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This article, "How I stopped Being Afraid of the Religious and Began to Wear an 'Invisible Kippah,'" was circulated by the Beit Hillel Organization in Israel. The author of the article is Eran Rolls, Chairman of the Israeli Building Center, and a member of the Executive Board of Beit Hillel. Beit Hillel works to spread an intelligent and inclusive Orthodoxy in Israel. You can learn more about Beit Hillel by going to their website beithillel.org.il. There is a link to click to get the English translation of the website material.

If, ten years ago, someone had told me that I would be a member of the board of a religious, rabbinic organization, that I would attend synagogue services every Shabbat, that I would put on tefillin, and that I would even write an article for a religious publication – I would have laughed and explained how severely mistaken that person was: I, the proud member of Hashomer Hatzair, who is secular in every fiber of his body?! Nevertheless, something no less than a revolution took place in my life, and a substantive change in my worldview. Like many revolutions, the change began with something small.

But, if I may, I would like to begin at the beginning. I was raised near Haifa, and I was taught the values of secular socialism, the love of Israel, tolerance, social responsibility – and many other values that can also be found in the Torah – as a member of the Kiryat Haim section of Hashomer Hatzair. In my childhood, there was no connection between the religious and secular residents, and no attempt was made to establish such a connection. The two communities lived side-by-side like oil and water, never mixing. In the army, I served in a mostly secular unit, whose members came from backgrounds similar to my own. When a religious soldier would arrive, our mission was to see how long it would take for us to get him to watch television on Shabbat, and to remove his kippah. We had quite a few “successes”.

After the army, I met my wife, Irit, who had been raised in a traditional Jewish home, and we had four children. Until about a decade ago, a connection ith God was foreign to me, and was always associated with the corrupt religious establishment, on the one hand, and extremist settlers, on the other. I wrongly assumed that there was a part of the Jewish people that had an exclusive license from God. In the meantime, my hard work bore fruit, and I managed to purchase the Israeli Building Center.

The biggest change in my relationship with religion and Judaism began in that framework, as I came to know several religious people involved in the construction industry. Work-related discussions began to digress to discussions about life, family, children, lifestyle, and we even got together with our wives. Slowly, for the first time in my life, I began to have real friendships with religious people. One day, our friends, Meir and Revital Noga, invited us to their home for Shabbat dinner. Meir gently suggested that I come early and accompany him to the synagogue. What I did not know at the time was that Meir had consulted with his rabbi, and had received what was then a rather innovative rabbinic decision, allowing him to invite me and my family for Shabbat, even though it meant that we might desecrate Shabbat. We went to synagogue together – for me, it was the first time in 30 years – and we sat down together for Shabbat dinner with their beautiful family.

Back then, we also became very close friends with a family from Givat Shmuel, Michal and Meir Mizrachi, whose children became close friends of our children, and Iris and Dvir Granot from Tzur Yigal. Through those acquaintances with those special people, I learned how beautiful and special Judaism is, and that, wow, some of it suits me. Who would have imagined that one day the rabbi who allowed us to come for Shabbat, and who opened that door, Rabbi Ronen Neuwirth, would become a friend whom I would join in working together to establish the Beit Hillel organization?!

More than ten years ago, I began putting on tefillin daily, making kiddush and saying birkat hamazon after meals. Two years later, I began attending synagogue services on Friday evenings (in the community center of my moshav, Ramot Hashavim), and a year later, I began attending Saturday morning services, as well, becoming a regular member of the minyan. Due to the small number of worshippers in the synagogue in Ramot Hashavim, Benzi (perhaps the only Orthodox person in the community), began to encourage us to lead services. Slowly, we began to add other “secular” Jews.

But the turning point came during the Second Lebanon War (2006), when one of the women began attending Friday night services on a regular basis, and other women followed. The women began bringing their children, and their husbands soon followed. Today, twenty-five families are members of the Ramot Hashavim congregation. If you had asked people in Ramot Hashavim five years ago if such a thing were possible, they would have said that you were hallucinating. Every Monday, we study the weekly Torah portion at one of the homes in the community. Because we did not have a kosher Torah scroll, I assumed the responsibility of having one written (when I was told that I was crazy, and that it was very expensive, I replied that, in any case, everything I earn is granted to me from Above, so it really isn't mine anyway), and two years ago, I brought it to the synagogue in a procession in which hundreds of residents participated, with musical accompaniment that rocked the whole neighborhood.

This year, we held hakafot shniyot for the first time. We are on the way. We are not (yet) Shabbat observant, and perhaps some of us never will be. But we are now firmly rooted in the world of Torah and tradition, like thousands of other Israelis throughout the country – people with "invisible kippot". None of this would have occurred had it not been for the Noga family from Kfar Ganim, the Mizrachi family from Givat Shmuel, and the Granot family from Tzur Yigal, who opened their hearts and their homes, and were it not for the invitation to be their Shabbat guests, and having us as guests in their home. They lit the Jewish spark that exists in every Jew. They showed me the beautiful side of Judaism and Jewish tradition. Thanks to their outstretched hands, my children are growing up together with theirs, and when my son joins the army, he will not be motivated to encourage his observant friends to watch television on Shabbat, but the opposite.

So, what do I ask of the religious community? I ask them to learn from the Noga, Granot and Mizrahi families. Open your hearts and homes to your friends, coworkers and neighbors. Friends, the time is ripe in Heaven and in Israel. You must take advantage of this opportunity to be part of the unification of the Jewish People. That, I believe, is the current mission of Religious Zionism. May we fulfill the statement of the rabbis in the Midrash (Song of Songs, 5:2) - "Open up for me an opening like the eye of a needle and in turn I will enlarge it to be an opening through which wagons can enter."