

Letters

Bridging the Teshuvah Gap

■ *Yasher koach* on your excellent articles about the problems with the *ba'al teshuvah* movement ("Bridging the Teshuvah Gap" by Yaacov Haber and "Preventing Second-Generation Dropouts" by Shaya Karlinsky, summer 2004). Unfortunately, most other Orthodox publications take a "hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil" approach to the *ba'al teshuvah* movement, choosing to only sing its praises instead of dealing with it honestly. It's refreshing to read articles that discuss the topic openly.

Moshe P. Mann
Maale Levona, Israel

Among the many pressures facing the *ba'al teshuvah* is his intense need to be accepted by the religious community. It is the prevailing belief among some that the *ba'al teshuvah* must reject any vestiges of his previous life and look and act as if he were an FFB (one who is *frum* from birth). Rather than feeling proud of the transformation he went through, sadly, he often feels shame at his lack of *yichus* and the "impurity" of his former life.

By disowning a significant part of his past, the *ba'al teshuvah* is at-risk of creating a rigid adherence to Orthodoxy that is primarily based on fear rather than on a deep spiritual conviction. His children may rebel against what they consider to be his soulless religion, governed by the most extreme, and sometimes arbitrary, adherence to *halachah*. His lack of confidence and extreme need to be accepted may influence him to act in an authoritative manner with his children.

Children resent having to be a certain way so that their parents will feel okay. Usually, they either rebel or conform. In either case the child loses his sense of autonomy and is at-risk for

future problems. This is a phenomenon that is becoming increasingly common among the children of *ba'alei teshuvah*.

Michael S. Tobin
Clinical psychologist
Jerusalem

I have been struggling with the issue of rebellious children of *chozrim beteshuvah* for fourteen years, and have a worm's-eye view of it.

Most American *ba'alei teshuvah* are third-generation Americans, well entrenched in a culture that prizes critical thinking and freedom of action. This is not all bad—the *ba'al teshuvah* was raised to think and seek the truth, and he chose *Yahadut!* We should rejoice in his validation of our way of life. It is the best example of Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook's *kiddush hachol* (sanctification of the profane).

There is, of course, a downside. One can't extract three generations of freedom of thought in one generation. At age sixteen, in yeshivah, I rebelled when my *rabbeim* told me I could not read *TIME Magazine*. I chose to live and learn in a yeshivah, but I did not choose to have someone else, however learned, tell me what to read and think.

Another theme of American culture is finding one's own way by rejecting the values of the previous generation. American literature glorifies the coming-of-age theme. American youth are taught by the media to critically assess their parents' values. This enabled the *ba'al teshuvah* to find *Yahadut*. How can he now put blinders on his children?

Ba'alei teshuvah are seekers. Their restlessness is a virtue. There is a synagogue in Jerusalem called Kehillat Mevakshei Derech. What a great name for a synagogue! I wish it were Orthodox, but it happens to be Reform. Would we ever call ourselves *mevakshei derech* (seekers of a path), or even admit to being so?

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What if a child wants to actuate *ma'asei avotav beyadav* (the deeds of his father) and be a seeker, too?

We often hear that those who go off the path had troubled relationships with their parents, or that mistakes occurred during the children's upbringing because the parents did not have FFB parents. Maybe children go off because *ba'alei teshuvah* are passionate, critical seekers of the truth, and their children are, too. And maybe the children see things in the Orthodox community that their parents opt not to see.

Rabbi Eliyahu Essas, the father of the *teshuvah* movement in the former Soviet Union, once told me that being an FFB is a big *nisayon* (test). What he meant was that the excitement he and I experienced in discovering Torah as adults is not so easy to transmit to the next generation. We all have to do a better job.

Moshe Kuhr, MD
Monsey, New York

Rabbi Karlinsky responds

The problems highlighted by Dr. Tobin are exacerbated by an Orthodox community that is polarized into camps that maintain exclusivity on the truth, and by outreach work that tends to focus on short-term numbers rather than long-term growth. The result is that the real and long-term needs of Jews who are looking to grow in Torah are ignored. Dr. Tobin has too much experience in picking up the pieces; we cannot afford to take his analysis lightly.

While I share Dr. Kuhr's wish that Kehillat Mevakshei Derech was Orthodox, I don't think it just "happens to be Reform." We don't find the phrase *mevakshei derech* anywhere in Tanach, and Orthodox Jews don't consider themselves *mevakshei derech*. Rather, they are *mevakshei Hashem*, seekers of God (Mishlei 28:8). As the Maharal explains, the path that leads man towards God is only available through revelation, which the Jews experienced at Sinai. Do the *mevakshei derech* that Dr. Kuhr adulates know their destination? Seeking is a critical thing. But we need to have clarity on

what it is we are seeking.

Complacency and habit are the death of growth. The prophet rails against *mitzvat anashim melumadah* (*mitzvot* performed out of habit), and *Chazal* implore us that "every day the Torah should be fresh and new in your eyes." This is the tremendous *nisayon* of the FFB described by Rabbi Essas, which becomes the problem of the *ba'al teshuvah* within a few years (or less) of his integration into the Orthodox community. But as Torah-observant Jews, we (are supposed to) have a conviction of the beauty, value and, ultimately, the imperative of a Torah life in that it fulfills man's purpose of existence.

If parents (whether BTs or FFBs) lack that conviction in their daily lives, children will notice, whether by sensing confusion on an ideological level or by observing inconsistency on a behavioral level. It would be intellectually dishonest and Jewishly irresponsible for parents, whose search for meaning in a world of moral relativism and self-gratification led them to embrace our eternal Torah, to view their teenagers' seduction by those same forces as "actuating *ma'asei avotav beyadav*" in a quest for truth. Would Dr. Kuhr have the same laissez-faire attitude towards his child if the "search" led to a life of drugs, a livelihood based on shoplifting or the religious practices of Scientology? As mature adults, we have a responsibility to educate our children in ways that we are confident enhance their welfare.

Choosing to ignore the negative realities that exist in Torah communities undermines a parent's credibility with his children. And forbidding a sixteen-year-old from reading *TIME Magazine* may be damaging to the teenager's need for exploration. The problem with Dr. Kuhr's reaction is that as Torah-observant Jews, there are limitations on what we may read or accept as truth. The challenge of every generation is to develop leaders and educators—in the FFB and BT worlds—who understand the complexities and subtleties of the Torah in a way that enables boundaries to be set, consistent with our Siniatic experience,

without stifling individual growth and creativity. My experience shows that this balance is possible. But it requires an investment of time and resources.

Single Parenting

■ I was deeply moved by the plight of single mothers so poignantly described by Shoshana Bulow in your Just Between Us column ("A Single Mother Speaks Out," fall 2004). I agree with the suggestions Ms. Bulow makes to improve the awareness of, and sensitivity to, the single-parent family, e.g., the Shabbos invitations, social events, teacher training, financial accommodations, et cetera. But promoting the normalization and integration of divorced families into the communal structure would deprive the Jewish community of the few devices at its disposal to stem the rising trend of divorce.

Dovid Kornreich
Jerusalem

As a divorced mother with children, I agree with Ms. Bulow that the term "broken home" is needlessly painful. However, the term "single-parent home" fails to convey necessary information. There are significant differences between the issues facing a child of divorce and those facing a child who has lost a parent. Moreover, in the case of divorce, the term "single-parent home" normalizes a situation that should not be normalized, no matter how prevalent it is. While one wishes to make one's children as secure as possible within a situation of divorce, I, for one, would be greatly distressed if my children viewed divorce as an "alternative life style."

The article suggests that "pushing" teachers to talk to children of divorced parents is a way of helping them to avoid feeling ashamed. I think that a carefully chosen teacher, friend, mentor or therapist is better able to emotionally support children than one who is untrained or not sensitized to the situation of divorce. My children would not have wanted their teachers to be anything beyond "sympathetic." Had a teacher with whom they did not feel close initiated conversa-

tion, it would have been considered an invasion of privacy.

I agree that the marginalization of the divorced individual is real. An effective way to reduce this is to alleviate the discomfort that divorce causes in others. People do not want to be in a position of “choosing sides,” so perhaps spouses getting divorced should make it clear to others that there will be no resentment if they wish to maintain a relationship with the “other party.” People are uncomfortable in uncomfortable situations, and divorce is just one of many uncomfortable situations in life.

Invitations are greatly appreciated, and certainly make one feel less marginalized. However, Shabbos may be the only day that the family really is together. It is an opportunity for a parent to anchor the child in the security of a home that functions just like any other. One parent can light candles, sing Shalom Aleichem, make Kiddush, sing *zemiro*s and give and listen to *divrei Torah*. My son could not wait to become bar mitzvah so he could make Kiddush.

Anonymous

I wanted to express my appreciation for the article “A Single Mother Speaks Out.” Since my divorce nearly two years ago, I have been shocked and amazed, repeatedly, at the lack of community support for the single parent.

I am one of the extremely lucky ones—I remarried several months ago. My husband and I have managed to create a loving environment for my two children, and a real sense of family. Even with this tremendous good fortune, the path has not been easy, nor will it continue to be. “Blended” families face many issues as well. Individuals, *yeshivot* and shuls all have a long way to go in this arena.

Tzofit Goldfarb
Riverdale, New York

In her article, Ms. Bulow implies that it is easy for her divorced husband to mix in the Orthodox Jewish community, to be asked out for Shabbat meals,

to be set up on dates, et cetera. Perhaps a younger divorced man in college, professional school or soon thereafter may have frequent invitations, but someone who is older is not in the same position. Furthermore, the mature single male does not have the usual ways of meeting people—the wife’s social connections, the children’s carpool, et cetera. Unless he is socially gregarious, he either has to invite himself to people’s homes for meals—an uncomfortable experience for most—or spend every Shabbat eating by himself.

Although, it is indeed difficult for a single mother, it is no “cup of tea” for a divorced mature male either.

Paul J. Goodnick, MD
Highland Park, New Jersey

Shoshana Bulow responds

Mr. Kornreich’s statement about not wishing to promote the normalization and integration of divorced families into the communal structure is deeply disturbing. Is he suggesting that marginalization is the best way for the Jewish community to decrease the divorce rate? I have received numerous heartfelt letters from people feeling isolated and stigmatized post-divorce, and others describing staying in unhappy marriages for years out of fear of the community’s response should they separate. Creating pain and isolation is not the way to keep marriages together. Perhaps promoting pre-marital counseling or rethinking the pressure we put on men and women in their late teens and early twenties to marry so young would be better ways to stem the rising trend of divorce.

People do not enter marriage with the intention of ending it. But, sadly, divorce does happen, and the real risk of not integrating single parents and children into the larger community is that eventually it will become easier for them to leave it.

It cannot be the responsibility of single parents to help people in the community feel comfortable with divorce, just as it should not be the responsibility of anyone facing a life challenge to quell the discomfort of others. Additionally, the anonymous writer’s implication that

once her son became bar mitzvah he assumed the role of man of the house by making Kiddush is troubling. Being a single parent is hard, but parentifying children or giving them the impression that it is up to them to fulfill the roles of our missing spouses deprives them of their childhood.

The Torah, in its wisdom, gave us the option to divorce if a marriage does not work; it should not be stigmatized by our community. Untrained, insensitive teachers can make matters worse for children, which is precisely why I support sensitivity and awareness training in schools. My article never referred to divorce as an “alternative lifestyle”; embracing divorced families is not tantamount to advocating for divorce, it is acknowledging a life reality.

Chosen People

■ Readers who are still troubled that notions of Jewish specialness are hopelessly non-PC should re-read Rabbi Jonathan Blass’ article on Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook (“You Have Chosen Us from amongst the Nations,” fall 2004). No one wrote more explicitly concerning the fundamental difference between the Jewish and non-Jewish soul than Rav Kook. Yet, no one wrote more convincingly about the mission of Torah and the Jews to enhance and uplift the lives of all people on the face of the earth. Chosenness, properly understood, does not lead to a rejection of the rest of mankind, but to its embrace.

Yitzchok Adlerstein
Los Angeles, California

To explain the concept of “the chosenness of Israel,” *Jewish Action* called upon “a diverse group of thinkers” who themselves turned to Jewish scholars of previous generations for insight. However, although he is quoted in all but one of the articles, the opinion of the greatest scholar and thinker since Talmudic times, Rambam, is not consulted. Rambam writes in *Iggeret Teman*:

Know that ours is the true Divine Torah [teaching] that was given to us by the Master of all prophets. With it, He sep-

arated us from the rest of mankind as it says, “Only with your forefathers did God bond to love them, and He chose their descendants after them from amongst all the nations.” This was not because we were worthy of it, but only because of God’s mercy (chesed) upon us, because of our forefathers’ knowledge and worship of God, as it says, “Not because you were greater than all nations did God desire you and chose you, for you are the smallest of all nations.”

Dr. Fiorino’s understanding is basically in line with Rambam’s words as he quotes the text of Birchat HaTorah—*“Asher bachar banu mikol ha’amim venatan lanu et Torato,”* “Who selected us from all the peoples and gave us His Torah”—as proof that our chosenness is in that we were given the Torah, and this is what makes us special. Nevertheless, Dr. Fiorino’s claim that there was nothing special about Israel that singled them out to be chosen is too harsh.

Moreover, whereas for several of the contributors Israel is seen as a nation with a mission to the nations, Rambam speaks of no such mission.

Benzion Buchman
Brooklyn, New York

Editor’s note: In the commentary of Rav Avraham, the son of Rambam, to Exodus 19:6, he writes as follows:

“The explanation of ‘kingdom of priests’ is that the priest of each congregation is the leader, the most respected and the role model, and the members of the congregation will follow in his footsteps, and they discover the straight path through him, as the passage says, ‘By virtue of your observance of my Torah, you will be the leaders of the world; your relationship will be as the relationship of the priest to his congregation. The world will go in your footsteps, imitate your actions, and they will go in your ways.’ This I received in explanation of this verse from my father, my teacher.”

Clearly, Rav Avraham understood his father to believe in a mission to the nations.

Dr. Fiorino responds

I must make a subtle distinction between what I wrote and how Mr.

Buchman summarized my position: My claim that “we must reject the racial hypothesis of chosenness, that Jews are chosen because we are special” should not be read to mean “there was nothing special about Israel.” My rejection of “specialness” for the Jewish people was stated with respect to the idea that as a race, Jews possess unique characteristics determined by our biology. As far as national character as shaped by our morals, traditions and *avodat Hashem*—as passed down through Avraham—there is indeed much there that is quite special. Moreover, the idea that God gave the Torah to the Jewish people because of their commitment to Avraham’s message is fully consistent with my theme. I thank Mr. Buchman for bringing this Rambam to our attention. **JA**

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