

Melech Yacov, Ex-Jew, USA (part 1 of 2)

Description: Melech gives insight to Jewish life and religion, and his slow move away from Chasidic Judaism.

By Melech Yacov

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When I was born I was given the Hebrew name Melech Yacov. Today I still live in the area in New York where I was born. We were a semi-religious family; we belonged to a Chasidic congregation to which we went every Saturday, but we did not keep all the strict observances required in Chasidic Judaism. For those who don't know, Chasidism is known in the mainstream as "Ultra Orthodox" Judaism. They are called so because of their strict observances of *Halacha* (Jewish Law) and their following of Jewish mysticism (*cabala*). They are the strange people that you see walking down the street wearing black suits and hats and letting their beards and sideburns grow long.

We were not like that though. My family cooked and used electricity on the Sabbath, and I didn't wear a yarmulke on my head. Moreover I grew up in a secular environment surrounded by non-Jewish schoolmates and friends. For many years, I still felt guilty about driving on Saturdays and eating non-kosher food.

Although I did not observe all of the rules, I nevertheless felt a strong sense that this was the way that God wanted me to live, and every time I omitted a rule, I was committing sin in the eyes of God. From the earliest days, my mother would read to me the stories of the great Rabbis like Eliezar, the Baal Shem Tov, and the legends from the *Haggada* (part of the Talmud other than the *Halacha*) and Torah.

All of these stories had the same ethical message which helped me to identify with the Jewish community, and later Israel. The stories showed how Jews were oppressed throughout history, but God always stood by His people until the end. The stories that we Jews were brought up on showed us that miracles always saved the Jews whenever they were in their greatest time of need. The survival of the Jews throughout history, despite all odds, is seen as a miracle in itself.

If a person wants to take an objective view on why most Jews have the irrational Zionist stance regarding Israel, then they must understand the way by which we were indoctrinated with these stories as children. That is why the Zionists pretend that they are doing nothing wrong at all. All of the *goyim* (gentiles) are seen as enemies waiting to attack, and thus they cannot be trusted. The Jewish people have a very strong bond with one another and see each other as the "chosen people" of God. For many years I believed this myself.

Although I had a strong sense of identity as a Jew, I could not stand going to Saturday services (*shul*). I still remember myself as a little boy being forced to go to *shul* with my

father. I remember how dreadfully boring it was for me and how strange everyone looked with their black hats and beards praying in a foreign language. It was like being thrown into a different world away from my friends and the people I knew. This was what I thought I was supposed to be, but I (and my parents) never adopted the Chasidic life like the rest of my family.

When I turned 13, I was *bar-mitzvah*'ed like every other Jewish boy who becomes a man. I also began putting *tefilin* (Hebrew amulets) on every morning. I was told that it is dangerous to skip putting it on because it was like an omen and bad things might happen to you. The first day I skipped putting on *tefilin* my mom's car got stolen! That event encouraged me to wear it for a long time.

It was only a little while after my *bar-mitzvah* that my family stopped going to synagogue altogether. They could not stand the three-and-a-half hours of prayer and felt that getting me *bar-mitzvah*ed was the most important thing. Later on, my father got into a silly quarrel with some congregation members, and we ended up not going at all to services anymore. Then something strange happened: my father was convinced by a friend to accept Jesus into his heart. God willing my mother did not divorce my father for his conversion to Christianity, but she has kept a silent hatred of it ever since.

This was also a period in my early-teen years when I sought to find something to identify with. My father's conversion helped me question my own beliefs. I began asking questions like: What exactly is a Jew anyway? Is Judaism a culture, a nation, or a religion? If it is a nation, then how could Jews be citizens of two nations? If Judaism is a religion, then why are the prayers recited in Hebrew, prayers for Eretz Israel, and observance of "Oriental" rituals? If Judaism was just a culture, then would not a person cease to be a Jew if he stopped speaking Hebrew and practicing Jewish customs?

If a Jew was one who observes the commandments of the Torah, then why is Abraham called the first Jew when he lived before the Torah came down to Moses? Incidentally, the Torah doesn't even say he was a Jew; the word Jew comes from the name of one of Jacob's 12 sons, Judah. Jews were not called Jews until the Kingdom of Judah was established after the time of Solomon. Tradition holds that a Jew is someone whose mother was Jewish. So you can still be a Jew if you practice Christianity or atheism. More and more I began to move away from Judaism. There were so many laws and *mitzvahs* (good deeds) to observe. What is the point of all these different rituals, I began to question. To me they were all man-made.

Melech Yacov, Ex-Jew, USA (part 2 of 2)

Description: In college, Melech studies various philosophies and involves himself in the political left, only later to move on, but still in support of the Palestinian Cause. After September 11, his open-mindedness allows him to disregard all propaganda, and after reading the Quran, finally finds the truth he was searching for.

I was fascinated with Native American culture and their bravery in the face of the white settlers who stole their land. The Native Americans had over 250 treaties broken with them, and they were given the worst strips of land that no one wanted. The story of the Native Americans is similar to that of the Palestinians. The first Palestinians were living in Palestine for thousands of years and suddenly Jews replaced them, and the natives are forced into refugee camps in which they still live. I asked my parents how the Palestinians are different from Native Americans, and the only answer I got was "because they want to kill all Jews and drive them into the sea." My understanding of the Palestinian people put me above any of the Jews, their leaders, and Rabbis whom I once viewed as wise men. How could any good Jew deny that Palestinians were killed and forced from their land to make way for Jewish settlements? What justifies this act of ethnic cleansing - the fact that many Jews died in the Holocaust! Or is it because the bible says it's "our" land? Any book that justifies such a thing would be immoral and hence not of God.

When I reached high school, I became interested in philosophy and read many of the great thinkers of the past. I spent time with good friends who read philosophy and who went along with me through the bumpy paths to Truth. One of the philosophers who had an impact on me was the Jewish-born Spinoza. Spinoza was a 17th century Talmudic student who questioned everything he was taught such as the belief in life after death, a belief that is found nowhere in the Torah. In fact many of the early Jews didn't have such a belief. Spinoza was expelled from the Jewish community for his views. I enjoyed reading his views on the Bible, which he said could not be taken literally without a boat-load of contradictions and problems.

Then I read two significant books that completely swept away any ounce of sympathy I had left for Judaism. The first book was called "On the Jewish Question" by Abram Leon. Leon was an underground Communist organizer in Belgium during World War II, and later he was caught and died at Aushwitz. His book answered the age-old question: Why did the Jews survive for so long? He gave a superb historical account of the Jews from the age of antiquity to the modern day and shows that their survival was by no means a miracle. In the words of Karl Marx, "It is not in spite of history that the Jews survive but because of it." First, he shows how much of the Jewish community left Israel on their own accord before the destruction of Jerusalem. Then he explains that the Jews were valuable to the kings and nobles of the middle ages because of their status as middle men. Then he shows how during the process of capitalist accumulation the status of Jew finally took a downward turn and they were subsequently persecuted for their usury.

The second book that affected me greatly was called "Who Wrote the Bible?" by Elliot Freedman. It takes up the historical task of Spinoza. The book proves that the Torah is actually written by 4 different people. Freedman explains to us that there were 2

different traditional accounts from the Kingdom of Israel and Judah, and that a redactor intertwined them together to get the Bible we have today.

Besides reading philosophy with my friends, we also took up many different political causes in our youth. We experimented in everything from Republicanism to Communism. I took up reading all the works of Marx, Lenin, Stalin, Mao and Trotsky. I found in Marxism what I felt was missing in my life. I believed that I had found all the answers to everything and hence felt intellectually superior to everyone. The philosophy bandits (as I like to call us) got together and formed our own little Socialist club. We went to different activist events like protests and labor strikes.

After meeting all the different cult groups that surrounded the political left in America we all became disgusted at the way they acted and denied reality. No revolution would be made in a country by this type of people. Fighting for social change cannot win by using methods of the past.

Although I gave up the fight for revolution, I became an active pro-Palestinian organizer. This is the one cause about which I was very passionate. We were very small and attacked by the mainstream which gave me a sense of pride. I wanted the world to know that not all Jews are bad people. It shames me to see people whom I once looked up to support the aggressive regime of Israel. The lies coming from Israel are nothing less than holocaust denial.

Although I gave up Judaism and looked at this world as the ultimate aim of man, I was never really an atheist. However, I had a strong hatred of all religion and believed that it was a tool of the people in charge to use to keep everyone else in check. When you see the way fundamentalist Christians act in America, doing things like denying science and upholding values of old white men, you can understand why I was skeptical of all religions. The way Jews acted toward Palestinians did not help either. Nevertheless, I still believed in God in the very back of my mind. But with religion gone, I had a big emptiness left in me. I sometimes even wished that I was a religious person because I felt that they lived happier lives.

Honestly I do not remember what got me interested in Islam, especially after many years of strong anti-religious feeling. As a child, I remember hearing my mother talk about Islam, and how Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, worshipped the same God as us, and also how Jews are related to Arabs through Abraham. So in a way I kind of accepted Islam as just another religion that worships God. I have a faint memory of my cousin (a Chasid) who said to me that if a Jew gives up his life as a Jew and lives like a Muslim, he wouldn't be committing any sin! Looking back I am astonished to have heard such a thing.

When September 11th happened, there was a surge in anti-Islamic propaganda in the news. From the very beginning, I knew that it was all lies because I already had developed the perspective that everything in the media protects the interests of those who control it. When I saw that the most militant people in attacking Islam were fundamentalist Christians, Islam started looking more attractive to me. I thank God for

what I learned in my activist days, because without the knowledge of society and the media, I would have believed all the garbage that I heard about Islam on the television.

One day I remember hearing someone talk about scientific facts in the Bible so I wondered if the Quran had scientific facts in it. I did an Internet search and I discovered a lot of amazing stuff. I subsequently spent a great deal of time consuming articles on various aspects of Islam. I was surprised of how logically consistent the Quran was. As I read the Quran, I would compare its moral message to that of what I learned from the Bible and understood how much better it was. Also the Quran was not nearly as boring as reading the Bible. It's fun to read. After about 5 months of intense study I said my *shahada* and officially became Muslim.

Unlike my old religion, everything in Islam made sense. All the practices like prayer and Ramadan I understood already. Although I imagined Islam to be like Judaism in which one follows a series of different rules dogmatically, I was wrong. My understanding of the world also matched what Islam taught me - that all religions are basically the same but have been corrupted by man over time. God didn't make a name called Judaism and Christianity and tell people to worship him. God taught the people only Islam; that is submission to Him alone. It is as clear and simple as that.

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