

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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Category: [Articles](#) > [Stories of New Muslims](#) > [Men](#)

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.

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