

CONFESSIONS OF A BT ÉMIGRÉ

Bayla Sheva Brenner

I was born in America, yet I consider myself a refugee. As a young adult, I fled the secular world for one truer to my soul. Although I am forever grateful for that decision, I sometimes feel like a woman without a country. No matter how hard I try to segue into *frum* culture, I remain the immigrant whose “accent” gives me away every time. I am the master of the BT (*ba'al teshuvah*) faux pas.

I cringe when I remember my first innocent “misunderstanding.”

I moved to Manhattan from the suburbs with an interest in exploring Judaism. After several failed tries, I found a synagogue I liked. The shul's twenty-something contingent spotted me and quickly took me in.

They asked me if I'd like to join them for Shabbat dinner. Still not sure what Shabbat was, I definitely knew dinner and readily accepted. As soon as we sat down, someone announced, “Let's wash!” Wash? The entire group formed a line at the sink. The women removed their rings and placed them between their lips.

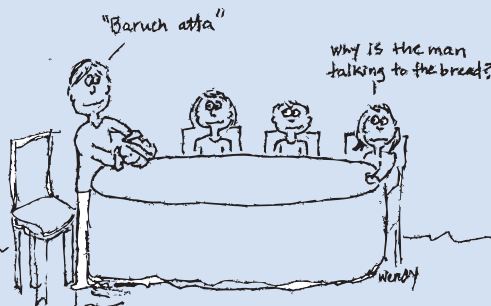
After everyone returned to the table, I asked one of the guests about the washing and the ring thing, but she ignored me. Everyone ignored me. They just stared at the host who was lifting two loaves of bread into the air and spoke to them (the loaves) in a foreign language.

Upon consuming her first bite of challah, the woman next to me politely whispered, “I think you should try the Beginners Service on the Upper West Side.”

As I continued to hang out with my new friends, the texture of my Saturdays began to change. Just when I thought I had Shabbat down, my new friends invited me to an “*oneg*” that was to take place at the home of a young couple the following Friday evening. I assumed it meant a festive dinner and arrived at the Feinmans' home shortly after candle lighting. I was taken aback by Mrs. Feinman's obvious surprise when she greeted me at her door. She wished me “Good Shabbos” and asked me if I perhaps needed something. “No thank you; I'll wait until the meal,” I said as I walked in.

I eyed the elegant Shabbat table--set for two. Had I mixed up the date? We groped for conversation; I hoped my friends would arrive soon. Her husband returned from shul, greeted his wife and seemed puzzled by my presence. She motioned for him to come into the kitchen. He promptly reappeared with a plate and utensils, and placed them before me.

Mr. Feinman recited Kiddush, we washed, and the meal began. Something was off. Where were my friends? They arrived two uncomfortable hours later. So much for my *oneg*! Would someone please give me a dictionary?!



Although, I still say *hashgachah* when I mean *hashkafah* and *hashkamah* when I mean *haskamah*, with each *shomer Shabbat* year, my *frum* vocabulary definitely improves.

My grasp of the nuances of *halachah* and *minhagim* is another story. Pesach came around, and my group of friends organized a Shabbat meal. I was to prepare the salad. I excitedly bought a variety of fresh vegetables, knowing my dish would be sampled first. The shul rabbi joined our gathering. Feeling that I had truly arrived, I proudly watched him dig into his salad. He stopped mid-bite.

“What is this?” he asked. “Are these green beans?” I assumed the rabbi didn't care for green beans or maybe he was allergic. Yikes. But everyone stopped eating my salad. My subtle introduction to the concept of *kitniyot* (legumes not eaten on Passover).

It's heartening to know I have lots of BT landsmen out there. A fellow “foreigner” has her own stories to tell. While at her neighbor's Shabbat table, one of the guests noted a portrait of an illustrious rav displayed on the dining room wall. “He was such a great *talmid chacham*,” said the host. “They summoned him from Europe to the States to serve as the *mashgiach* of a very prominent yeshivah.” Confused, my friend thought: If he was such a brilliant scholar, what was he doing checking lettuce in the kitchen? Why wasn't he delivering the top *shiur* (class) at a yeshivah?

As embarrassing as they are, BT faux pas can also bring out the best in the FFBs (Frum From Birth). Years ago, the Zuckers, a middle-aged *frum* couple I had befriended, invited me to an Orthodox organizational dinner. I gladly accepted and put on my swankiest pantsuit. Upon entering the dining hall, I realized the only other people in the room wearing pants were men; I took little consolation in the fact that we'd be sitting at a table most of the evening.

After the first speaker concluded, a woman sitting across from me threw a transparent inquiry my way. “Where are you from?” Exposed as an interloper, I, red-faced, longed to join my pants under the table. Mr. Zucker piped up, “You didn't know? This is our daughter.” To the woman's shock, Mrs. Zucker, my new “mom,” put her arm around me and kissed my cheek to accentuate the point.

Truth is, the Zuckers were right. Accent and all, I am a full-fledged member of the *chumrah*--I mean *chevrab*!

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CONGRATULATIONS AND MAZAL TOV

ENGAGEMENTS

Shoshana Collins and Yosef Jacobs
Mazal Tov to parents Mariam and Rabbi Avraham Yitzchok Jacobs
Ellen Silber and Robert Greenberg
Adina Tropp and Kyle Maxell Lonn
Mazal Tov to parents Rochelle and Harry Tropp



Natasha (Rachel) Kim and Coby Zekry, on the birth of son, Nitay Isaac (Yitzchak Nitay)

BAR/BAT MITZVAH

Gabrielle Shira Broome
Mazal Tov to parents Donna Mirman and Bernard Broome
Sophia Feder
Mazal Tov to parents Valerie and Daniel Feder
Debra Schwartzben
Mazal Tov to parents Jill and Dov Schwartzben

CONDOLENCES

Elisheva Lambert, on the loss of her mother, Mary Lillian Lambert

CONGRATULATIONS

Wendy and Brandon Dunn for being honored by the Hebrew Institute of White Plains

Helen Freedman for being honored by American Friends of Ateret Cohanim

Wendy and Richard Goldstein for being honored at the Jewish Education Program of Westchester
Steve Reich, founding member of the Beginners Service, on his musical composition being featured in the blockbuster movie, *Hunger Games*

TODAH RABBAH

The incredible cast of the Purim Schpiel: Seth Litzenblatt, Manny Zareh, Constance Tyler, Assaf Alster, Andrew Leibold, stage manager Chaviva Warner, and Alan Leicht for his superb writing, producing and directing

MARRIAGES

Jenna Duval and Rafi Gasner

BIRTHS

Elisheva and Oren Epstein, on the birth of a daughter, Ayelet
Mazal Tov to grandparents Judith Weil and Lloyd Epstein
Sheryl and Benjamin Shaykin on the birth of a son
Mazal Tov to grandparents, Maura and Leonard Shaykin

