Finding Orthodoxy

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My path to Orthodoxy was unorthodox, and that has made all the difference, I think, in what I hope for and expect as part of Orthodox Jewry.

I was the child of an American-born mother from a religious home and an immigrant father whose family had fled the pogroms of the Ukraine in the early 1900s. While my mother's father was a devout Jew from Poland who took up house painting as a profession when he realized most other jobs in New York would force him to work on the Sabbath, my father's father was a colonel in the Russian army and a boxing champion. I don't remember anything remotely religious about our household except for my mother lighting candles Friday night. But when I turned six, our lives underwent a traumatic change when my dear father, z'l, tragically died following a short illness.

Stranded in a low-income housing project in the Rockaways filled with welfare recipients, my widowed mother wanted desperately to get my 12-year-old brother out of the neighborhood's delinquency-prone junior high school. Taking the bus to affluent Jewish Far Rockaway, she invaded the offices of the director of the Hebrew Institute of Long Island—an expensive Orthodox Jewish Day School housed in former summer mansions by the sea—demanding they take in her eldest.

According to family legend, she was asked to pay a five-dollar fee for an IQ test. Only after she'd paid, did they explain that if admitted, my brother (who didn't know any Hebrew) would be placed in first grade for religious studies and seventh grade for secular studies. I vaguely remember my brother's explosive reaction to this offer, which sent my mother scurrying back to request the return of her five dollars. It was non-refundable, they told her, but perhaps you have another child…?

As my younger brother was barely three, I was the only, obvious, candidate.
At the time, I was in first grade, happily enrolled in multi-racial P.S.92, envious of my Catholic classmates who were allowed to leave school once a week with the nuns for religious instruction. It seemed exotic, and most of all, it got them out of class.
To take advantage of the scholarship being offered, my mother switched me.

I wasn't happy.

Still in the throes of my young life's transition from peanut butter and jelly into the drama and heartache of longing for my lost father, I struggled with the long school day, the double program, the strange letters of a language written backwards I felt as an American I didn't, and would never, have any use for. But slowly, I began to see things differently.

Invited to my classmates' homes for the weekend, I was entranced by the rituals of Shabbat: the lovely set table, the chilled wine in silver cups, the father at the head blessing his children, the mother at ease praised by Eshet Hayyil, in charge of a smoothly-running household, so unlike my own. The songs, the preparation for the holidays began to enchant me. I stopped watching cartoons all day Saturday, taking the long walk to a synagogue in middle-class Arverne, enchanted by the silver Torah chalices, the velvet ark cover embroidered in gold thread, the stained-glass windows, the glowing wooden pews, all of which fired a lonely, dreamy child's vivid imagination.

But there was no instant decision to become religious. My mother was not pushing me in any direction. The school didn't demand proof of Sabbath observance (and if they had, I would have been expelled). I took it all in, but at arm's length and at my own pace.

Finding Orthodoxy and accepting it upon myself was a totally independent decision that took many years. I was at least 13 when a new teacher entered my life. He was a Hareidi rabbi from Jerusalem, very thin, with a wispy beard and a thick accent when he spoke English or even Hebrew for that matter. The girls, myself included, thought he was a riot. He was teaching us Humash. One day, though, he began teaching us Parashat Mishpatim. "You shall not mistreat any widow or orphan. If you mistreat them, I will heed their outcry as soon as they cry out to me, and my anger shall blaze forth and I will put you to the sword and your own wives will be widows and your children orphans."
To a fatherless orphan who daily witnessed her widowed mother's struggles, the words resonated so deeply that I took another look at religion. Religion then was the practice of goodness toward others, especially the unfortunate, people I knew a great deal about. The poor, the orphaned, the widowed, the stranger, the convert. My path to Orthodoxy started with this. From this small road sign, I followed a path that led me to a sincere love of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of compassion and justice. Eventually, this led me to Orthodoxy, a place which I believed housed a sincere dedication to pleasing this God I loved by doing His bidding as outlined in His Torah, both oral and written.

My moment of truth came when I was invited to the wedding of one of my cousins in far-off Pennsylvania. My aunts—my father's sisters—offered to take me with them to the celebration. On Saturday, they picked me up in their car and drove. On the way, we stopped at a Howard Johnson for lunch. My aunt ordered lobster. I remember distinctly how she cracked it open and speared the white meat with her fork, dipping it into melted butter. Then she dangled it in front of me. "Try it. It's delicious," she cajoled. As I recoiled, she laughed. It was then I realized that I was not, and would never be, like her. Without even realizing it, I had passed over into Orthodoxy.

From then on, I never desecrated the Sabbath again. In fact, I did everything I could to turn our home into the home of my classmates. Taking the shopping cart, I walked to the kosher butcher and bakery every Friday while my mother was at work, getting her instructions over the phone on how to prepare chicken soup. When she arrived home minutes before candle-lighting, the table was set, the meal prepared. But before I allowed the meal to begin, I insisted someone make

Kiddush. I am sure my sudden, bossy enthusiasm rubbed my elder brother the wrong way, but I persisted (and he eventually also became Orthodox, sending his kids to the same school he'd refused to go to).

I cleaned for Passover, and readied the house for the New Year. At school, I was more and more serious about my religious studies, and by the time I graduated at 18, I was fully committed to becoming the most religious person I could be: everything the Torah was asking of me, I would happily do, out of love for God, who in many ways had replaced my earthly father, becoming part of everything I did, or thought, or hoped to achieve.

I applied to college, but also looked around for a Jewish studies program so that my knowledge would grow equally in both spheres. I wound up at the Sara Schneirer Hebrew Teachers Seminary in Borough Park run by the esteemed Rabbi Bulman, z"l, who was familiar to me from his lectures as a rabbi of the Young Israel of Far Rockaway along with those of my own beloved Rabbi Chait, z"l,the rabbi of the Young Israel of Wavecrest and Bayswater.

Going to college during the day, I attended Seminary at night. It wasn't easy. In order to manage, I had to rent a room in Borough Park because there was no way I could travel home to Rockaway so late at night. One of my teachers, a devout Hassidic rav from Mea Shearim, offered me a room in his home at the going rate. I agreed, moving in. But halfway through the year, he suddenly asked me to pay a higher sum. He'd expected to house several students in the room I was using, he explained, but none had appeared. For the pittance I was paying, they preferred to have their room back. I told them that unfortunately I couldn't afford to pay more.

Soon afterward, the rav's daughter knocked on my door holding a pile of papers. She told me her father was working on a book and asked me if I could type up these pages. At the time, I was working two challenging academic programs in addition to paying my own expenses, including rent, through a work-study program.

But what could I say? He was my teacher, a respected rav who I saw getting up every morning at 5:00 to study Talmud. I took the papers. In addition to typing, the manuscript needed major, time-consuming editing to turn it into proper English. Finally, I handed over the work. Instead of a thank you, the next day, the daughter returned with another pile, making me feel like that girl in the fairy tale who has to spin an endless supply of straw into gold. Taking a deep breath, I handed the papers back to her, explaining that I just didn't have time.

The next day I was asked to leave.

It was too late in the term to find another apartment. It meant I would have to leave the Seminary, which I did, going back home. Eventually, to his credit, the rav must have realized this, calling me to apologize and to offer me my room back at the old price. At that point, though, my hurt feelings and disappointment wouldn't allow me to accept.

This was my first, but certainly not my last, encounter with the harsh reality of the ideals of Orthodoxy clashing with the behavior of people who, at least outwardly, seemed to be living a sincerely Orthodox lifestyle. It was a sad lesson, I thought, but one I didn't allow to dampen my desire to live a totally committed Jewish life as I had always understood it from the rabbis and teachers who had been my religious mentors for so many years. I chalked it up as a strange anomaly.

Soon after I met my husband, a yeshiva high school graduate. Our decision to make aliya after marrying was a religious one based on "lekh lekha me-artsekha." Neither of us had ever been to Israel, but we didn't want to be like the spies sent out by Moshe to scout the land. Whatever we would find there, we told ourselves, we would learn to love.

We did.

At the time I was wearing a wig, and my husband had grown a beard. We wanted very much to be part of the Hareidi world, considering it the most sincere expression of religious devotion. We moved into Jewish Agency housing set aside for religious olim in Sanhedria Hamurhevet in Northern Jerusalem. I became friends with my neighbor, a young Hareidi rebbitzen from Williamsburg—let's call her Shaindee—with six small children. A few months into the year, Shaindee came to me with a shocking request: She needed help getting a passport. Her husband had taken hers away. He was not working, and he was beating her and the children. She needed to escape.

The concept of domestic abuse among those presenting themselves as the ultimate in God-fearing Jewry sent me reeling with profound shock. How could such a thing be possible?! It went against everything I thought being a religious Jew was about. This, too, I branded an anomaly.

But a few years later, in another Jerusalem neighborhood, another neighbor, a Hareidi rebbetzin, jumped out of a Tel Aviv hotel window from the 23rd floor, clasping her three year- old daughter in her arms, killing them both. She was my neighbor, and the child—a little blonde angel— had attended gan with my son.

The words of the song “Blowin’ in the Wind” went through my head: “How many times can a man turn his head and pretend that he just doesn’t see?”

Through my shock, and horror and tears, I investigated. This, too, was an abused woman married to a sexual deviant guilty of both wife and child abuse presenting himself as a tzadik and an illuy. Years later, I met the aunt of his second wife—an 18-year-old rabbi’s daughter from Lakewood—who would later divorce him, saying: “This time, you’re going to jump, not me.” But at the time of his first wife’s suicide, many of the religious people in our neighborhood expressed sympathy for him, painting the tragedy as the insane actions of a mentally ill girl he’d been saddled with by her devious, wealthy parents.

My decision to turn this story into a novel was truly based on the idea that religious Jews simply didn’t understand that there was a problem with domestic abuse in the religious world. I would enlighten them, thereby winning their gratitude and spurring them on to make vast changes in line with the Torah that would prevent these things from ever happening again….

The personal vilification I suffered (and continue to suffer) following the publication of Jephte’s Daughter and the two books that followed, all novels based on true stories in the Hareidi world, has left me older, wiser, and sadder, but no less committed to Orthodoxy as it was taught to me by the lovely families that invited me into their homes as a child, and the wonderful rabbis and rebbitzins who transferred to me their knowledge of Torah, Prophets, Jewish law, Jewish history, and Jewish custom.

It has not been easy.

In the half-century since I entered the world of Orthodox Jewry, that world has undergone wide-ranging and cataclysmic changes, no less than those imposed on tradition by the Reform and Conservative movements. But unlike Reform and Conservative Jewry, the changes in Orthodoxy have struck at its deepest heart, the core of meaning from Orthodox life as it was taught to me and which I decided to follow so many years ago.

Take “daas Torah,” for example, a brand new concept that gives rabbis license to abrogate every interpersonal law in the actual Torah, including allowing people to pursue venal agendas with backstabbing gossip, destroying the livelihood and reputations of those who disagree them. A very small and recent example is the story of the young girl from Satmar who had the temerity to ask for justice from a religious “counselor” who had sexually abused her from the age of twelve. The

Satmar community, with the support of its rabbinic authority, supported the counselor, even after a court convicted him on all counts. After the verdict, the “rebbe” went out of his way to publicly and with great fanfare place a mezuzah on the doorpost of a new business openly competing with that of the victim’s father, thereby attempting to ruin the man’s livelihood.

This disappointment in weak, cowardly rabbinic leadership is unfortunately supported by many such examples, the most extreme, perhaps being the inability (or lack of desire?) of Orthodox rabbinic leadership to solve the problem of the extortion of women by their husbands during divorce.

While rabbinic authorities of the past have had no problem in finding ways around laws specifically written in the Torah including not having bread in the house on Pessah (we sell our hametz to a non-Jew) or taking interest on loans (there is the prosbul), when it comes to annulling a marriage contracted under false terms (the husband turns out to be a homosexual, sexual deviant, wife-beater, and so forth, all information hidden from the woman, who would never have contracted such a marriage) apparently no solution can be found. The extortion of women rightfully seeking divorce in Rabbinic Courts, even when the dayyanim agree with her and demand the husband to comply, continues on a daily basis all over the world.

Attempts by sincere, well-meaning rabbis to circumvent the problem with prenuptial agreements have also been thwarted by the lack of agreement and will among Orthodox rabbis to insist it become a normal part of every marriage ritual, thus shifting the responsibility to the young couple and their families, who are often too embarrassed to bring the matter up. Surely an abused wife or an aguna is as vulnerable as any widow or convert or orphan, and thus coming to her aid is in the deepest spirit of the Torah. That a permanent halakhic solution to these problems continues to elude rabbinic authorities strikes at the heart of the Torah’s message to us. In the same vein, this disregard for human suffering, for justice, for the feelings of others can be seen in the outrageous decisions by Israeli rabbinical courts in cancelling conversions. Can there be any worse way to oppress a convert than declaring their marriages illegal, their children not Jewish?

Unfortunately, the rise of these injustices has been concurrent with the increasing power of Hareidim over Rabbinic Courts in Israel, which have displayed a disregard for women’s rights and the rights of the convert. A small example of the former: The woman, about whom I wrote the play Women’s Minyan was issued a restraining order by the Jerusalem Rabbinic Court after her divorce from a philandering husband which prevented her from seeing her 12 children. No reason was given. No permanent custody decision was ever reached. To this day,

13 years later, the Court, despite repeated requests, has never reached such a decision, nor has it insisted at the very least that the husband allow visitation. The damage can never be undone.

Further damage to the core values of Orthodox values has crept in over the last few decades with the rise of practices that can only be described as magic and superstition. Despite all that is written in the Torah against witchcraft and idolatry, the popularity of red strings, the rituals of throwing candles into fires, written and spoken kabbalistic incantations have become commonplace practices which few Orthodox rabbis have had the courage to strongly and publicly condemn. In line with this, visiting the graves of Jewish saints and asking them to intercede on our behalf with God (or for that matter, visiting a living kabbala master or “saint” and asking him for the same) surely reeks of idolatry in its most basic sense, i.e. the setting up of an intermediary between oneself and God? Yet, those practices, too—once solely the custom of Christians and Muslims—have become ingrained in Orthodoxy despite tepid rabbinic protests voiced over the years. The public disgrace of Chabad declaring their rebbe to be the Messiah who was going to rise again after his death was also swept under the carpet after some raised eyebrows.

But one of the most radical veering from Jewish law and tradition that has created the deepest and most hateful schism within the Jewish state is the demand that yeshiva students be supported by public funds so they will not have to work, despite the fact that such a demand has no basis in Jewish law or tradition.

Au contraire.

As Maimonidies wrote hundreds of years ago: Anyone who decides to be engaged in Torah [study] and not to work, and will be supported by Tzedaka—this person desecrates God's name, degrades the Torah, extinguishes the light of our faith, brings evil upon himself and forfeits life in the World to Come; since it is forbidden to derive benefit from the words of Torah in this world. The Rabbis said (Avot 4:5): Anyone who derives benefit from the words of Torah in this world, forfeits his life in Olam haBa. They further commanded and said: (Avot 4:5) Do not make them [the words of Torah] a crown to magnify yourself or an axe with which to chop. They further commanded, saying: (Avot 1:10) Love work and despise positions of power. And: (Avot 2:2) Any Torah which is not accompanied by work will eventually be nullified and will lead to sin. Ultimately, such a person will steal from others.”

The second deepest schism is the demand of the yeshiva world that their students continue to receive an exemption from the draft. This demand, made with an arrogant sense of entitlement, has infuriated both secular and dati-leumi Jews, uniting them politically into a power base that has shut out our Hareidi brothers and sisters from Israel's government for the first time in many years. The drafting of yeshiva students is going to happen, despite the outraged "religious" objections of the yeshiva world, and its branding of both secular and dati-leumi Jews as "amalek," for supporting this.

Rightly so.

One has only to look at the simple wording of the Torah itself in Devarim 20: "When you take the field against your enemies…ask…is there any man who has built a new house but has not dedicated it? Let him go back to his home, lest he die in battle and another dedicate it." Similarly, exemptions are granted "to anyone who has planted a vineyard… is engaged to be married… is afraid and disheartened."Moreover, even these exemptions are conditional. According to the Mishnah (Sotah, 8:7) in a mandatory war (or as phrased by the Ramban, a Mitzva war) "even a groom in his room, and a bride under her canopy takes part." Draft exemptions for learning Torah are a very, very new invention.

I have no doubt my learned Hareidi opponents can swiftly debate all these points with chapter and verse from their own rabbinic leadership. But even they must admit there is a strange irony in the introduction of all these, vast unwelcome changes in traditional Orthodoxy accompanied as they are by the rigidity in the interpretation of halakhot supported by these same rabbinical authorities.

Nowhere is this more blatant than in the Orthodox attitude toward women's role in Jewish ritual. The desire of arguably the most vastly educated and able of Orthodox women in Jewish history for a more active role in Jewish ritual life has often been denied simply on the grounds that a woman called to the Torah "dishonors" the congregation.

Having occasionally attended an egalitarian Orthodox minyan in Modiin, in which men and women, separated by a mehitza, share in conducting the service, women and girls getting aliyot to the Torah, layning, and giving the learned Torah discourse, I can honestly say that while I still prefer the old ways, I see nothing but good in the new ways. Women learning to layn, and involving their daughters, is an excellent way to ensure mothers and wives as active synagogue members, and enthusiastic supporters of religious community life.

While mainstream Orthodox congregations are slowly adopting new rituals to include women including giving women their own Sefer Torah with which to dance on Simhat Torah and the “naming of the daughter” ceremony in which the entire family, including the mother and baby girl, stand before the entire congregation reciting prayers of thanks and haGomel and naming the child, this is not enough.

In my opinion, the ultimate solution to this conflict is to make the synagogue service more meaningful to both men and women so that women won’t feel that the only way for them to deepen their spirituality in prayer is to don a tallit and a kippah. To pray as part of a congregation that is divinely inspired toward the height of spirituality can open up one’s mind and profoundly expand one’s heart with love for the object of our prayers. How many times, however, does the experience do that? And how many times is it a futile attempt to hurry through obligations and get to Kiddush?

There is no one solution to that, but it’s something that must be on the agenda for the coming years if we are to combat the growing allure of alternative prayer services, the Breslaver howling at the moon in the forest. While Breslav doesn’t denigrate the need for a traditional prayer minyan, many of our kids who have been to the forest have found the experience paints in fine relief the emptiness of hollow mouthings to stale tunes among disinterested adults in the average Orthodox congregation.

What I would like to see in the next century for Orthodoxy is innovation whose sole purpose is a return to authenticity; a rededication to the values and spirit of the Torah that convinced me to embrace Orthodoxy in the first place.

A more authentic Orthodoxy would mean a sincere desire to return to “Do not do anything to your neighbor you would find hateful if done unto you.” Surely this would include all domestic abuse, all child abuse, all child molestation, all sexual abuse. Instead of the well- documented desire of many Orthodox rabbis and their communities to hide these offenses and these offenders, to keep them from punishment by secular authorities, there would be a general rabbinic outcry that demanded anyone with knowledge of such crimes bring the criminal to light and to justice in whatever way possible. The law of “moser” often used to excuse the whitewashing of Orthodox pedophiles in the community, would be clearly denounced.

A way must be found for the religious community in Israel to be full participants in the building and defense of the Jewish State, the beginning of our redemption, based on the words of the Torah, the Mishna and the Rambam. Does Moshe not

admonish those who refuse to take possession of the land: “Will you sit back and let your brothers risk their lives?”

An authentic Jewish way must be found to recognize the modern miracles of the founding to the Jewish State and the ingathering of the exiles from the four corners of the earth. We say Hallel for Hanukah and Purim. Why not a consensus for saying it on Israel Independence day, surely equal in its miraculous intensity following as it did the most horrific destruction of our people in its long and bloody history, certainly as meaningful as that of the victory of the Maccabees or the Jews of Persia?

In the same vein of authenticity, should not there be a clearly defined halakha that commands the Jews of the Diaspora “leave their homes and their birthplace” and move to Israel? Or at the very least, visit? Should not the Orthodox Jews of Cedarhurst, Lawrence, and the Upper West Side of Manhattan be obliged by such a halakha? Not to mention the Jews of Golders Green, Lakewood, and Monsey?

A return to authenticity and the words of the Torah will only become natural when Tanakh is once again taught side by side with Talmud. In our enthusiastic desire to imbue our sons with Talmudic learning, we are forcing our sons into learning Talmud before they are intellectually or emotionally ready to embrace the profound lessons it has to impart, running the very real risk of alienating them forever from this foundation of Jewish life. All of us are witness to the alarming side effect of these educational mistakes, from boys from religious homes bailing out en masse from religious schools and life, as well as the rise of Hareidi hooligans who force women to the back of buses and throw things at little girls on their way to school, having learned none of the simple lessons of respect and humanity, kindness, and compassion for the weak I learned directly as a child so long ago from the simple words of the Tanakh.
In the wonderful book, Hakhamim, Volume One, author Rabbi Benjamin Lau describes the vast changes in Jewish practice instituted by Shimon HaTzadik necessitated by the Babylonian exile. The teaching of Torah was taken out of the hands of the Kohanim and given it to Anshei Kenesset HaGedola, theTorah was translated into Aramaic, Torah readings were instituted every three days, and the laws of muktzah were enacted to combat widespread desecration of Shabbat. If such remarkable changes were made necessary by only 70 years of exile, how many changes does the challenge of a 2,000 year exile necessitate to ensure the strength and continuity of the Jewish religion during the miraculous ingathering of the exiles that has taken place since 1948?

The time has come for a courageous, widely based consensus of truly pious rabbinical scholars to reassert their leadership in instituting halakhic changes to address the needs crying out to be met in Jewish law and custom of our own miraculous age in all walks of Orthodox life, from fairer marriage and divorce laws, to more inspiring synagogue services, to more effective religious education for both girls and boys, including pre-marital counseling which not only teaches the halakhot of taharat haMishpaha, but also how to be a loving and effective partner in building a Jewish home. This must start with moral clarity in rabbinical leadership. Politics and rabbinic leadership need to part ways, swiftly and forever.

Sadly, those modern changes that have taken place have transformed Orthodoxy into a place I must admit I never envisioned inhabiting 50 years ago when I chose to be part of that world. That shining beacon of morality, justice, compassion, and Godliness that had attracted me has been dulled by ineffective leadership, and the rise of religious dogmatists and fanatics who on the one hand have introduced, vast, inauthentic changes to Jewish practice, while on the other resist at all costs all positive, necessary change to adapt Orthodox practice to the true meaning and spirit of the Torah.

What gives me hope for the future is our past. Often in our long history, the lessons of our Torah have been forgotten by the masses, hidden from us as a nation. But they have never been extinguished.

In modern Israel, filled with the children of the miraculous ingathering of the exiles, there are now more believing Jews than almost any other time in our history. Among them, I see a new determination to fan the living embers into a new conflagration, a bright beacon, a hearth, at which every Jew filled with a sincere love of God can warm him or herself; a place in a cold and alien world that every believing Jew can truly call home.