

Blogging Baal Teshuvahs and Loving our Fellow Jews

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How many of you occasionally get your news from the website Times of Israel? Times of Israel was founded by David Horovitz, the former editor of the Jerusalem Report and the Jerusalem Post. I get regular updates about Israel and the Jewish world sent to me in my inbox from Times of Israel, and I see its articles and blog posts reappear on Facebook and all kinds of social media. Times of Israel is also a host for bloggers who write about a variety of Jewish issues, and one of those bloggers is a young woman who grew up in my shul in Dallas, whose bat mitzvah I officiated, and whose brother lives here in DC and occasionally comes to my Text in the City downtown lunch and learn. A couple of days ago I opened my Facebook page to discover that this former congregant wrote a blog that many people I know--friends, former congregants--were sharing, commenting on, liking...Her blog is titled: "Hi, I am a Baal Teshuva." For those who are unfamiliar with that term, Baal Teshuvah typically describes someone who becomes traditionally observant or religious, having previously lived a not particularly observant Jewish lifestyle. My former bat mitzvah has written about how as a kid in Plano, TX she never felt a particularly strong connection to her faith, and did not grow up as an especially devout or practicing Jew. Of course she knew she was Jewish; her family is Jewish; they were synagogue members; she went to Hebrew school...but a real heartfelt, personal connection she did not have. That is until she started working at Camp Gan Izzy, a Chabad sponsored day camp where she first encountered people, girls not much older than her, who were brought to Texas from Brooklyn to help staff the camp. This encounter with passionate, observant young women led to her decision to switch from public school to the Orthodox high school in Dallas, to get involved in C-Teen, the Chabad youth program that took her on Shabbatonim and trips to Crown Heights, then to attend a girls seminary, Machon Chana, where she continued to learn about how to live a traditional lifestyle, to taking on mitzvot like keeping Shabbat, and keeping kosher, to today where she is a proud exponent of frumkeit, writing blogs that are read all over the Jewish world about her journey to tradition.

As I read Risa's piece I thought about the many conversations I've had over the course of my rabbinate with nervous parents whose children make very different decisions about their Jewish

lives than their parents. Sometimes those conversations are with parents of kids like Risa, my former congregant, who become much more religious than how they were raised. Parents of kids like this often express a whole range of fears and reactions, from the sense of being judged as somehow less Jewish than their newly religious kids, to concerns over whether their friends will eat in their homes, or if they'll ever enjoy a Passover Seder or Rosh Hashana dinner together. Often parents are bewildered at the choices their kids make about being religious, not comprehending how that kid could have grown up in their house! I remember in my own journey to tradition when my mother passed by the half open door of my bedroom when I was getting dressed one day. She saw that I was wearing tzitzit under my shirt, and had a brief moment of panic...Oh, you're wearing those now? She said, somewhat sheepishly...

Some of the kids in this congregation are at summer camps right now where all the food is kosher, where they recite blessings before and after meals, where they pray every day and celebrate Shabbat each week; where Hebrew language and Jewish culture is a part of their every day experience in a joyful, positive camp atmosphere. What happens though when they come home? Are those experiences meant to be left back in the bunks and dining halls and prayer spaces of summer camp, or is there room for some of that learning and growth to continue in their own homes? Do we seek to nurture, support, and encourage our kids to explore what Jewish life could mean for them personally, or do we want them to be in the exact image of our Jewish lives, no less observant than we are, and certainly no more?

As I read Risa's blog post, I must admit that I thought for a moment, 'Was I part of the problem?' Did the Judaism I represented at her synagogue somehow not speak to her in a deep way? Were the words of my blessing to her at her bat mitzvah empty or ineffectual? Would I be more proud of Risa if she was an observant Jew who became an active member of a Conservative synagogue, rather than having to find observance and community elsewhere? Just as quickly as those parochial, narcissistic questions came into my head, I escorted them right out of my consciousness. While I certainly find meaning in my particular constellation of Jewish beliefs and practices, and while I do experience frustration that too often people who want to be more observant end up having to sacrifice egalitarianism--because traditional observance and gender

egalitarianism rarely occupy the same space in our contemporary Jewish world...the fact is that I am so proud of her, and her journey.

Today is day two of the period on our calendar that is referred to as "The Nine Days." This is one of those black-out periods on the calendar when we do not have weddings, when some people refrain from eating meat or swimming, when there is an overarching spirit of mourning leading up to next Saturday night/Sunday when we will observe the only other 24 hour fast on the Jewish calendar other than Yom Kippur. On Tisha B'Av, when we recall any number of cataclysmic, devastating events in Jewish history, the main theme is the Temple's destruction as recounted so vividly in the Book of Lamentations which we will chant while sitting on the floor, in a candlelight service next Saturday night. As time marches on, I acutely feel that remembrances of the Temples in Jerusalem over 2,000 years ago become more and more anachronistic for many Jews. Here we sit in our beautiful synagogue, in a free country, where we can live and practice our Judaism without fear of persecution. We live in an era when we no longer are required to bring animal sacrifices to an altar in order to commune with the divine. And the land of Israel is back in the hands of the Jewish people! Most of us would consider these circumstances to be improvements over time, not reasons to mourn! But what I mourn for on Tisha B'Av is not necessarily the loss of the edifice that was the Temple, but the circumstances that brought about that loss.

Our rabbis are unabashed in their blame of the Jewish people themselves for the crisis that befell them in the first century of the common era. The cause of the disintegration of the Jewish community was placed squarely in our own laps. *Sinat chinam*, the utter and complete intolerance that Jews displayed toward one another; the lack of respect for different expressions of Judaism, for different ideas about Jewish life or practice, the turning of one Jew against another. We didn't deserve the holy space that the Temple provided, the sense of God's immanence in Jerusalem, because we lost connective tissue that held the Jewish people together as one nation. While nostalgia for the Temple may not be our overarching emotion, this internal strife still should be...

Just a month ago I witnessed an incredibly distressing scene in Jerusalem of all places, and at the Western Wall, the remnant of the Temple Mount whose destruction we mourn right now. Women of the Wall, an organization that brings women together from all streams of Judaism to pray, read Torah, sing Hallel, and celebrate Rosh Chodesh in the women's section of the Western Wall was holding its monthly gathering for Rosh Chodesh Tammuz. I wanted to witness the gathering, and I stood and looked on from the men's side as the women began to chant and gather closely around the Sefer Torah they read from. It was impossible to hear though because men were shouting unbelievable obscenities at the women gathered there. Some women blew whistles to try to drown out the sound of other women singing. A tall, ultra-Orthodox man stood on a chair and tore up the service pamphlet that Women of the Wall handed out so people could participate. I looked up at those ancient stones, stones that 2,000 years ago were engulfed with the smoke of the smoldering temple and wondered what they would say to the raucous, divided, vituperative masses below. Have we learned the lesson of Tisha B'Av? 2,000 years later, are we any less fractured, any less factionalized as we were then?

During these days leading up to Tisha B'Av, I pray that each one of us examines our love and loyalty to our fellow Jews...particularly those who believe or observe differently than we do. Is our love for our fellow Jews conditional upon them being just like us, or do we love and care for each other regardless of our differences. With so many anti-Zionists, so many anti-Semites in the world today, God-forbid that we should once again be our own worst enemies. God-forbid that we should make ourselves so vulnerable to outside forces because our inner resolve has been hollowed out by judgmentalism, intolerance, and sanctimoniousness. May we honor these days on our calendar by elevating *ahavat Yisrael* and *achdut Yisrael*, the love of the Jewish people and the unity of the Jewish people above all else. And let us support organizations like Women of the Wall and other pluralistic expressions both here and in Israel that embrace the entirety of the Jewish people in all of our varieties and differences and truly be able to say: *Am Yisrael Chai*, the Jewish people lives; all of the Jewish people, in the Diaspora and in Israel, now and forever.