

Ba'al Teshuvah Twice Over

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Poet Robert Bly speaks of two periods of “opening” in human life, roughly between 18 and 23 years of age, and then again sometime in one’s mid-40s. The first of these coincides with our college years, a time of notable openness to new ideas, new ways. It was as a freshman at Yeshiva College that I was introduced to serious religion, and I became an enthusiastic participant. My engagement lasted only five years. I was very much in love with the Orthodox life, the practices, and the learning. But for better or worse I had a philosophical conscience.

I entered Yeshiva in 1960. Having no substantial Jewish education--I don’t count the horrors of pre-bar mitzvah Hebrew School--entered (what was then called) JSP, the Jewish Studies Program. The program was led and inspired by Rabbi Morris Besdin, a wonderful human being, gifted educator, and incisive interpreter of the Ramban. Rabbi Besdin was strikingly undogmatic; he loved good, even impossible, questions, so long as they were the product of honest probing. That Orthodox religion could be a source of such intellectual richness was something I never expected—and equally so, the deep spirituality in the air. I felt as if I had come home and to something I had not known to exist.

At the same time I was troubled by the ambitious truth claims of Orthodoxy. Beginning with belief in God and continuing from there, I was less than sure about any of it. Philosophy^¾something equally new, equally wonderful ^¾was of great help here. My introduction was provided by a visiting student from the University of Toronto, Sydney Goldenberg. There were lots of wonderful late nights in Ruben dorm talking through the thorny questions of faith.

As my engagement with traditional Jewish life intensified, and especially as I was introduced to the joys of Talmud, my theological worries fell into the background. I simply loved the life, the learning, and the community. I spent three years in JSP, and then moved to Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein's shiur in the regular yeshiva program. Rav Lichtenstein modeled what I took to be a very advanced form of religious engagement: intellectual rigor combined with an almost breathtaking humility. I felt a sense of privilege learning in his presence, not to speak of under his guidance. Religion, for Rav Lichtenstein, enhanced the human project; serious religion and serious humanism—a dream.

The Orthodox world to which I was exposed suited my political and social instincts pretty much perfectly. This was in the early 1960s, before many of us were awakened to issues about the engagement of women. But the atmosphere I lived in^{3/4}others at YU lived in different worlds^{3/4}exuded a sense of fairness and decency, a sense that serious human concerns would never be dismissed in the name of religion. Looking back, it was a world of the 1960s (minus the excesses of that period), and Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik was its inspiration and spokesperson, a golden age of Modern Orthodoxy.

After five years of college^{3/4}I had extended college to devote time to Talmud^{3/4}I entered the semikha program and the Kollel. But for reasons or causes that I only partly understand, my theological concerns were again becoming prominent. The summer after college and before semikha I was teaching Talmud at YU's Camp Morasha by day and obsessing by night about theology. By the end of the summer, I knew that I had to leave the semikha program. I had thought through (and under and over) my belief in God to the extent that, as I would have put it, (and this is only a little embarrassing) a just God would understand why I could not believe.

I started dating Barbara Lipner during my Yeshiva College days. Our families were next-door neighbors in Spring Valley, NY; we had met when I was 13 and she was eight. The Lipners were the only Orthodox people in the neighborhood and I spent many Shabbat meals with them. When I left religious life Barbara and I parted ways but then unparted them a short time later. Our marriage^{3/4}now 44 years old--was respectful of our religious differences and mutually supporting. Still, our differences, and especially raising children in the light or shadow of such differences, required discussion, work, attention.

And then, in my 40s--Bly's second opening--religion exercised its magic a second time and I became a real ba'al t'shuvah. (I refer here not to fervor but quite literally to a return to something I had left.) Not that I had resolved my

philosophic issues. But life was taking me in new directions that were not to be denied, and I took on the project, personally and academically, of making sense of my religious life. [1] In writing this I am struck by the energy it must have taken, the sort of stress that is part and parcel of such life changes. But that's not how I experienced it; it was a time of new beginnings.

My wife reports that there was a day she was walking past the dining room, saw me with tefillin in place and actually did a double take. And I can imagine what it seemed like to my philosophy colleagues: One day I was thinking about the philosophy of language--exploring concepts of reference and meaning^{3/4}the next day about God. Perhaps this is why God created tenure.

What sorts of things, what sorts of life changes, might move a 40-something atheist academic toward Orthodox life? I've addressed the question more fully in an essay, "Man Thinks, God Laughs," in my book, *The Significance of Religious Experience*. [2] There I spoke about various life events that contributed to my change in religious orientation. Here I provide only a sense of the new direction of my thinking and feeling.

As a young man, taken with philosophy, Talmud, and such things, the life of intellect was very much a first love. So much so that while there was a place in my life for music, poetry was beyond the pale. I remember trying to read A. J. Heschel, the twentieth-century poet/philosopher of Jewish religious life; the work was inaccessible, far too poetic, too mushy. By my mid-40s, though, my Jungian shadow had begun to emerge: I found myself reading poetry, amazed that I could, stunned by its power. Heschel became available and with his help, religion in a new key. Rationality seemed to pale a bit; Heschel's emphasis on awe seemed to capture something essential to the life of the spirit.

My atheism, if that's what it was, did not involve any sort of disdain for religion. I remember arguing with a friend at Notre Dame about the matter. My practice was to use the adjective, "religious," as a sort of honorific; he, with Marxist sensibilities, the opposite. My atheism was a metaphysical position; I couldn't wrap my mind around the supernatural. But my finding spiritual power, meaning, solace in religious life didn't feel like it had anything to do with belief in another realm, removed from the natural world. It's true that God remained a puzzle; the central idea of religion was what I found the most difficult. But as I gained more than a foothold, it seemed more and more natural for the idea of God to be elusive. After all, I mused, there is a substantial religious intuition that when we try to think about God we are over our heads, out of our depth. Lots of people supposed that God has to come first, then some form of religious life. I was

increasingly at home in religious life, even prayer; but lost about what it was I was talking about. Buber comments that it is one thing to talk to God, and quite another to talk about Him. One who attempts the latter reaches beyond his competence.[3]

And so my thinking about religion, about religious life, about God, began to take on a direction. I met Charles Taylor, a traditional Catholic, at a conference in which we both presented material. I asked him about the more theoretical aspects of his religious commitments. "I'm an orthodox Catholic," he said. "I believe every bit of it, but I have not much of an idea what it means." And this was not, I believed, an evasion. Overstated perhaps, under-explained, but not an evasion.

My first sojourn in Orthodoxy was a gift of hessed. I showed up in Washington Heights (of all places) and there it was, almost waiting for me. The second time around it was very different. The world had moved to the right in politics and religion. A kind of yeshivish Orthodoxy had become something of the norm, for which the black hat is not a bad symbol. A moment of confusion: early in this period my family was away at a Pessah hotel. I was walking through the corridor, to the shul, walking behind a group of men of various ages, all wearing large black hats. But their conversation was not that of b'nei Torah. I was learning my way around the new world.

The world seemed to have shrunk spiritually and ethically in the intervening period. In America, and noticeably among my students (largely Christian), religion grew stronger but seemed less open, more evangelical (or in our vocabulary, more eager for outreach). The religious humanism with which I had so strongly identified seemed less in evidence. Religion seemed both on the move and more identified with right wing political and social attitudes.

When I was at YU, the learning was at the core of my religious life. And returning to the life, I was eager to return to the learning. I never forgot how to learn; the mode of thinking was deeply inscribed. But Aramaic and the text of the Gemara was another thing; I had only been involved for a few years. And trying to find a havrutah was now a serious challenge.

Learning opportunities were in a way abundant; daf yomi, for example, had become widely available. But the learning that I knew and loved was very different. (Rabbi Moshe Chait, z"l, my former JSP teacher and mentor who had become the Dean of Jerusalem's Yeshivat Chafetz Chaim, later told me^{3/4}we were discussing daf yomi^{3/4}that he was once encouraged to take a speed reading

class...and he failed.) Where was I to find a learning partner? I tried a Kollel of Lakewood mushmakhim in Los Angeles. Their offer^¾if I wanted a one-on-one havrutah^¾was for 20 minutes a week. Twenty minutes! A local rabbi in Los Angeles told me that he could arrange a havrutah. My excitement was short-lived^¾seconds^¾he immediately added that I would have to pay for it. Not only that but I had the sense that he was thinking about doing it himself. I felt quite confused by all this and seriously considered paying. But Rabbi Chait advised against it.

Rav Chait once told me that the boys in YU were nowadays “not like you fellows were.” I asked what he meant. “They don’t know how to challenge stubbornly, to fight their way to clarity.”[4] I said, “They are frum.” I was thinking about a conversation I had with my brother, about my son who was then about 10 years old and in Little League baseball. I was lamenting my son’s lack of aggressivness. “Of course he’s not so aggressive,” my brother said. “He’s so sweet. You can’t have it both ways.”

During our travels Barbara maintained her observance. Shabbat was a family holiday. But strange things happened in our super-galut world. If we ever make the movie, it will feature prominently a scene of me flagging down a bus in western Minnesota during the winter. It had a shipment of kosher meat from Minneapolis. Among our memorable Sukkot stories: My father-in-law built us a heavy wood sukkah in Minnesota. It protected us from the wind, but we still needed down parkas and a camping heater. The first year we spent there, before the advent our own sukkah, a colleague from biology built a sukkah more or less in Barbara’s honor; he said it was something he always wanted to do. I, severely lacking in the gifts of carpentry, helped him, as it were. A non-Jewish friend looked at the sukkah and commented that he now understood why they didn’t let Jews into the carpentry union. Some of the places we lived lacked anything like a Jewish community. Others lacked Orthodox shuls, or lacked ones in which Barbara felt comfortable.

In 1989, before my return to religious life, I moved from the University of Notre Dame to the University of California, Riverside. I was motivated by a lifelong dream, to help build a first-rate philosophy department and a graduate program that I would have enjoyed as a student. We moved to Redlands, California, a lovely orange-grove town, with more of a Jewish community than anything nearby and a small Conservative shul. My observance grew during this period; as time went on I would sometimes daven for the amud and sometimes give divrei Torah. But I was never at home in the Conservative environment, not even when I was

barely observant. It seemed like thin soup with only a taste of the real thing.

After a number of years in Redlands, Barbara wisely saw that we needed a more focused Jewish community, and we moved to Los Angeles. By this time, I had found my way back to observance. We joined a Modern Orthodox synagogue that was halakhically, socially, and politically congenial. But as my engagement intensified, it became difficult to daven there. There was so much talking and the rhythm felt all wrong: rushing through the most important parts of the tefillah, taking enormous amounts of time for more conventionally appreciated aspects of the ritual. Tefillah in a local yeshiva was more satisfying, until it came time for the talk. So I would attend one synagogue and then the other.

For over 15 years, I have been going every summer to Jerusalem. It started with a letter I wrote to David Hartman, z"l, with whom I was acquainted from the old days. I explained my situation and expressed a desire to connect with his institution, especially with its annual philosophy conference. Hartman invited me to the next conference and I have been a regular ever since. Part of what we do at the Hartman conferences is to study talmudic texts; these are mined for their political or social content, but are not studied in depth. And so I sought a more intense learning experience during my visits to Jerusalem. And here a funny story ensues.

The year after my first Hartman conference, I contacted an old YU friend who was teaching at an Israeli yeshiva known to be on the liberal end of the Orthodox spectrum. I asked if I could come the following summer for 10 days to study at the yeshiva. The plan was to go to the Hartman conference and then to the yeshiva. I was told that I could ... but a condition was imposed: that I did not speak to the students. It was a bit titillating to feel like a dangerous character. But what were they thinking? Would I use a discussion with students to insert questions in their minds? Why would I do that? A simple question addressed to me would have allayed such concerns. But life is strange, and I moved on.

Subsequently, an old and wonderful friend of mine from YU, Rabbi Yitzhak Frank, mentioned that he had met Rabbi Chait, who asked about me. I told Yitzhak the story of my recent experience. He laughed and volunteered to speak with Rabbi Chait about finding me a havrutah. Rabbi Chait also laughed, and then suggested that he would be happy to help. Strange that a more Hareidi yeshiva was less concerned about the danger I posed.

Thus began my havrutah with Rabbi Menachem Diamond, one that continues to this day. We spend two to three weeks every summer, two to four hours a day

depending on his teaching demands. It began as a kind of tutorial. The first day I learned with Menachem was like basic training in the military. I was completely winded after an hour. But over the years, our learning, supplemented by various havrutahs in Los Angeles, has turned into something closer to a real learning partnership. It has become one of the most important highlights of my year.

My summers in Jerusalem, sometimes with Barbara but often alone, were and often are magical. The time often has a monastic quality: solitary and focused on the spiritual. Central has been my relationship with Yakar synagogue, especially with its late Rabbi, Mickey Rosen, z'l. Rosen was or is an unforgettable character, a man of spiritual intensity, so focused on his relationship to God and on the orientation, the stance that this relationship engendered, that he failed to notice many of the things that are prominent for many of us. Davening with him was a privilege and I think he taught me by example how it is to be done. He often davened be-yehidut in the mornings, to minor-keyed, second movements of classical compositions. His religious devotion stood alongside his deep commitment to an ethical stance that was inseparable from his relationship to God.

Twice a year he gave a sermon on unsere; on how our collective self-absorption blinds us to our ethical shortcomings. This would not have been problematic for his Jerusalem congregants, except that his case in point was the Israeli treatment of the Palestinians, which he took to be unacceptable. He would lose a lot of people twice a year, but his musical gifts drew them close after a short time. The davening in Yakar was breathtaking, a few hundred people in a small enclosure, singing their hearts out in spontaneous harmony. The music began some years ago, I believe, as the sort of Carlebach minyan that has now become almost normative. But Mickey was not seeking a routine; he was seeking intimacy with God, and so the music was dynamic, alive to the state of his soul.

Here are two illustrative incidents. One Shabbat afternoon during se'udah shelishit (which at Yakar meant very little se'udah, but lots of intense music) an American (without a kippah) wandered into the darkened room. It was as if he were an actor playing the evil son of the Seder. "Why do you folks bother with all these little silly, picky details?" he asked. Rabbi Rosen looked at him, unruffled, "It's the way we express our intimacy." The comment took me a year or so to assimilate fully. It seemed to me to suggest a new way to think about the hukim, more generally about mitzvot and their details the point of which are obscure.

A second incident: I gave a lecture at Yakar on the thought of Wittgenstein, a terribly difficult but profound thinker. Perhaps I should not have volunteered to do

so, and I was not happy with the lecture; Wittgenstein is simply too difficult to try to unravel in an hour or so. During the question period, someone asked a penetrating question about which I needed to think. So I paused and thought about it a moment and responded. Several hours later, Mickey and I were visiting a friend in a hospital and the friend asked how my lecture went. I told him that I wasn't happy with it. Mickey commented that he didn't know about that, but that when someone asked a good question, I paused for a full 30 seconds before replying. The report was meant as a high compliment.

There is an aspect to my religious attitude, to my religious being, that I hesitate to highlight here. I am not an Israeli and so I speak very hesitantly about Israeli politics and policy. This is not because "if one doesn't live there and share the risk, one should not offer opinions." Indeed, when Ehud Barak sought compromise, right-leaning American Jews did not hesitate to criticize in very strong terms. They did so out of care and concern for Israel. My hesitation instead reflects my belief that unless one lives in the country, day by day, one's perspective is partial and limited. When I am in Israel for even a few days, I feel an intangible sense of an enlarged perspective. So viewing things from a distance, even if it has some advantages, has serious disadvantages. At the same time, Israel is my other home, one that I love and honor, one about which I feel an enormous pride, a place whose history and policies are of great interest and concern. It has always seemed strange in the extreme that criticism of the State's policies are seen by some as disloyal or as indicating a lack of support. This is not the place for the sort of extended discussion that the matter deserves. But I do feel an obligation to read, to think, to learn, to support policy where that seems right and to criticize forthrightly when that is what is called for.

A final word about the religious life for which I am so grateful, actually about the question of how to describe that life, and how to describe myself as a participant. There are some words, "Impressionism" comes to mind, that are introduced into the language by opponents or critics of the designated movement. "What you are doing is mere impressionism" was originally hardly a compliment. But the term stuck and eventually was adopted by those we call the Impressionists. "Obamacare" is another. And "Orthodoxy" in the context of religious Judaism is a third. The word literally means "correct belief" and its appropriateness to our religious ways seems to me questionable. Perhaps it's no worse than "Judaism," which suggests an ideology, an "ism."

[1] See my book, *The Significance of Religious Experience* (Oxford University Press, 2012), a collection of essays written over a 15-year period, all aimed at the

project mentioned.

[2] Oxford University Press, 2012.

[3] As Larry Wright would put it.

[4] I'm reconstructing our conversation.