

Who Is a *Ba'al Teshuvah*?

Thoughts of a Now-Orthodox Adult Raised in a Non-Orthodox Family

I grew up in a home where we usually watched Saturday morning cartoons on television, where we often ate *chazir*, where we sometimes opened presents set under a Christmas tree. In the context of American Jewry a half-century ago, of “religious school” a few days a week that culminated in a Bar Mitzvah—sometimes a Bat Mitzvah—that ended any semblance of Jewish education for most young Jews, it was a typical home.

Also typical for many American Jews was the path I chose years later. I veered from my childhood roots in Reform and Conservative congregations, stopped turning on the TV on Shabbat, gave up McDonald’s—and, of course, didn’t have a Christmas tree. Today, in the Orthodox synagogues where I continue to *daven*, in the *yeshivot* where I learn the intricacies of Rashi and Rambam, I look around and see myself surrounded by men, of various ages, from similar backgrounds.

Whether wearing a black hat or *kippah serugah*, many of the *mitpallelim* and *talmidim* in my circles were raised, like me, by parents who loved being Jewish and who wanted us to be good Jews, but not in the way that their *shuckling*, Yiddish-speaking, *kapata*-and-*shtreimel*-wearing immigrant parents had been.

They wanted us to be good Americans, too.

So what did we do? We went off and learned to *shuckle*. We learned Aramaic, and some Yiddish too. We put on a *kapata* and *shtreimel*.

To all appearances, we are devoted *frum* Jews, virtually indistinguishable from the *frum*-from-birth (“lifers,” we call them) Jews next to us.

We are part of the *ba'al teshuvah* movement that, contrary to secular assumptions about the imminent death of Torah Judaism, has swelled shuls and *yeshivot* in the last few generations.

Good Americans, we have shown

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that you can lead a Torah-observant life without sacrificing the professional success that our parents prized. Thanks to the growing number of Orthodox Jews, many of whom who were not Orthodox as children, you can study medicine in *shomer Shabbat* residencies. You can take clients to meals in kosher restaurants where the cuisine rivals that of any *treif* establishment. You can even run for vice president.

I don’t like labels, but I proudly identify myself as an Orthodox Jew. When pressed, I’ll even say I’m a *ba'al teshuvah*.

But questions remain. For how long can I keep calling myself a *ba'al teshuvah*? And am I really a *ba'al teshuvah*? Is anyone?

Thirty years after I made the first tentative steps toward a life of traditional Jewish observance, after I spent a month at an intensive learning program, after I began wearing a *kippah* all the time, after I asked my mother to prepare only kosher chicken in our home, after I started staying at my Orthodox friends’ homes on Shabbat so I wouldn’t have to drive, I still ask myself these questions.

The learning and *davening*, *kippah* and *kashrut* are still in place, but the question stands: What—or who—is a *ba'al teshuvah*? Is it anyone from a non-observant background who has adopted a *shomer mitzvot* lifestyle? At what point do you pass from *ba'al teshuvah* to plain *frum* Yid?

As my personal anniversary of *frumkeit* approaches, as the evolving *ba'al teshuvah* movement adopts new ways of reaching today’s potential members of the Orthodox community, the questions grip me not only on a philosophical level.

Am I flattering myself to call myself a *ba'al teshuvah*? Am I—or is anyone who has gone from zero to 613—arrogant to do so?

The term means, literally, “master of return.” What have I mastered? I’ve admitted with my mouth that I had, unwittingly to be sure, violated countless

halachot and Jewish precepts in my first three decades, but I don’t know if I feel the proper shame in my *kishkes*. I learn, but I’ve not become a *talmid chacham*. I wear a *kippah*, but I don’t know if my behavior always reflects that of a pious Jew. I keep kosher and Shabbat, but that’s the easy part.

“There are no *ba'alei teshuvah* today,” my rabbi in my hometown, now a recognized leader of Klal Yisrael in Israel, once told me. The title denotes such a commitment, such a level of knowledge, that the people who so loosely take it upon themselves shouldn’t do so, he explained.

He told a story of a man who embraced a life of Torah observance in London a century ago. Standing out in his long black coat, mocked for his adherence to Shabbat and *kashrut*, he was known as “the *ba'al teshuvah*,” so rare were his ilk in his days.

He was a ba'al teshuvah.

So I’m not a ba'al teshuvah.

So what do people like me call ourselves if someone asks about our background?

I don’t have a good answer to that question.

Several years ago I heard a story about a *talmid* from one of Jerusalem’s leading *ba'al teshuvah yeshivot*—he was *frum* from birth and admired the *yeshivah’s derech halimud*—who went to a *gadol* for a *berachah*.

The *talmid* introduced himself, identified his institution of advanced Talmudic learning and then added, “But I’m not a *ba'al teshuvah*.”

“Why not?” the *gadol* asked.

Chagrined, the *talmid* realized that it’s no disgrace to be a *ba'al teshuvah*, no matter how you define the term, no matter how many years have passed since you joined the ranks of the Orthodox, no matter how you judge yourself.

So until someone comes up with a better title, I’ll go on calling myself a *ba'al teshuvah*. ■