

Oved ben Aharon, Ex-Jew, USA (part 1 of 4)

Description: 25 years of reflection, evaluation of the Jewish community and their Tradition, and in-depth studies within the Yeshivas of Jerusalem, finally leads Oved to Islam. Part 1: A truthful evaluation of the "exiled" Jewish community.

By Oved ben Aharon

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Rambam (Rabbi Moses ben Maimon) comments in Moreh Nevuchim (Guide for the Perplexed) that we should "pause and stop" at that which appears doubtful. At various times of my life I have paused to consider the truthfulness or accuracy of my Jewish faith and tradition. But for the last 15 years especially I have been pausing and reevaluating Judaism and the status of Klal Yisrael (the entire congregation of Israel). The duration of our current exile, the Roman exile, has now surpassed by five times the duration of our exile in Egypt. The vast majority of Israeli citizens in our "Jewish" homeland are militant atheists. A survey of Israeli Jews asking whether they believe in the coming of Moshiach and the building of the Third Temple reveals the answer to be an apathetic NO. All of these things are fixable, but I bring it up for the purpose of showing that something is wrong, sincerely asking all of you to pause and consider with an open mind what has happened within our community.

When moving to a new community or when the community receives a new family, the very first three questions are the following: " 1. What do you do? 2. Do you keep kosher, and if so how strictly, and does strictly include not eating out or just strictly in your home? 3. Are you Shomer Shabbos (Sabbath Observant)?" The questions themselves aren't the problem, but the cultural changes underlying these questions is disturbing. Why don't we ask the following: "1. Do you believe in one God and recite the Shema daily? 2. Do you pray 3 times a day, and if not do you need help learning how to pray?" Why is it that congregants are categorized by occupation and Sabbath adherence as opposed to worship of the One True God via the duty of prayer?

For years I have had conversations with friends about God being replaced in Judaism, more accurately God being replaced by Judaism. If you have any doubts simply pay closer attention to the conversations at your Sabbath Table and the newspaper articles during Rosh Hashana and Passover. These newspaper editions over the last few years have highlighted architecture and recipes, and two of the articles contributed by my local rabbis failed to mention God entirely until the very end, "God give you a sweet new year." During the period of time when we are supposed to be drawing close to God and renewing our commitment, we are delving into recipes to impress. When I attended a learning activity offered by an international Chassidic organization's adult education platform, the questions at the end of units included, "What does the Torah want you to do in this situation?" My reaction is that the Torah doesn't want me to do anything, as it is parchment and has no emotions, but God wants me to do something. Why has God been

replaced, and how long ago did this happen in our Tradition? Why is it that when the Temple stood the entire community understood the grave sin it was to use honey on sacrifices or include honey with ritual feasts--recall the Talmud section on the incense mixture included in the Siddur for Sabbath prayers, the recitation of which makes clear that the use of honey in the incense mixture invalidated the incense. Why so serious? It was serious because the use of honey was popular with idolatrous offerings, and we did not use honey in order to distance ourselves from idolatry and reverting back to forbidden practices. Rambam explains that idolaters chose sweet things for their sacrifices, which they seasoned with honey; in contrast salt is never mentioned among their sacrifices, and accordingly our Law requires salt with every sacrifice (see Lev. 2.13). Yet today, from Rosh Hashanah through Sukkot we drown our Challah Bread and apples with honey, and the Jewish community is more alert to this ritual addition (albeit inappropriate and with no Torah or Talmudic foundation) than it is to the requirement of wording changes in the recitation of Kaddish and the changes in the daily prayers. In other words, honey is more popular and holds a greater emphasis than God being approached as Melekh (King).

I believe the problem is that Judaism had to reinvent itself after the destruction of the Second Temple if not earlier. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai escaped the Roman carnage and went to Yavne, and there fashioned together what has become Rabbinic Judaism today"prayer services without the Temple sacrifices, references made within prayer of what should but can't be done, and Festivals and Day of Atonement with no High Priest reciting the Name of God. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai created a system of daily observance and maintenance, not dependent on the Temple or pilgrimage to Jerusalem, which would get us by until the end of exile, which he himself believed to be imminent (see Berakot 28b, with his approaching death he instructed his students to prepare a throne for Hezekiah, the King of Judah, who is coming). Ben Zakai had to emphasize external observance to approach God because the Divine Presence was gone, and the instructed method of approaching God (ritual sacrifice) was gone. Educated Jews know that the Divine Presence (Shechinah) wasn't actually in the Second Temple either (as the Aron Kodesh, Ark of the Covenant, was lost when the First Temple was destroyed), so the system established by ben Zakai was at that time two steps removed from truly approaching the Divine.

It should be noted that ben Zakai's actions in Yavne were questionable as he adorned his school there as the new Sanhedrin in a unilateral shift of power in order to make decisions after the destruction of Jerusalem. In this light, Rabbinical Judaism is the child of an illegitimate institution (Mamzer Judaism?). In terms of approaching the Divine and Holy place today, I recall going to the Western Wall with my yeshiva friend Naftali. He told me that he didn't feel anything at the Wall, that he was jealous of the old men in beards crying, that he wanted to have that experience. I explained to him that they felt the same as him, nothing, which is probably why they were crying. We are crying because we feel nothing, are in exile, and the Divine Presence is gone. This is our excuse for a lot of community shortcomings"we are in exile.

Oved ben Aharon, Ex-Jew, USA (part 2 of 4)

Description: 25 years of reflection, evaluation of the Jewish community and their Tradition, and in-depth studies within the Yeshivas of Jerusalem, finally leads Oved to Islam. Part 2: Judaism is a celebration of culture and Jewishness, but where is God and submission to Him?

By Oved ben Aharon

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Nearly 2,000 years into our longest exile ever, we now see the result of ben Zakai's changes--the elevation of external culture over morality. This is best understood through examples. A good friend and Rabbi explained it to me as "Yiddishkeit" (Jewishness, i.e. true Judaism) versus "Frumkeit" (the appearance of Observance-ness). Judaism mandates modesty during prayer, that women should cover their hair during the prayer known as the Shema, the declaration that there is One God. This is the law, this is Yiddishkeit. Frumkeit is the market of Sheitels (wigs) being acquired by women for thousands of dollars, which they wear all the time, and criticizing women who only cover their hair when it is actually required (during the Shema prayer only). The explosion of responses and mean attacks by women who insist that they must cover their hair at all times by law is proof of this point"true Judaism has been replaced with the desire to externally appear Observant. Judaism requires having something extra on the Sabbath, an extra meal, bread at each meal. Frumkeit is the latest craze of Shabbat Cookbooks geared towards not only a tasty Shabbat dinner but a chic dinner (think the "Kosher by Design" cookbook series or Feldheim publisher's new release "Chic Made Simple"). The point is that the Sabbath is now equated with Food, not the Divine, and the way that the Sabbath is enhanced is with fancier food and alcohol "not with the discussion of God or the Sabbath. Rambam explains that ritual sacrifice included all of our sensory faculties, and thus included meat, wine, and music. Ben Zakai's Judaism is a celebration of the meat, wine, and music without the actual sacrifice, without the Divine. It is a celebration of a shared external culture, which gives a feeling of unity, but it is a costly imitation and replacement of the Divine.

One of the most extreme cases of frumkeit that I have witnessed is what my wife refers to as the "fake accent dude." One Shabbat after services when we were schmoozing with others and having a nosh, a new face sat down and spoke with a strange accent. It wasn't a Yiddish accent, was quasi Israeli, but I couldn't place it and really didn't care since I could live my life without having to know where he was from and didn't want to be rude. My wife on the other hand, who is a four-field trained Professional Anthropologist, immediately detected fakeness as her knowledge of linguistics detected inconsistencies. After a short 15 second interrogation by my wife, she smoked him out and he disclosed being from Omaha, Nebraska, that he had barely lived in Israel (like 8 months) studying at a no-name yeshiva, and was in town visiting with family. The individual was trying to speak with a mixture of Yiddish and Hebrew accent to imitate

what he believed in his mind to be a "yeshivish" accent. Why would a person try to imitate and speak with a yeshivish accent? We really shouldn't be surprised because in a culture that celebrates and embraces the external and observable aspects of Judaism, a Yeshiva accent is just another way of feeling more Jewish.

Here is a recent example of the elevation of culture over morality. Over the last 3 years, numerous converts and those interested in converting have come through my home and sat at my Sabbath Table. Without any coaching on my part, I simply asked each why he or she converted, why he or she felt connected to Judaism. With one exception that I will elaborate on below, the various responses made it very clear that everyone was converting for the culture, for "chosen" status and perceived benefits, and not for God. One gay convert joined Judaism because he identified it as a progressive haven for homosexuals. He did not believe/interpret that the Torah prohibited practicing homosexuality. Another convert expressly wrote in her book that she converted because she wanted to give her children a culture (being American wasn't enough culture), and chose Judaism because it was old and has survived the storms of various societies. She couldn't connect to God as a Catholic, even called God a moral ambiguity, but felt right at home in Judaism where observance and piety are measured by cultural participation and material achievements.

The question of "What do you do, what is your occupation" is today used as the touchstone principle proof of the Abrahamic Covenant, i.e. Abraham and his descendants will prosper and those who stand in the way or oppose us will be brought down. Within our community and outside of our community, material achievements are used as proof that Jews are still chosen. The opinion that prospering may simply mean being close to God, without any material success whatsoever, seems to escape so many. We instead define "blessedness" as Nobel prize winners and famous successful members of the tribe, then use this as a proof that the covenant remains intact. On numerous anti-Semitic news articles' comment boards, Jews rally to defend the community with stories of individuals who left Eastern Europe or the Middle East with nothing, came to America and became millionaires or notable Scientists etc, therefore Jews are still chosen by God. In other words, our MATERIAL success is proof of this SPIRITUAL covenant. This is irrational.

Oved ben Aharon, Ex-Jew, USA (part 3 of 4)

Description: 25 years of reflection, evaluation of the Jewish community and their Tradition, and in-depth studies within the Yeshivas of Jerusalem, finally leads Oved to Islam. Part 3: Leaving exile and returning to God.

By Oved ben Aharon

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Achieving material success while maintaining cultural participation is the Holy Grail of the truly pious Jew in frumkeit Judaism. The more extreme on both sides (more cultural participation, more financial success), the better. For example, being Sabbath Observant is great but being Sabbath Observant AND a successful professional who puts business aside to observe the Sabbath is especially noteworthy. Being unemployed and Sabbath observant isn't recognized as piety although this person's humility and unshaking loyalty to God despite the lack of material wellbeing is probably the hallmark of piety as exemplified by the prophet Iyov (Job). Being a Sabbath-observant professional is the goal. There are even books to guide a person to this goal, for example "The Meister Plan: A doctor's prescription for financial security and success in learning" available from Artscroll.com. Take notice of the book's description which makes zero reference to God (the Divine Presence that disappeared 2,500 plus years ago), only a description of the author's method to balancing Torah literacy and financial security. The only capstone remaining for the successful Sabbath Observant professional is to promptly move to Israel! Most American Jews have a successful friend or relative who has moved or retired to Israel, who then take it upon themselves to demand that we all likewise make Aliyah (elevate) ourselves by moving to the homeland. However, because of too many idealistic Jews (i.e. not so financially secure) who have moved to Israel, Israel's GDP (and hence our chosen status) is taking a hit. Thankfully we now have a solution to this problem, the new book from Feldheim, "A Financial Guide to Aliyah and Life in Israel."

Unfortunately these books are not sufficient to protect our status as an accomplished and financially secure people, as one of my friends seeking to join the tribe has been held at the gate and denied entry simply because she lacks the aura of a potentially affluent member. She is the one exception I spoke about above, who truly feels a connection to the God of Israel, trusts in Him, and wants to join herself to what she believes to be His people. She has been devoted for seven years, but can't pay for a Rabbi to return her call. When she was redirected from Rabbi one to Rabbi two, she was informed that if she wanted to continue with her "conversion," a learning fee in excess of \$1,000 would be required. She is now working with Rabbi three and hasn't given up yet. In contrast, the gates into the tribe swing fast and wide for the affluent or soon to be affluent, i.e. Donald Trump's daughter and an individual I'll identify as Ms. Ploni. Ms. Ploni had sporadic Synagogue attendance, made no effort to be Sabbath observant or Jewish knowledgeable, but she was fast-tracked and converted in 6 months. The difference between Ms. Ploni and my friend is that Ms. Ploni was in the health care industry and engaged to a Jewish doctor"she was already successful and so fit the cast of the ideal Abrahamic descendant that we have to portray in order to maintain our status as a chosen nation (since we can't point to the Divine Presence anymore).

The Jewish "observant life" has been recognized as problematic by Orthodox Union president, Rabbi Richard Joel, who in an introduction to Jewish Action Magazine a few years ago stated that today only 10% of the Orthodox can afford to be/remain observant. He unfortunately misses the point, as he identifies the problem as the need to make observance more affordable and therefore more accessible to non-affluent Jews. Rabbi Joel fails to recognize that Jewish observance today emphasizes the external and is largely

dependent on financial affluence. Affordability shouldn't be in the equation at all. When the Temple stood, all paid the same amount for maintenance (the half shekel), and those who were poor were not excluded from sacrifice as their offerings were birds and on Festivals they received meat from others' offerings. Is the community today helping the less affluent to live within an Eruv so they can participate more (if at all) on Shabbat? Are Jewish children excluded from day school or Hebrew school if their parents cannot afford the tuition? Are anonymous donors to Jewish Federations treated as more meritorious (as Halachah deems them to be) than those who want their names seen as "pillars" etc.?
These community problems go deeper than trying to keep up with the Cohens.

After 25 years of reflection, evaluation of the Jewish community and our Tradition, and even in-depth studies within the Yeshivas of Jerusalem, I have reached several conclusions. One of those conclusions sets a course that I would never have imagined I would ever take. Part of that conclusion is that the third Temple has already been built. Specifically, the porcelain walls of the Haram al Sharif (the Noble Mountain, the Dome of the Rock) with walls that came out of fire are what the Talmud (in tractate Berachos) refers to as walls of Fire. As I have indicated to my friends before, the Jewish community is today in its longest exile in history. For numerous reasons, I have concluded that this exile will never end as God has made very clear to us with His Mosque on the mountain of fire, which He has no intention of removing. The word fire can be read as literal, or as implied or derived. Based on the length of our exile, and for reasons I will be happy to discuss if not related below, I am confident that the porcelain walls of the existing Dome, derived from fire and among the only materials in the world able to withstand fire, are truly walls of fire that we should embrace and not seek to tear down. This is my formal announcement that I went to Jerusalem, to Yeshiva, to become a Rabbi but instead had experiences and insights that lead me today to declare that I am Muslim. I firmly declare that there is no god but Allah, and that Muhammad is His prophet.

I will never forget the day I went with some friends to daven neitz at the Western Wall, morning prayers at literally sunrise, and during prayers I was interrupted by a fellow Jew who asked for Tzedakah (Charity money). I gave him the coins I had in my pocket that I had intended to give out later. He gave them back to me and asked for "bills." Not only did he interrupt at the improper time (during Shemoneh Esrei and not the preceding psalms when money is set aside for charity), he rejected my charity and asked for more. When I left the old city to walk to a pizza place on my way home, I saw in the near distance a Muslim woman sitting with her hand out, not interrupting anyone, not speaking to anyone, just sitting. I watched countless fellow Jews walk past her without even acknowledging her existence. I refused to do the same and gave her the coins that I still had. She cried and said thank you in Arabic. The same day, literally the same day, I went into an Arabic store to buy some juice since the Jewish stores were closed in preparation for the Sabbath. I accidentally left some money bills on the store counter—the only reason I know is because the owner's son chased me down for several blocks to return them to me. That Shabbat I thought long and hard about the behavior of my fellow Jews, and the other descendants of Abraham, my Ishmaelite cousins who were grateful and honest.

That one day in Jerusalem has turned into several days of the same observations of behavior, both in Israel and in the United States. It should make every Jew ask himself/herself, "why is it that Arabs are known for their hospitality, and Jews for their cunning?"

Oved ben Aharon, Ex-Jew, USA (part 4 of 4)

Description: 25 years of reflection, evaluation of the Jewish community and their Tradition, and in-depth studies within the Yeshivas of Jerusalem, finally leads Oved to Islam. Part 4: Islam and the Muslim community, the true God and entrance into the true faith.

By Oved ben Aharon

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At a time when I was yearning to know whether God would redeem the Jewish people from our exile, and my research of the issue yielding the answer that the majority of worldwide Jewry said no or didn't care, the thought came to me again that perhaps it was the other "Mesorah", the other descendants of Abraham and their tradition that is authentically the message God wanted Abraham to transmit. Recall the core of that message "there is one God. Who today is vocally and unequivocally proclaiming that there is one God? A friend of mine in Boston encouraged me to visit his Synagogue's website, and encouraged my family to move to his community. The website has no reference to God, and instead says the congregation are ambassadors for the Torah. The website for the local Muslim community in contrast emphasizes the message of Islam is the existence of one God.

Not only are converts to Judaism doing so for the culture and not for God, entrance into the Jewish path comes at a cost. As an example, a Jewish family friend of ours recently adopted a 2 year old girl and needed to formally convert her to Judaism. The woman is the daughter of a well-respected Rabbi, yet to prove that her toddler was serious about converting she was charged an \$800 fee in addition to the travel expenses to and from Chicago for the conversion ritual immersion to occur. Compare this to the entrance into Islam, which carries no monetary screening but only requires the sincere declaration that there is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is His prophet. Which pattern did Abraham follow, being charged money or declaring his belief?

For my entire life, from youth to adulthood, spiritual matters have been important to me, and I have been restless in my search for God. I am no longer restless, am grateful that He has been patient with me and led me in a way that was necessary for my acceptance of and understanding of Islam. It is humbling to leave a tradition that was my entire life and identity, but this is how God works "He asks his true followers to submit to His way and leave their accumulated life behind, just as Abraham submitted. I challenge

my friends and others to objectively evaluate who of Abraham's descendants are acting as a Holy nation"the nation of Sabras (Israel) composed of a culture of militant atheism and immorality, or the nation of the two mosques composed of a culture and life governed by the will of God as revealed in the Koran. I challenge my friends to objectively evaluate who of Abraham's children dress and act modestly"simply go to a Zoo in a major metropolitan area and compare those women who cover their hair, whether with sheitel (wig) or Hijab, and see which it is who arrogantly puts on a token cultural symbol of modesty but nevertheless wears a short skirt and tight clothing. I challenge my friends to objectively evaluate which of Abraham's children follows God's admonishment to not oppress your brother, the congregation that charges thousands of dollars for membership otherwise a seat during high holidays will not be granted, or the congregation where the prayers of the poor are preferred by God; for a daily example of not oppressing your brother, examine the costs of kosher food which can economically devastate the most devout Jews. Our father Abraham would be ashamed to read the June/July 2013 edition of Hadassah Magazine, in which one of the articles highlights the rainbow road to Tel Aviv, Israel as the gay capital of the Middle East with its c'est la vie attitude.

There are numerous examples that can be given, but I don't doubt that my friends will ignore the predominant behavior of the worldwide Muslim community and will instead focus on the .00000005% fundamentalists who ignore the will of Allah who says in the Koran that there is no compulsion in religion. I challenge you all to stop and pause and seriously evaluate your community and your standing with God, and evaluate the Jewish People's and Nation's standing with God. Step away from the misguided Mesorah which has led Israel to become the newest Sodom and Gomorrah, and remove yourself from the misguided Mesorah that has made the Jewish holidays and Shabbats festivals and displays of gluttony and wealth with numerous sets of dishes for overpriced foods. The authentic Mesorah of Abraham still exists today, and that nation publicly stops five times a day to proclaim there is only one God, and that nation accepts upon itself a month-long daytime fast to remind us all that the poor often go hungry but God loves the poor and their prayers. Be courageous and go for yourself (Lekh Lekha) from the misguided Mesorah of indulgence where "chosenness" is defined by material and cultural achievements, and submit to God. Put away the expensive Tefillin and Tallitot, which God does not require for prayer. Prayer is not limited to those who can afford the ritual articles and for those who can afford to live in an area where 10 Jews can be assembled for prayer. God wants your prayers, wherever you are and no matter how many are assembled.

For years I never considered converting to Islam because I had been told by Rabbis and others that Islam prohibits accepting Jewish converts. Then one day I saw a documentary on Al Jazeera about Muhammad Assad, formerly Leopold Weiss, a German Jew who had converted to Islam. This intrigued me, and as I began to study Islam I found that it was not what the media and others said it was. The turning point for me was hearing the story of Muhammad's ascent to Heaven, when Allah informed him that prayer was compulsory, that Muhammad and his followers must pray 50 times a day. When Muhammad was returning, he passed the prophet Moses, my prophet, who told Muhammad that this was too much, that he had a hard time dealing with Israel with their

prayer obligations, and that Muhammad must return to Allah to have this number of prayers reduced in order to not burden the people. I recognized the voice of Moses, his personality of arguing with God, and there was no question in my mind that this conversation between Moses and Muhammad did in fact occur. When I decided to say the Shahada, the declaration that there is no God but Allah, and that Muhammad is His prophet, my soul was returning to what it always knew was true.

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