



## Mazel Tov: The Story of My Extraordinary Friendship with an Orthodox Jewish Family

**J. S. Margot**

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J. S. Margot's memoir *Mazel Tov* is the unvarnished account of how two clashing cultures led to lasting friendship.

In her student days, Margot answered an ad to be a tutor. The woman in charge of student jobs sent her to the interview with a warning: the family was Jewish (which, she alluded, meant "cheap"). It was the first cringeworthy moment in a working relationship that turned into a friendship—but not without a lot of misunderstandings along the way.

Margot's early encounters with the Schneider family are tinged by exoticism and some cultural insensitivity, as when, though she's aware of the Holocaust's impact on the local community, she marvels over the fact that Orthodox people separate themselves from other Belgians: "was there something I was failing to understand? To see?"

But Margot, despite bristling over her nagging perception that, to the Schneiders, "different" equals "better," is also compassionate and eager to learn. When Elzira worries that she'll never be cured of the condition that leads her hands to shake, Margot comforts her, and agrees to teach her to ride a bicycle. She tutors Jakov in advance of his history exam, leading to intense conversations. She is disturbed when she hears old friends recite old prejudices that now sound wrong. Four years in: she's invited to the Schneiders' Shabbat. A few years after that, she visits the children in Israel.

The text is notable for its authenticity. Though some of Margot's recollections include perhaps embarrassing missteps, she shares them as a matter of course, capturing what it's like for willing people to bumble their way toward unlikely connections. *Mazel Tov* is a fascinating story about what is possible when pretenses are dropped and true bonds are allowed to form.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (March / April 2021)

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