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Lessons from a Veteran *Ba'alat Teshuvah*

By Barbara Bensoussan

It was with great interest that I read the *Jewish Action* articles by Rabbis Yaacov Haber and Shaya Karlinsky on the problems of *ba'alei teshuvah* (BTs) and their children in the summer 2004 issue, for here I am, twenty years and six kids after becoming religious, watching my own children grow up and start to find their places within the *frum* world. My husband and I have also been *zocheh* (privileged) over the years to help nurture quite a few young people on their paths to becoming observant Jews. The struggles of BTs and their children are consequently an issue that is very close to my heart.

Rabbi Karlinsky writes that people who become religious because they have been intellectually convinced of the truth of Torah tend to transform more slowly and steadily, and the philosophical belief structure they adopt anchors them to *frumkeit* even when they encounter difficulties in their lives. By contrast, those who have been pulled in by, what he calls, the “marketing approach” have been con-

vinced that becoming religious will vastly improve the quality of their lives and resolve all of their problems.

But, as a wise friend of mine, a convert, once observed: “Becoming *frum* doesn’t solve your problems. It only solves your *existential* problems!” In cases when the latter approach was used, when the going gets rough, the roughly formed tend to get going, because Judaism had been presented to them as a cure-all rather than as a challenge and a responsibility that we were given at Sinai.

But regardless of whether one’s attachment to Judaism was inspired by intellectual or emotional reasons, there are certain difficulties that all BTs experience. Becoming Orthodox involves learning a religion, a language, a culture and a set of attitudes. In this sense, BTs are similar to immigrants. Many immigrants adapt to a new country with ease (especially those who are young, intelligent and flexible), but others never seem to master the language or assimilate into their new environment. There are few more stressful experiences than undergoing a radical change of environment, and there are always some people who panic and simply return “home.”

It is a relatively concrete, if arduous, process for the motivated new BT to

make changes in his behavior, in the same way an immigrant changes his place of residence and his job. But an immigrant may forever have trouble understanding the *mentality* of the people in his adopted country. Similarly, it can take a BT many years to change ingrained secular-world attitudes and thoughts. For example, learning how to *kasher* one’s kitchen is a matter of following directions, but it takes more time for a thoroughly secular person to appreciate what might be *treif* or objectionable about certain television shows and secular publications. Learning to dress modestly involves following clear-cut instructions, but it takes more time to develop a sensitivity as to which topics may be inappropriate to discuss in front of children or mixed company at the Shabbat table. Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb, a senior faculty member at Ohr Somayach in Israel, once remarked that it should take a person at least fifteen years to become fully *frum*. Perhaps this is what he was alluding to.

The aggressive feminism of secular society puts newly religious women at odds with their role as the *akeret habayit*. Feminist rhetoric has warned women to be sure to keep their own needs in the forefront and to avoid compromising too often with their husbands. (“What? Allow him to walk

all over you?”) Many women have been raised to view large families as a form of female oppression, and, after years of feminist struggle to gain control of reproductive “rights,” they look with horror at the idea that a *rav* might need to be consulted in the case of very personal decisions such as family size. (The comments of non-*frum* family members don’t help either; while the first two or three grandchildren are generally greeted with tremendous joy, after that, the reaction to impending new bundles of joy tends to be: “What? *Again!*”)

Women raised in secular society are generally unprepared, both psychologically and practically, for the challenges of raising large families: for the sheer quantities of laundry and dishes, for the monotony and frustrations that often accompany large-scale housework and for the logistics of dealing with two screaming babies and one screaming toddler while trying to get enough food cooked in time for a three-day *yom tov*. While these women are often competent in their professional fields, they may have very little training or experience when it comes to caring for children or to domestic organization. The secular world promotes the idea (to both men and women) that one should invest greatly in one’s career. It identifies people not by who they *are* but by what they *do*, and equates success in a career with success in life. According to this mindset, career success, not Torah life, takes precedence over everything else; one should be willing to forsake his place of residence and even good relationships if a terrific career move appears on the horizon. In the secular world, you choose a profession in order to have a brilliant career; in the religious world, you choose a job you think you can be successful at because a Jew needs a *parnassah* to keep living as a Jew.

But this is a perspective that may also take time to develop. I will never forget the time a BT asked me to host her husband and kids for a *yom tov* meal because she was going to attend a

professional convention. “On *yom tov?*” I asked incredulously. “Well, I won’t break any *halachot*,” she said, unperturbed. “I’ll just attend the sessions.” I cannot think of a single person who is *frum* from birth (FFB) who would even *think* of leaving his or her family during a major *yom tov* to attend a professional conference. This woman had apparently learned the laws of the holiday without absorbing much of their spirit or meaning.

But in order for old secular attitudes to gradually change, it really “takes a village”—not only the sort of long-term *kiruv* support or “continuing education” that Rabbi Karlinsky suggests, but also friendship, patience and moral support from the community to

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keep the new BT from becoming isolated. One thing I found difficult as my family grew was the sense, especially during the *yamim tovim*, that I was always “going it alone,” reinventing the wheel and having to shoulder more of the burden than should be the case. As much as many BTs create networks of friends (often with other BTs, the only folks who understand what it is like to radically change one’s life and to live in between two cultures), there is no substitute for family.

When young FFBs get married, for example, many of them don’t make Shabbat for themselves until they have one or two kids; I know of people in their forties who have yet to make a Pesach Seder because they go to either their parents or their in-laws. A BT couple rarely has that luxury, even while they are still struggling with the technicalities of Shabbat or Pesach

observance. While well-meaning people often try to invite them for meals, once a couple has a child and is household (if the community has no *eruv*) or has enough children so that they have reached critical mass and nobody dares to invite them anymore, the BT *balabusta* finds herself spending many long *yom tov* evenings washing dishes alone in the kitchen.

Similarly, our children find themselves relatively lacking in extended family since BTs usually come from small families. Our kids miss out on the rich experience of having a large *frum* extended family, with all the *semachot* and gatherings, as well as the sense of security and belonging that it provides. I worry that when the time comes to marry off my children, I will not have the same breadth of social networks that are available to those who come from big families.

The child of BTs also has greater exposure to, and contact with, the non-*frum* world, with all the risks that that entails. Many FFB kids grow up unacquainted with Jews who aren’t religious; they have no idea that it is possible to be Jewish without being religious, that other lifestyle “options” exist for Jewish people. My kids, on the other hand, like many children of BTs, have grown up with regular visits from their non-*frum* grandparents, uncles and others, and while they have come to share our view that sometimes these relatives espouse non-Torah or just plain silly attitudes, they also see firsthand that it is possible to be Jewish, Jewishly-identified, a good and happy person and yet still not be *frum*. Perhaps this can be a destabilizing influence on a child whose *hashkafah* is shaky, especially if he happens to encounter *frum* people who are hypocritical or not so nice or if things at home are unpleasant due to *shalom bayit* problems or other stresses. One of my friends, who is a BT and divorced, confided to me, “Here I am, divorced, poor and *frum*, always struggling and burdened. Then my kids see my married, non-*frum* sister and her kids who are happy and successful and

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very nice people on top of it. How can I convince my kids that *our* lifestyle is the more fulfilling one?"

When the going gets rough, do we have the right answers to persuade our children that Torah really offers the more fulfilling lifestyle in the long run? Or that even if they are less "fulfilled" personally, sometimes we have to do what we believe is right regardless of how pleasant our lives may or may not be?

My friend's financial struggles lead me to another area of difficulty for many of us BTs: the sheer *cost* of *frum* life. *Yeshivot*, *semachot*, kosher food and holidays, housing in the nation's larger cities and formal clothing are unexpected expenses that throw us for a loop. When you become interested in *Yiddishkeit*, nobody bothers to tell you—maybe on purpose—"Oh, by the way, I hope you're really well fixed for money, because that nice large family you're hoping to have is going to cost you an extra forty or fifty thousand bucks a year once they're all in yeshivah!" (Or as one BT friend once said, with a sigh, "It doesn't even matter how much money you make—\$50,000, \$100,000, \$150,000—extra money just means you pay more tuition!") As my family grew, I found myself complaining loudly and frequently to my husband that I got into *Yiddishkeit* because of the *ruchniut* (spirituality), but the lifestyle seems to keep us awfully preoccupied so much of the time with *gashmiut* (materialism)!

FFBs struggle with the same financial issues, of course, but they grow up with a better idea of what to expect, and it is more common in the *frum* world for grandparents to help out with tuition, *yom tov* clothing and shoes, camp payments, et cetera. Furthermore, BTs may be less savvy about negotiating these extra expenses; we have no idea what the gap is between the tuition the yeshivah asks for and that which it realistically expects to get, how much we should try to negotiate and what programs are available to ease the burden. I realized my naiveté some years ago when one

of my neighbors, the wife of a *rosh yeshivah*, took me to task for paying too much tuition. "Why did you let [the yeshivah] get away with charging you for its dinner?" she scolded. "Why did you agree to such a high tuition? Only people who take fancy vacations and own their houses should be paying what you pay!" But I, like a Westerner entering an Arab souk for the first time, had no idea I could have bargained.

Many BTs are mystified, wondering how other families get by—big families, *kollel* families, families without large incomes. BT *yeshivot* don't teach much about the ins and outs of financially surviving as a *frum* Jew, even though

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their graduates could probably use the kind of advice my neighbor gave me.

Am Yisrael is described as having "married" the Torah at Sinai. The BT—the captive who was away for so long he forgot his origins and his people—marries the Torah all over again. The metaphor of marriage is perfect, for marriage entails commitment, challenge and putting in more than you expect to get out. It means making a lifelong obligation through thick and thin, whether life is easy or hard. It doesn't solve all of one's problems, but it provides a partner to help one through life, even though the relationship has ups and downs. Similarly, "marrying" oneself to the Torah doesn't mean one's worries are over, but rather that one acquires Hashem as a partner to guide and help him through life's vicissitudes.

Getting married means giving up certain things—a large measure of freedom, certain career choices that may be incompatible with the marriage, money that could be used for personal gratification rather than for investing in the future. But the payoff is a lifestyle with greater structure and meaning, a family and a community, a more anchored role in society.

The person who "marries" the Torah makes a similar tradeoff, giving up certain personal gratifications for the long-term goal of having a relationship with Hashem and all the personal growth that this relationship engenders.

A final story: Last year my husband and I made our first Bar Mitzvah. Our son had been very secretive about learning his *parashah*, never practicing in front of us, and only the reassurances of his tutor gave us some confidence that he was in the least bit prepared. When he finally stepped up to the Torah and began to *layn*, with, what I considered, unexpected ease and aplomb, I embarrassed myself by falling to pieces.

I sat in the *ezrat nashim* (women's section), sobbing like a baby. It wasn't just a matter of motherly pride, or relief that he was pulling it off so well. No, I felt engulfed by a wave of something that ran even deeper: the sense that despite all the sacrifices and struggles, all the moments of self-doubt and kvetching, my husband and I were finally reaping the fruits of our labors. We had raised a child who can open a Gemara and learn, who can *layn* from a *sefer Torah*, who has taken on the *ol Torah vemitzvot* and is continuing the *mesorah* (tradition). Because of our efforts, the chain of Torah in our families has finally been repaired, hopefully never to be broken again.

My husband and I may be poorer and more "restricted" than our old non-*frum* friends. But we are reaping profound, authentic *Yiddishe nachas* in spades. At such moments, I just want to shout to all the other BTs out there: Stick with the program, because when Jewish life succeeds, it's the most beautiful thing in the world. 