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THE AMERICAN BAAL TSHUVA* IN ISRAEL

During the last decade, Israel has played temporary host to an ever increasing number of American Jews between the ages of 18 and 30. They come to Israel as tourists, university students, or volunteers. Many are attached to one of the many programs connected with the Jewish Agency which are designed especially for this age group. Others arrive independently, perhaps on one leg of a European tour or en route to or from the Far East. Though their backgrounds are by no means homogeneous, many come with little or no formal religious training. It is especially for this reason that Israel can have a great impact. For it is in Israel that they first encounter a normalized Jewish community whose self-stated raison d'être is the fulfillment of the obligations placed upon the Jewish people by Divine decree. To the uninitiated a new world literally opens up.

As a result of that encounter, there has arisen in Israel over the past few years what some people have found sufficient reason to label a movement, the baal tshuva movement. Its geographical center is Jerusalem, its attendant institution the yeshiva, and its ideology, the diffusion of Torah knowledge. ** According to interested observers, there is every indication that its ranks are growing steadily.

Who are the young people being attracted to this movement? How did their lives come to change so significantly? What is the rhythm of their new lifestyle and the nature of the community with which they now identify?

Any attempt to understand the present phenomenon must consider the relevance of certain recent historical events. These include: 1) the counter-culture and the drug culture of the late 1960s which together legitimized spirituality and mysticism for a generation raised with a world view grounded in rationalism; 2) the resurgence of ethnicity and minority group ideology in the United States which began among blacks and whose efflorescence came to include practically every national, ethnic, or religious subculture in America; and 3) Israel's impressive victory in the 1967 Six-Day War, the consequences of which were to bolster Jewish pride and identification around the world, and to make Israel a permanent focus of world-wide attention. This combination of factors resulted in unprecedented numbers of American students traveling abroad, included among these, large numbers of Jews who, for reasons not necessarily indicative of Jewish commitment, chose to include Israel in their itinerary.

* Hebrew terminus technicus for penitent, i.e., one who returns to the fold.

** Which includes the Five Books, Prophets, Mishnah, Talmud and all later rabbinic commentaries.

At this point, one must distinguish those American baalei tshuva now living in Israel who first began to re-embrace traditionalism while still in the United States. In America, the metamorphosis may have developed through contact with such groups as Lubavitch, Hillel, or the Havurah movement. They came to Israel as a logical extension of previous ideological change. But for many who came to Israel for the reasons mentioned earlier, that is, who were motivated by essentially secular interests, the discovery of the baal tshuva world proved to be a personally historic encounter.

The scenario is by now a classic and continues to the present day. While visiting the Western Wall, standing at the central bus station, or even on the street, any student type who clearly presents the image of being non-observant may be approached with an invitation to experience a "real" Shabbat with a local family or at a yeshiva. The offer is both warm and sincere; the ensuing discussion tends to be enticing and challenging but never coercive. Although some yeshivot advertise for beginning students, most first encounters are more or less as described here, through word of mouth, or via an acquaintance.

Who is the American baal(-at)* tshuva now in Israel? It is with great difficulty that we search for an ideal type, for each story is individual enough to preclude most generalizations. For example, there is: Rafi, who holds a Masters Degree in Business Administration from the University of Chicago and is also a champion pistol marksman; Beth, once an up and coming New York graphic artist and photographer on the staffs of New York Magazine and Esquire; Uri, a one-time high school delinquent previously arrested for dealing in stolen diamonds and drugs; Yaffa, a former resident of a Zen ashram who now prepares vegetarian meals for the male branch of the yeshiva where she studies Bible and Mishnah; Tuvia, who ended a promising tennis career and after six years of intensive yeshiva study received his smicha (Orthodox rabbinic ordination). This list is in no sense exemplary, but rather typical of the diversity one encounters.

One celebrated case is that of Dov, who was brought up in an upper middle class Reform Jewish home in the Washington, D.C., area. He was introduced to Christianity by his professor at Dickenson College in Pennsylvania in a course on religious philosophy. When he first came to Israel in 1975 in conjunction with a European vacation, he had already been voluntarily baptized, had had himself apprenticed to a Presbyterian minister, and was studying Christian theology at Harvard Divinity School. Standing at the Western Wall, he was approached by a young man from a nearby yeshiva who invited him to visit the institution. The young Jewish minister complied, and after a heated polemic with its director, agreed to a trial study period. He has been studying full-time at the same yeshiva for the past three years.

*Feminine.

The baal tshuva world also attracts many young couples. However, unlike young couples in the ultra-Orthodox community where the wife works in order to allow her husband the opportunity to continue his studies in the yeshiva, it is not uncommon among baalei tshuva to find both husband and wife engaged in yeshiva studies, albeit separately. Steve and Stephanie met while undergraduates at Yale. After completing school three years ago they came to Israel where they were married. They are now raising a family while they attend the respective male and female branches of the same yeshiva.

The yeshiva is naturally at the center of the baal tshuva's world for through it he fulfills his primary obligation as a Jew, namely, the study of Torah. There are currently about one dozen yeshivot in Israel which were established primarily to receive baalei tshuva. Almost all of them are located in Jerusalem. Through their own fundraising efforts or per capita stipends paid by the Student Authority Office of the Ministry of Immigration and Absorption, these institutions are able to offer modest financial support to individuals and couples who demonstrate a genuine need.

With each step he advances in learning, the baal tshuva better understands and reaffirms his commitment to the lifestyle he has adopted. Among the existing yeshivot for baalei tshuva one can identify two distinct approaches, or pedagogic philosophies, towards the study of Torah. The one practiced by the majority of yeshivot is primarily oriented towards faith building and in this respect is historically analogous to eighteenth century hassidism. It emphasizes the importance of obeying the mitzvot (commandments) on the strength of faith, with maximum concentration and intent, and with careful attention paid to detail. Its goal is to speedily transform the non-observant Jew into an observant one. This type of yeshiva is predisposed to fielding the almost necessary challenges which are raised concerning the existence of God, divine revelation, etc., especially at the beginning levels. If, after a certain length of time, serious doubts still persist, one is of course free to leave the institution. The finished product, on the other hand, expresses a strong fundamental belief system which is constantly reinforced by his scrupulous carrying out of the precepts. Among the institutions favoring this approach are Yeshivat Aish HaTorah, Dvar Yerushalayim, and Or Sameach.

The second approach is oriented more towards building learning skills, for in its view, Torah study as an activity is sui generis. In this respect it follows the tradition of the mitnagdim, the ideological camp consisting largely of Lithuanian Jewry who stood opposed to the hassidic movement. This school applies rather literally the verse from the Talmudic tractate Shabbat, "And the learning of Torah balances all (other mitzvot)." Thus, the ongoing act of studying the tradition is considered to be the ideal state of existence of which proper and enlightened observance of the mitzvot is the natural by-product. Practical observance is not ignored; rather, it is informally transmitted through role-modeling and through "on the spot" question-answer exchanges. Formal study of the texts demands attention be paid to their structure and style as well as content and that all questions be immediately relevant. This approach demands a particularly high level of self-motivation. It is also recognized as being the more intellectual of the two teaching philosophies. Only two institutions

prefer this approach; Yeshivat HaMivtar, whose women's branch, contrary to convention, offers studies in Talmud, and the Pardes Institute, which distinguishes itself as the only fully co-educational Israeli institution geared towards the baal tshuva.

Although there are no exams, serious yeshiva study poses a significant challenge even for those from the best American colleges and universities. The usual regimen of study is quite demanding. On an average day one awakens at 6:30 a.m. and begins with davening shacharit (morning prayer) in a minyan (quorum). This lasts about one hour. Breakfast is then served after which one attends gemarah shiur (a lecture class on the Talmud). The majority of the day is given over to hevruta, a one on one format for review or preparation of the text, which is unique to the yeshiva world. This continues amidst the din of the bet midrash (study hall) and is interrupted by lunch and mincha (afternoon prayer). The afternoon proceeds with a study break, which many nevertheless set aside for learning, and another shiur in some area other than Talmud, that is, Bible with Rashi's commentary, law, philosophy, or ethics. Then comes dinner and maariv (evening prayer). Evening hevruta can continue until midnight, and such practice is generally encouraged. Friday is free in order to prepare for Shabbat and for pursuing necessary mundane chores such as laundry, letter writing, or shopping. Although women are technically free to devote as much time as they wish to Torah study, community norms dictate a less intensive yeshiva schedule for women.

Given the available range of ideologies, from modern to ultra-Orthodox, the baal tshuva is able to choose from a variety of images. Although it is axiomatic that men wear a headcovering, conformity to any one mode of garb is not insisted upon. The yeshiva and the community at large offer role models for dress and deportment. A symbolic attempt towards the synthesis of two world views has given birth to a particular style among many baalei tshuva which is typified by longish hair, jeans, a kippa (skullcap), and tzitziot (ritual fringes worn about the waist). Women, likewise, may favor denim skirts, colorful blouses, and if married, a colorful babushka. As is customary in some religious circles, some married women don wigs.

Fraternization with members of the opposite sex is generally discouraged unless one is actively seeking marriage. Matchmaking is not uncommon in baalei tshuva circles, and every new engagement is met by great celebration in the community.

Most secular pursuits, especially university studies, are discouraged as they subtract from the time available for Torah study. The administration's attitude is that since the baal tshuva has gotten a late start he has little time to spend engaged in "non-Torah" activities.

The baal tshuva network can rightly be spoken of as a subcommunity. However, it is a subcommunity which is marginally situated within the larger Orthodox realm. Its marginal status derives from the fact that the baal tshuva tends to maintain certain ties to the secular world, namely to family and close friends, although as his life is now regulated by a more sectarian rhythm, it is understandable.

that these relationships must suffer a certain degree of attenuation.* Simultaneously, the baal tshuva is also constantly involved with the Orthodox establishment, at least to the extent that he resides in the community and thus shops in their stores, frequents their synagogues, etc.

Although Judaism teaches that the baal tshuva, because of his extra efforts, is considered as existing on a higher spiritual plane, the Orthodox establishment has responded to the baal tshuva movement with some ambivalence. Knowing of the recent popularity of religious movements and the high level of transience among new adherents, they are somewhat leary of the relatively large number of baalei tshuva who have appeared in their midst almost overnight. Unlike the unrevealed number of baalei tshuva who have re-established Jewish roots under the direct supervision of the Orthodox establishment, they question the sincerity of the baal tshuva who, although he stands daily wrapped in tallit and tefillin, continues to affect longish hair, blue jeans, and sandals. Thus, the many overlapping points of contact with the secular and established Orthodox worlds notwithstanding, the marginality of the baal tshuva world paradoxically results in a certain degree of insularity. Furthermore, in the admittedly short history of the movement, the majority of baalei tshuva seem to have chosen to retain their aura of distinctiveness. By not becoming fully integrated, they can retain certain personally prized secular interests which although not specifically prohibited by Jewish law, are outside the range of community norms in the ultra-Orthodox camp.

It is natural to question why any individual who was raised in an average middle class American home would willingly adopt such a lifestyle, one which by comparison places so many restrictions upon the individual; a lifestyle in which the individual perceives his interests as secondary to those of the community as a whole.

Disillusionment with the counter-culture and the acknowledged failure of the peace movement to have established a new era in human understanding found many continuing the search for relevance, meaning, and not in the least, for a sense of community. As the sixties faded and the seventies seemed to bring about a return to material values, the search intensified. For a considerable number of Jewish youth, after McCarthy and McGovern, after socialism and feminism, after Krishna and Zen, Judaism was at least worthy of investigation.

In one sense this should not seem so surprising. Orthodox Judaism offers a way of life to which one may relate at various levels. Its system of codes and philosophy challenges the sophisticated intellectual, while its ethics and moral teachings attract the idealist. Furthermore, it certainly professes the ultimate relevance. For an individual reacting to the relative normlessness of modern secular society, the return to Jewish tradition promises greater direction and purpose in life. It is a way oriented more towards family and community than the self.

*The direction and extent to which the families and friends of baalei tshuva have come under their influence is an interesting separate topic for discussion.

These qualities notwithstanding, the tradition's initial selling point may very well be its ability to capture the right combination of the exotic and the familiar. The acculturated Jew in search of his roots may respond to certain Jewish concepts and symbols, but because of his ignorance still feels himself an outsider. Nevertheless, he has an authentic claim to his heritage. From his marginal perspective, the lifestyle of his forefathers is strange but enticing.

The baal tshuva experience is currently under study in a research project under the auspices of the Jerusalem Van Leer Foundation. The goals of the project are to understand the process of change in the baal tshuva and to study the institutions which have been established to educate and socialize him in his new role. According to preliminary estimates which were revealed by the project director, there are an estimated non-Israeli 500-700 baalei tshuva currently studying in local yeshivot, with an additional few hundred who are involved in other sectors of the society. It is believed that of the total number, approximately 70% are Americans.

The American baal tshuva movement in Israel is small in numbers when compared, for example, to the reported size of some recently established political movements. However, the communal characteristics of the baal tshuva movement by its nature elicits intensive involvement, and thus, the movement's presence in Israel society is disproportionately larger than its numbers would lead one to believe.

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