortunate to have me.

But when the long-awaited envelope from Columbia finally arrived, it was of the dreadfully thin sort, containing noth-



ing more than a letter telling me: sorry but not interested. I was crestfallen. I was hoping to spend the year studying with some of the brightest minds in the world; instead, I spent it right back in the Chinese restaurant, working long hours and, whenever I had free time, taking some classes at the local community college to earn college credits. I saved every dollar I could and realized as well that if I was going to have a better shot at getting into a good school, I needed some wise counsel. And so, I turned to one of my most beloved high school teachers and mentors, Mr. Ed Foley.

A real prince of a man, Ed listened to me patiently, and when I was done babbling about my achievements and my interests, he delivered his verdict. My international experience, he said, and my language skills, left little room for doubt: "You are going to attend Georgetown's School of Foreign Service!" he declared, and I didn't dare argue. I applied, and in the fall of

1981, I started my first year at Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, known for its excellent programs in international relations and China studies.

As good as the university's undergraduate offerings in Chinese were, my year in Taiwan put me well ahead of the curve, and so I wound up taking one graduate course in Chinese dialectology and serving as a teaching assistant in the first-year and third-year Chinese programs.

Academia had its appeal, but my goal was not to teach; it was to play a consequential role in international relations. That path was made possible by the guidance and wisdom of my mentor at Georgetown, Professor Thomas W. Robinson, a recognized scholar in international relations and, particularly, in Chinese foreign policy. He was fluent in Russian and Chinese, and one of the few world-renowned experts at the time in Sino-Soviet relations. He fostered my interests in Chinese



domestic politics and foreign relations, and he pointed me toward law school.

I will never forget our chat about my future when I was nearing the end of my junior year. I confided in Professor Robinson that I wasn't sure what I should do when I graduated. "Do you want to attend medical school?" he asked. "No," I answered, "I'm not good with blood." "Do you want to go to dental school?" he asked. I answered, "No, that's never been an area of interest for me."

"Well, then," he concluded, "you are going to law school!" And so it was. Where would I be without Mr. Foley and Professor Robinson? Their role in my life was the perfect illustration of divine providence combined with the personal touch.

During my thesis work, Professor Robinson provided another invaluable service: He introduced me to one of the very few scholars of Chinese law in the United States at that time,

Professor Hungdah Chiu at the University of Maryland School of Law. Professor Chiu was a legend: Born in Taiwan to a noted legislator, he excelled in his studies in law at National Taiwan University. He was the first person from Taiwan to earn an SJD (doctor of juridical science) degree at Harvard; he then went on to found the East Asian Legal Studies Program at Harvard Law School under the renowned Professor Jerome A. Cohen. In the 1970s, Professor Chiu accepted a position at the University of Maryland School of Law and built one of the most vibrant programs in Chinese law in the US in the late 1970s and 1980s. Professor Chiu not only became an invaluable source in assisting with my dissertation, he also recruited me to Maryland law school.

At Maryland, in addition to my classwork, Professor Chiu hired me as assistant director of his East Asian Legal Studies Program. This position provided me with the chance of a life-

time: to research and speak on interesting topics in Chinese and international law, and to be exposed to leading experts in the field, including Dr. Ma Ying-jeou, who would later become a two-term president of Taiwan.

I loved every minute in law school, but as graduation approached, I began to ponder my next step. I was keen to pursue a career in corporate law with a China focus. Such jobs, however, were mainly in big law firms in New York, and, as I feared and expected, it was challenging at that time for a Maryland

grad to break into a top-tier New York firm.

In addition, the one credential for a career in Chinese that I was missing was having spent any extended time in mainland China. I learned that the US National Academy of Sciences' Committee for Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China bestowed ten scholarships to postdoctoral fellows for a year of study and research in their field at a host university in China. I threw my hat into the ring.