

Confessions of a BT Wannabe

By Charlotte Friedland

I t's a little embarrassing to admit, but I'm not a *ba'alas teshuvah* (BT). As I was born to observant Jewish parents, the outreach networks dismiss me as an "FFB"—a "*frum* from birth" specimen, not worthy of attention. The term itself suggests staleness. After all, an FFB arrives in a world where traditions and education are clearly outlined, and from that moment on, it's same ol', same ol'.

So there are no special Shabbatons, no charismatic rabbis seeking me out, no books written about my kind—except those describing us as smug, spoiled and spiritually indolent. But that's not all: the fact that our families held onto religious Judaism renders us likely to indulge in excessive triumphant bleating. And nobody invites a triumphalist to parties.

Thus it is written, and thus it is believed. Lord knows, I've tried not to be triumphant, curbed my pride in rabbinic ancestors, lowered my voice in *shul*. Yet the image persists. To remedy

the situation, I've been hanging out at outreach events, skulking around, trying my best to look lost. One must appear to be searching, that's the key.

Usually, in fact, I am searching for my keys, but no one seems to care about the small stuff. Everyone is so busy describing their personal epiphanies, so full of that glowing exuberance over critical life choices, that they can't hide their disappointment when I confess my lineage. "Oh, an FFB," they

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mouth politely, "how nice," and then move on to that fascinating individual who just entered the room, fresh from an ashram.

No, I don't remember my first Shabbos. I never struggled over reading Hebrew, nor had a defining moment of truth. But I've had a few good cries on Yom Kippur, really, and once in awhile I think to myself, "If I weren't born religious, would I be doing this?" And then my mind clicks off, unable to fathom the question.

Trained to think in Biblical terms, I look for guidance to the first FFB in history—Yitzchak. After all, his father and mother had grown up "out there." He was born after they had mastered Shabbos *zemiro*s and correct hemlines, and he was raised to be a perfect Jew from day one. Granted, it appears that he has no trace of his folks' flair for convincing people of an invisible God. Kind of withdrawn and sullen, he seems—and I think I know why. He probably felt out of place at his parents' "Judaism 101" weekends. There he is, the first FFB, standing awkwardly among all those repentant pagans, struggling to empathize with their turmoil, while his father works the tent, cheerfully spreading his light.

He nods dumbly as the caravan driver describes to him his disillusion with idols, his attempts to find meaning in camel racing, his sixteen failed marriages, his forty-three children who "just don't seem to have any values, no values at all. That's why I'm here. I'm told that Abraham is onto something big, something that could change my life. You know what I mean? Did you ever wonder 'what's it all about?'" Abraham's son shifts uneasily. "Yeah, sure. I know. I have a brother like that...." But his voice

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