

It is a Tree of Life for Those that Hold Fast to It

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Why did I have to wait – until I was 20-something years old – to first learn that Torah is an important part of Judaism that actually might be meaningful and relevant to my life? This is a question I struggle with every day. It is also the question that energizes me to dedicate my life to Jewish education, in both my personal and professional realms, in order to prevent others from having to ask it.

I can't spout off to you any formal theories about adult Jewish learning. I can't endorse a specific policy for Jewish education. I can't even quote to you any research in the field, let alone teach you the formula for how to create the perfect system in which adults can learn about their religion and their birthright. What I can tell you, however, is how I began to become an educated Jew as an adult. I can share with you my story of how my life as an informed Jew has evolved. I can offer you my opinions and my journey, which is, in some ways, strikingly similar to the growth patterns of so many other adult Jews today.

No longer an obscure enigma, there is a phenomenon that now exists with perhaps no precedent in Jewish history. There is a group that insists on foiling the "prophecies" of forecasters throughout the ages, who have said that if Judaism would endure at all, it could certainly not endure in its traditional form. This population, known as "*Baalei Teshuva*" (those who have returned to Judaism), is beginning to number its adherents in units of one hundred thousand, and has a vibrant brand of Jewish experience to thank for its success.

Four years ago, I set off on my "formal" path towards becoming an observant Jew. Although at the time I

was not particularly looking to change my very content life – I was certainly not searching for the meaning of existence – I nevertheless embarked on a return to my roots.

In reflecting back on the building blocks that led me to this point, I do not quite know where to begin. Perhaps it all started when I was a child in Sunday school. Even though I, like so many children of the modern age, was admittedly a product of a mediocre religious school experience that lost to "real life" in the competition for my allegiance, I always had a positive feeling for Judaism and never wanted to abandon it. I remember enjoying *Shabbat* dinners with my grandparents before they moved to Florida, and I recall learning little songs that taught me what each holiday represented. I reminisce on playing the part of a squash in a *Sukkot* play we performed in first grade, in celebration of the harvest! I continued my studies through my *Bat Mitzvah* and even went on to Confirmation.

The Teen and College Years

My most significant Jewish experience growing up took place on a scuba diving teen tour in Israel. I am, one could say, a poster child for the Israel Experience, since the seeds that were planted into my sub-conscience that summer were destined to flourish years later as an adult. Over the next many years, however, my Jewish involvement was decidedly sparse.

Although I majored in Religion and Women's Studies at Colgate University and was often unsuccessfully recruited to participate in Jewish events, I was more interested in building relationships with my non-Jewish boyfriends than in building the Jewish community on campus. I had many opportunities

throughout my early college years to connect with Judaism, but I somehow ended up ignoring the signs and foregoing the accompanying responsibilities. I even lived with an Orthodox Jewish family during my Junior Year Abroad in France, but I opted for weekend travel rather than the *Shabbat* experience. My European travel did, nonetheless, begin to awaken my spiritual calling, as I made it a point to visit the Jewish sites in every city. I passed through ghettos, cried through concentration camps, prayed in synagogues, and mourned at cemeteries.

Due to this growing interest in Jewish living, I spent the next summer participating in the Machon Kaplan Program, a Reform Judaism and social justice program in Washington, D.C. It was here that I found my first personal realistic connection to Judaism – a tidy match between my liberal interests and my long-lost religion – what could be better? More importantly, I found a *chevra* (peer group) of Jews who were more observant and involved in the Jewish world for cultural and religious reasons, not simply for materialistic ones (which is what I had often been exposed to growing up). I returned to my senior year of college with a renewed Jewish interest and even decided to write my senior thesis on a merger of two primary interests: “Women and the Rabbinate.”

Israel, UJA, and the Rabbinate

Not knowing what career I wanted to pursue after college, and not quite willing to commit over two years to the Peace Corps, I was fortunate to have stumbled across Project Otzma: a one-year, direct service, Jewish education and leadership development program in Israel sponsored by the North American Jewish Federations, the Israel Forum, and the Education Department of the Jewish Agency. It was here that I fell in love: I fell in love with the land; I fell in love with the community; I fell in love with the people; I fell in love with *Shabbat* – I completely fell in love with Judaism. I was what I would call a “Reform *baalat teshuvah*” (one who returns to Judaism). I was overcome by the sense of commitment I had developed towards Judaism, through my involvement with both friends and community within Jerusalem’s Reform Movement. At the conclusion of this year, I decided to work for the UJA as a stepping stone to what I decided would be the pinnacle of Jewish leadership: the rabbinate.

My tenure at the UJA again reaffirmed my dedication to the Jewish people, to Israel, and to my very liberal definitions of Jewish meaning. After a year, however, I began to experience an intellectual breakdown: I had off for holidays I had never even heard of (how pathetic that the reason I had no idea what the holiday of *Shavuot* is, was because Hebrew school was over for the year by the time it came around!); I could not answer the questions of those UJA mission participants who considered me a leader; I felt it was inconsistent that some of our functions were not kosher and therefore excluded a certain population of Jews (although I personally was eating bacon cheeseburgers at the time – and loving them!); and I could not understand why many members of our lay and professional leadership had such a similar dearth of Torah understanding!

I decided that in order to be a rabbi, I should enter the graduate program a bit less ignorant, so I enrolled in an Orthodox outreach program. Being somewhat “anti-Orthodox” at the time, this was quite a bold step for me. Frankly, one of the main reasons I chose this program was that it was free (definitely an effective outreach tool for program recruitment). But, I also felt that I should choose my educators from the most observant level of Jewish commitment. I intended to “learn it all, but do nothing” – famous last words.

The Path to Observance and Deeper Learning

I began with “Partners in Torah,” a program of *Torah U'Mesorah*, where I fought with my *chevruta* (learning partner) over women’s issues and “ridiculous extremes” for almost a year. In spite of my emotional blockages, however, I finally could not deny the intellectual consistency and integrity of the learning, and I certainly could not help being positively influenced by the religious families with whom I came into contact and by the beautiful *Shabbat* they held so dear.

The greatest shock to my system was recognizing the contrast between how little I actually knew about Judaism and how grand were my presumptions and preconceived notions about what our laws and practices entail. I became humiliated by my lack of knowledge. I was angry at the system I was raised in and even at my beloved family, for not making Judaism a greater focus and a more defined responsi-

bility in our home. I was embarrassed that the five year old children of my *Shabbat* host families were the ones teaching me how to *daven* (pray). How could I have spent from kindergarten until 11th grade in a religious school setting and come out knowing virtually nothing?!

Thank G-d, I was lucky enough – unlike most of my peers – to have at least *felt* something for my *yiddishkeit*, despite my lack of knowledge. I was shocked to realize that the Judaism I always thought was so open and accepting, actually had a very dear price attached to its glorification of autonomy: it had given away a meaningful connection with G-d and jeopardized our role as responsible, observant Jews and people. I was amazed to find out that laws could actually be binding – laws that I didn't even know about, or that I just couldn't imagine applied to my status of spiritual immunity. I was intrigued to learn that Judaism does not always espouse a “live and let live” attitude, but rather demands the responsibility of educating those Jews who may not know that Torah alone is their life-force. I felt robbed. I still feel robbed.

At this point in my learning, I realized that the rabbinate was not in the cards, but I was still unsure of my commitment to Torah. I was, in fact, dating a newly “Orthodox man,” despite our differences in lifestyle and theology. Our time together exposed me to the Orthodox world much more quickly than I would have chosen to be exposed to it myself. Ironically, due to my stubborn nature, this premature immersion may have kept me from embracing Torah much sooner, since I needed to assure myself that my growing observance would be a personal decision based on love of G-d, not on love of another person. It was at this time that I began to develop a sense of awe and trust in G-d, as both my Partner and my Teacher.

After a few years, I became *shomer Shabbat* (observant of the Sabbath) and stronger in *kashrut*, yet I was not at home in this foreign world. I then spent a summer at *Neve Yerushalayim Yeshiva* in Israel, intending to make a decision as to whether or not I would truly call this world home. If yes, then I did not care how long it would take for me to grow in *mitzvah* observance, as long as I could be certain it was my path. If no, then I would go back to the world I had always known – where my family and

friends held an open invitation for me (a profound understatement!).

Thank G-d, I chose yes. I feel that I chose life. The community at *Neve* helped to assure me that to live as a Jew means to live by the Torah. So now I am on the *derech* (path) to finding out what this all means. I am an observant Jew: *shomer Shabbat*, *shomer kashrut*, and the whole package. But I am still on that slow growth process of integrating the knowledge and skills that had eluded me for too many precious years.

Learning as an adult is not easy. There are many stumbling blocks. Not having a schedule that permits much time for such newfound interests, struggling to make life changes amidst resistance from family and friends, not having family role models or customs in the area of ritual observance – these are all challenges of adult learning. Perhaps more daunting than the desire to learn new information is the need to unlearn prior mental habits, misinformation, and misconceptions. Becoming more religious is far from an escape, crutch, or “easy way out” of making independent life decisions. Rather, it is an intense commitment that constantly challenges us to exercise our free will and to make decisions based on the acceptance and understanding of our role as Jews.

Supports for Torah Seeking and Study

Fortunately, some adult education programs have recognized these struggles and have suitably accounted for the modern Jewish predicament. Institutions today reach out to people from the lowest levels of knowledge and practice. My learning experiences in New York City include classes at *Aish HaTorah*, *Hineni*, and the *Jewish Renaissance Center*. “Aish” hosts many popular classes each week, from “Love, Dating, and Marriage,” to the weekly Torah portion, to one-on-one *chevruta* learning, to beginners’ prayer services on *Shabbat*. *Hineni* is now a “hip” hang-out for Jewish singles, as *Rebbetzin* Esther Jungreis seamlessly weaves together the Torah portion, current events, and timeless Jewish values. *Zooz* is another of my favorite outreach organizations. It is comprised of a group of volunteers who host classes, *Shabbat* camping trips, and interactive discussion experiences to ignite the soul of the undereducated and/or under-inspired Jew.

Yeshivot for *baalei teshuva* in Israel – and now even in the Diaspora – have been booming: *Neve Yerushalayim*, *Midreshet Rachel*, *Shapells*, *Ohr Somayach*, *Aish HaTorah* and the list goes on. They have all built curricula designed to teach the adult who is at the Jewish knowledge level of a child. They strive to help Jews discover the integrity and richness of their heritage, and to assist them in beginning to observe the precious *mitzvot* G-d has given us, one *mitzvah* at a time. They teach students how to develop skills for individual and partner learning, to work continually on their personal character development, and to build their newly acquired vision of a Jewish “dream home” – one permeated with G-dly presence and sanctified with *shalom bayit* (peace in the home).

Moreover, crucial in any form of adult educational experience is the informal education that comes from role models and families with whom one feels comfortable. One rabbi I learned from in Israel could not stress enough to his students, “Find thyself a Rav.” For over 3000 years, our tradition has emphasized that we learn from others, and even more so from preceding generations. This practice need not discontinue simply because our parents may be unable to serve as those teachers in every respect. I have become, over the years, an “adopted daughter” of a religious family, (namely, the family of the rabbi who runs the Partners in Torah program where I began my learning). My “adoptive parents” and their seven beautiful children have been exemplary teachers and friends to me and have stood as my role models for both *shalom bayit* and *derech erez* (way of the Jew). They have inspired me with the ideal formula of encouraging growth without imposing pressure.

Probably the most vital form of adult Jewish education is the experience of the *Shabbat* table. In a world so busy and perplexed, the interruption of routine labor allows for an unimpeded commitment to family bonding and a rededication to G-dly goals. In my own experience, *Shabbat* began as a curiously appealing, yet somewhat frustrating practice that gradually became the staple of my spiritual diet. In fact, at the 1998 AJOP (Association of Jewish Outreach Professionals) Conference, one Rabbi handed out an envelope that contained the “magic formula” for the ultimate in outreach success: inside was a small container of *Shabbat cholent*. His mes-

sage to the outreach professionals was that it’s not how slick the brochures can look or how seductive a program can be, but that in terms of transforming lives, there is nothing quite like a warm *Shabbat* meal – with good friends, spirited song, and sweet words of Torah. The integrity of Jews living Judaism – Jews embracing the *mitzvot* that G-d has so lovingly bestowed upon us – is truly a priceless gift that educates both the mind and the soul.

Despite all the warnings we received along the way, I have recently become engaged to that “Orthodox man” I had been dating through such confusing circumstances and life change. As our beloved families have come to accommodate and even to feel a sense of pride in our chosen lifestyle, they are helping us to plan a beautiful, traditional Jewish wedding. We have also decided to spend our first year of marriage learning in *yeshivot* in Jerusalem, to build the firm foundation of our Jewish home. We have much to learn in order to grow personally, to reach others, and to raise children in a household filled with the sanctity of Torah’s beauty and Truth. Our journey together is just beginning, and we are both so thankful for the many people and programs that have inspired us to come closer to Judaism and to find each other.

“The Moral of My Story”

Again, my story – although special to me – is not unique. *Baalei Teshuva* are becoming increasingly numerous. They are characterized by absolutely no distinguishing features. Their motivations and paths are too diverse to be explained away by convenient sociological justifications. In many cases, they had not been satisfied with superficial answers to their questions of Jewish relevance, including the urgency to marry within the faith simply to not upset their parents. Those who are gravitating towards Torah and a committed Jewish life are as diverse as the variety of Jewish populations that exist worldwide. The bond that ends up uniting them is that they all – at some point – become inspired by a mature Jewish education.

What brand of education could possibly be responsible for inspiring a wholesale embrace of Jewish practices and values? The answer has very little to do with mechanics or technique. Jewish education is effective when the educator exudes the sincerity and passion that accompany inspired Jewish living. It is effective when it defines

the very existence of those teaching it. It is effective when a mentor refuses to divorce intellectual exercise from tangible meaning. When the beliefs are real, the transmission is alive and the insights become applied.

As expressed by Rav Eliyahu Dessler, a 20th Century Jewish scholar and philosopher, each Jew is drawn to Judaism primarily through one of the three attributes embodied by our patriarchs:

“Each of our forefathers embodies a certain characteristic and made it the dominant theme of his *Avodas Hashem* (service to G-d). Yaakov’s drive was *Torah*. In the personality of a secular, twentieth century Jew, this drive is likely to be manifest in a strong interest in intellectual pursuits. Yitzchak’s *midah* (characteristic) was *Gevurah* (strength/discipline). His primary motivation was the desire to carry out his responsibilities. The “*Gevurah*” driven people are the doers of the world. Abraham embodied the trait of *Chesed* (loving kindness), through which he expressed his primary drive: pleasure. People with *Chesed* drives are the pleasure seekers (spiritual pleasures).”¹

There is no one path to either Jewish observance or adult Jewish education. I, personally, was influenced by Jews and programs from all denominations and outlooks. Some people are impacted through intellectual pursuits, others through emotional receptivity, and still others through a dramatic life event. Instead of judging why or how, it is the Jewish educator’s chief responsibility to create a diversity of vehicles and tools through which varied personalities may connect. We must provide the programs, the support, the *Shabbat* tables, and the knowledge, all of which are often sorely lacking in the lives of so many Jews. It is our duty to create options for adults and to ensure that Jewish education does not end at age 13. It is our mandate to convey that Jewish growth – both in educational and character development – is a lifelong process and privilege.

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1. Coopersmith, Yitzchak. (1993). *The Eye of a Needle*. Feldheim Publishers. Jerusalem.