

הביטו אל צור חצבתם ואל מקבת בור גקרתם, הביטו אל אברהם אביכם ואל שרה תחוללכם.

בְּנֵי אֲבֵרָהִם אֱהוּבֵיךָ

BNEI AVRAHAM AHUVECHA:
GERIM IN CHASSIDIC THOUGHT

DOV BEN AVRAHAM

דב בן אברהם

■ GOING DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE – BINYOMIN BEN AVRAHAM

I can explain why I originally became a religious Jew “while standing on one foot” with just three words: “Torah is deep.”

I grew up as a Reform Jew in a medium-sized Jewish community in the South. I did not realize it at the time, but I was not Jewish according to *halachah* because my mother had a Reform *geirus* before I was born, but I grew up like any other Reform Jewish kid.

I was not particularly seeking any new form of spirituality. I was moderately involved Jewishly, and was even on the local chapter board of the National Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY). Based on my exposure at that point (aside from some semi-Jewish poetry in the back of our “*Gates of Prayer*” prayerbook), I took it for granted that Judaism is a fairly shallow enterprise.

For example, in Sunday school growing up, every Sukkos we went out to the Temple’s *sukkah* (a thatched structure of three or four walls, used as a residence during the festival of Sukkos) and the rabbi explained the significance of waving the four species. He always said that “We wave them in all six directions to remind us that God is everywhere.” It was the same explanation year after year, from the early grades through early high school. It was mostly the same with respect to the other aspects of Jewish practice they taught us. Aside from the fact that I found these teachings boring, the superficiality did not really bother me very much. I just assumed that one-line pat explanations like this were what Judaism consisted of—and that was that.

Over Chanukah my sophomore year in high school, however, I met a couple of Orthodox kids at an inter-youth group event at the Jewish Community Center. Because I fancied myself an open-minded person with respect to people of “other faiths,” I interestedly asked them about Orthodoxy. I was in for two big surprises that day. One was that their answers to why they did this or that thing were not the kind of pat one-line answers I expected based on my own Jewish experience. There was depth, common sense, and thought-out explanations for each detail of what they did. This depth fascinated and attracted me and was the impetus

for me to continue my friendship with them. This process led me to begin attending a Torah class for teenagers and eventually to become observant myself.

The other surprising thing I learned was that according to Orthodoxy, I was not considered Jewish because my mother had become Jewish under the auspices of the Reform movement. I did not take this with as much umbrage as one might expect because, as I said, I considered myself very open-minded, so initially I simply accepted the Orthodox position on my Jewishness as just another interesting fact about Orthodoxy. As I began to more seriously consider becoming Orthodox, as time went on, I realized that a formal *geirus* would be required. So, as I became more observant, I simply rolled with the punches and included the steps toward *geirus* in my mental list of steps toward becoming Orthodox. I am happy to say that at the beginning of my senior year in high school, I underwent a *bris milah* and accepted upon myself the yoke of heaven just before immersing in the *mikvah* in front of a *beis din*.

Fast forward several years, through post-high school *yeshivah* and eventually *kollel* (an institute for married men for the full-time study of the Talmud). Over time, I learned how to learn Torah from the original sources, but there was something about the *Gemara* and *Chumash* (Five Books of Moses, i.e. Bible) that did not completely satisfy me. I often found teachings in the *Gemara* which screamed out to me that there was a deeper meaning to the text. As Rashi always says, “This verse says nothing but, “Expound me!”

I searched through the commentaries in the *Gemara*, *Ein Yaakov*, and the books commenting on the *Gemara* found in most *batei medrash* (houses of study). Maharal (Rabbi Yehudah Loew ben Bezalel of Prague, 1520-1609) in *Chiddushei Aggados* sometimes “hit the spot,” but it was slim pickings. It seemed that almost nothing went beneath the surface of the *Gemara’s* simple meaning. As for *Chumash*, when I had that feeling, I looked through all of the rabbinic commentators in the *Mikra’os Gedolos* and other books on the *Chumash* with similar results. I eventually came to expect that maybe the deeper meaning and current relevance of the text either did not exist or was simply not accessible to regular people.

This perception began to change when I discovered a book that is sometimes found in more *Litvish* (Lithuanian, non-Chassidic) circles: *Ohr Gedaliyahu*, by Rav Gedalia Schorr, a *Rosh Yeshivah* (head of the yeshivah) of Torah VoDaas. He was a Gerer chassid and I began to learn certain basic concepts of *Chassidus* (Chassidic thought) from these *seforim*. I felt like I was finally starting to go down the rabbit hole just a little bit.

Part of the time I was learning in *kollel*, I worked in the evenings for an organization called Hashevaynu. Rabbi Zakutinsky, the founder and head of the organization, persuaded Rav Moshe Weinberger to come to their first few retreats, which I attended as part of the organization. Rav Weinberger is a Chassidic rabbi who lives and teaches Torah in the Modern Orthodox community of Woodmere, in Long Island, New York.

Although I had heard Rav Weinberger speak before, the Torah and *Chassidus* he taught at those retreats were so deep, so real, and so true, that it made me feel like I was discovering an aspect of *Yiddishkeit* that I had always felt must be there, but never experienced.

I subsequently got a job as part of a community *kollel* in the Midwest. When I got there, I quickly ordered over 100 of Rav Weinberger's tapes. I listened to these tapes as I traveled to various college campuses giving classes, and they had a deep effect on me. When it was time for my family to move to a larger community so our children could attend an Orthodox day school, we moved to Woodmere in order to be closer to Rav Weinberger.

Over time I attended many of Rav Weinberger's classes and began studying more Chassidic books. The common denominator between my discovery of *Yiddishkeit* in general and my discovery of *Chassidus* in particular, is that I found a deeper life-path in both of them, compared to what I was exposed to before. I feel that it is the pure kindness of God that He revealed the Torah to the world through Moses and *Chassidus* to the world through the Baal Shem Tov. It seems like the majority of people, both in the outside world and within the Orthodox community, are satisfied with a life of superficiality. I am thankful that *Yiddishkeit* in general, and

Chassidus in particular, are there to offer a deeper path to those who seek it out.

■ **LOOKING BACK: A YEAR AFTER GEIRUS – YOEL BEN AVRAHAM**

It amazes me to look back and see all the places I've been, and not just physical places. Somehow, along this way, I was introduced to and became involved with Breslov Chassidus. It's been a welcome refuge and home, and for this I am thankful. There are no accidents in life and, for whatever reason, God has seen fit to put me here, where I am today.

It is much easier to tell of things as they have happened in the world of actions, or to tell of measurements and numbers, than it is to tell of and delve into the intimate, inner worlds of devotion and disposition, places of the heart; I find writing about these areas to be beyond my reach for now, but I will say that the story continues to unfold; the life continues to be lived.

So many things have happened in my life since I first set off on this journey; in more ways than one, I am not the same man as I was when I began. The road has been kind to me. Smiling on a hilltop was a beggar pointing to a holy guide, a *tzaddik*: Rebbe Nachman ben Feiga. There is reason to be glad.

■ **THE TWO TYPES OF PEOPLE YOU WILL ENCOUNTER**

A *ger* once told me a story about the following invaluable advice his rabbi gave him upon completing his *geirus*:

The Jewish people that you will come into contact with will generally fall into just two categories: 1) Those who are genuinely happy for you and congratulate you on your accomplishment, and 2) Those who think you are absolutely insane for voluntarily taking upon yourself commandments which you may be punished for in the future should you fail to adhere to them.

The people who belong in the first category are truly *ehrliche Yidden* (honest and sincere Jews) and are people you should associate with. The people, who fall into the second category, however, reveal through their negativity that they are descendants of the