

(FOR THE PINCHAS BAK MEMORIAL VOLUME)

"THE BAALEI TESHUVAH PHENOMENON"

The baalei teshuvah (returnees to Judaism) phenomenon is one of the most encouraging and puzzling of our times. Emerging almost ex nihilo at a place and time characterized by a rampant and triumphalist secularism, it has buoyed the spirits of the observant Jewish community which had begun to think of itself as vestigial, marginal, and without cogency or influence in the outside world. It has thrown a monkey-wrench into the tables, statistics, projections, and extrapolations of the sociologists and the futurists. It has disconcerted the assimilationists who, armed with dogmatic faithlessness and strident hopelessness, cheerfully prognosticated the end of Orthodox Judaism and the triumph of assimilation.

But this success story has not been without its problems. It has suffered from friend and foe alike, and it is by no means clear whether or not the movement has peaked.

Part of its problem has been the extravagance with which it has been hailed; it has had too good a press. Thus, it has been greeted as the sure sign of the inner revitalization of Torah Judaism when that is not at all that certain; it may well be only the Jewish form of a world-wide swing to the right, as expressed in Islam, in Christianity, and in politics. As such, it may say more about the disillusionment with modernity and

liberalism than about the attractiveness of Judaism and the Torah community. Nor is it helpful to exaggerate the numbers of baalei teshuvah and the significance of the statistics. We are still very much in trouble. The number of Jews coming into the fold as baalei teshuvah is far outweighed by the number assimilating and intermarrying. Good recruitment gives little ground for victory dances when it is surpassed by the rate of attrition.

Moreover, the baalei teshuva phenomenon has been appropriated by partisan religious groups who, for political reasons, covet the prestige of being the founders of the movement. A short time ago, a slick right-wing anti-Zionist magazine ran an issue on the baalei teshuvah yeshivahs. Reading it left one with the impression that the baalei teshuvah movement was conceived, nursed, and raised by the parent organization and its sympathizers. Not a word of credit was given to Yeshiva University which founded the James Striar School, the first true baalei teshuvah yeshivah of our times. Alas, neither immoderateness as to numbers nor immodesty in claiming credit will do much to help and encourage this welcome historical phenomenon.

The baalei teshuvah movement has also occasioned a number of negative reactions from all parts of the religious spectrum as well as from some of the families of the baalei teshuvah. It is important to deal with them in order to develop a proper

perspective on this significant new orientation in Jewish life in America.

One might expect that the baalei teshuvah phenomenon should prove disturbing and nettlesome to non-Orthodox religious trends in American Jewry. It has cut the ground from under the facile and confident assumptions that Orthodoxy is finished, a relic on its way out. It is, to say the least, disturbing to be confronted, in good health and vigor, by the subject of an obituary you have casually written. Yet, the angry rhetoric and sneering contempt, while psychologically understandable, are morally inexcusable. It is regrettable, therefore, to note the campaign to portray the baalei teshuvah movement as narrow-minded, Neanderthal, retrogressive, and atavistic. While indeed some individual returnees may qualify for such scornful epithets, it is unfair and even outrageous to tar all the baalei teshuvah with the same brush. It was Rabbeinu Gershom who declared a herem against such insensitive embarrassment of the baal teshuvah. (Ms. of Orhot Hayyim -- see Enc. Talm. XVII, 768).

Despite the highly complex psychological factors that go into the decision to become a baal teshuvah, some of which manifest themselves in a tendency towards extremism and even religious hubris, the essential phenomenon must be attributed to a fundamental metaphysical quest that is indigenous to man's very nature and which must sooner or later reassert itself in the search for meaning, for beginnings and ends, for significant purpose.



Hence, no matter the number or quality of disturbing aberrations, provided they are kept within bounds, one must conclude that the inner motivation of the baalei teshuah movement is one of a high degree of spiritual restlessness, an active conscience, and moral seriousness.

A colleague has apprised me of the surprising number of halakhic problems that have come to his attention from baalei teshuvah who have had vasectomies performed before they came to Judaism. Many of these men come from the West Coast, where such operations are considered an act of moral sacrifice out of a genuine worry over Earth's exploding population. Such individuals are idealistic, concerned, and sensitive -- hardly what one would expect from listening to their captious critics -- and it is this which has impelled them to search out a life of Torah.

Some notice must be taken as well of the vague and often unarticulated discomfiture that is experienced by the established, staid, "frum" Torah community in dealing with the baalei teshuvah. Here and there one hears snatches of critical conversation even from well meaning talmidei hakhamim and reads a guarded but caustic remark in a halakhic journal that probably reflects a larger subterranean reservoir of sentiment of disturbance and bewilderment -- one that is more than just a clash of "lifestyles," of the black fedora and conservative dress being confronted by the long hair, jeans, and hip vocabulary.



The argument goes something like this: These people have been leading profligate lives, disregarding Torah, indifferent to mitzvot, unconcerned with Jewish destiny, and now they come into the observant community with a certain exhibitionism or arrogance -- as if to say, "I'm proud to be a B.T. (baal teshuvah)" -- with none of the signs of embarrassment and regret and contrition that traditionally one might expect of a sinner who has repented.

Indeed, at first blush, there seems to be some merit to this argument. Maimonides, in codifying the passage in the Talmud, R.H. 16b, makes a series of rather severe demands on the baal teshuvah. (Indeed, while the Talmud offers the following four items as alternate routes, Maimonides requires all of them!)

This is how Maimonides describes what should be the conduct of a baal teshuvah:

Amongst the ways of teshuvah are: that the penitent constantly pray to the Lord with tears and supplication and give as much charity as he can; that he distance himself as far as he can from that which he sinned; that he change his name, as if to say, "I am someone else, no longer the one who performed those acts," and change all his conduct to the good and towards the path of righteousness; that he exile himself from his place, because exile atones for sin, for it causes him to be subservient, modest, and lowly of spirit.

-- Hil. Teshuvah 2:4

The prescription of "tears and supplication" hardly fits the picture of the happy, cheerful contemporary baal teshuvah who exults in his/her new way of life. Nor is our friendly baal teshuvah who happens to be the CEO of his business or chief

scientist of his lab or computer engineer, able to take off for exile in Bnai Brak as a condition of his teshuvah. And the assertive self-image of so many of our baalei teshuvah is not exactly in conformity with the norm of "modest and lowly of spirit." Yet, a correct analysis of the Halakah on baalei teshuvah will reveal that our contemporary baalei teshuvah are excused from such requirement of incessant contrition and even self-abasement.

Teshuvah is a term usually reserved for one who had conducted himself properly and then abandoned that behavior and now seeks to make amends. However, the Halakah distinguishes between this "standard" form of baal teshuvah and one who was captured as a child and raised among pagans. The subject is fully discussed in Shabbat 68. The Palestinian Amoraim R. Yohanan and Resh Lakish hold that only one who was acquainted with the prohibitions of work on the Sabbath but later forgot them is required to bring one sin-offering for all the Sabbaths he thus violated, but the child captive (tinok she'nishbah) who returns to Judaism and the gentile who was converted amongst the heathen (and therefore violated the Sabbath in ignorance and now is contrite about his omissions) are not required to offer any sacrifice. The Babylonian Amoraim, Rav and Shmuel, hold that the child captive and the proselyte are no different from the standard penitent.

Maimonides (Hil. Shegagot 2:6, 7:2) decides with Rav and Shmuel that all categories are to be treated alike. Hence, the

anti-halakhic conduct of the child captive and the proselyte is to be regarded as essentially culpable, but of that order of culpability such that one sin offering will suffice for all aspects of Sabbath, and there is no requirement for separate offerings for each Sabbath violated or each form of labor performed in contravention of the law.

Now, it is reasonable to assert that while teshuvah is required for both sins committed wittingly or unwittingly (see Maimonides, Hil. Teshuvah 1:1), thus characterizing the captive child and proselyte (as well as the knowing sinner) as baalei teshuvah, nevertheless it is highly unlikely that Maimonides' comments about the "ways of teshuvah" (Hil. Teshuvah 2:4 and see ib. 7:8) refer to the captive child who, after all, cannot be held morally responsible for his sinful deeds, and of whom it cannot therefore be demanded that he spend his days in prayer, supplication, or lowliness of spirit more than any other person. Support for this thesis that these requirements of Maimonides are limited to one who knew he was sinning when he sinned may be found in the Gemara's treatment of the captured child along with the proselyte under one heading; surely one cannot fault the proselyte for sins committed before he knew the law being violated, even though he may be required to bring one collective sin offering for all his past acts that may have been transgressions.

To put it another way, the misdeeds of the captive and the



proselyte are indeed considered transgressive (maaseh averah) and they are therefore required to bring a sacrifice (the sin offering) as well as to perform teshuvah for these acts. However, each of these lacks one crucial element that characterizes the ordinary sinner -- that of rebellion and conscious alienation from God. Never having known Him, as it were, the captive child and the proselyte cannot be considered to have betrayed Him.

In his famous lectures on teshuvah, my teacher and master, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik shlita, speaks of sin as the course of estrangement from God. Thus, the words of Maimonides (Hil. Teshuvah 7:7) "...separated from the Lord, God of Israel, as Scripture says, 'your sins separated you from God.'" The Rav draws our attention to the tragic bent of man who so often fails to appreciate and express his love to those closest and dearest to him; only after they have departed does his yearning move him to reach out to them -- alas, too late! The Rav finds this phenomenon in the penitent sinner. By means of his transgressions, the sinner, as it were, drives God out of his life and his experience: only afterwards does he realize the enormity of his act. His longings to restore God to his life partake, therefore, of the nature of mourning. It is this grief-like experience that impels and energizes the baal teshuvah to reach out to God. It is this phenomenon which is intended by the Sages who declared that the baal teshuvah stands higher than the completely righteous human, i.e., one who never sinned. Sin,

alienation, and the consequent longing for restoration and companionship empower the baal teshuvah in a way that the righteous non-sinner does not know.

I believe that from the point of view of this psychological insight, the child captive is closer to the righteous non-sinner than to the ordinary or standard baal teshuvah. The child captive too can be sensitive to the vacuity and ugliness of a life of sin; but he has no experience of a "paradise lost," of the deficit of a sense of closeness to the Creator, of yearning for a golden past, of grief and mourning over a divine companionship which once blessed his life and now is no more. Neither the child captive (and proselyte) nor the completely righteous person can share this tragic experience of mourning for divine closeness.

Now, the requirements enumerated by Maimonides -- constant prayer, tears, modesty, lowliness of spirit, shame, etc. -- are germane only to one who knew God as part of his life but rejected Him, to one who was a friend but whose sin estranged him from the divine Friend. But they are clearly irrelevant to one, such as the child captive, who never had the experience of divine companionship and who is now, as it were, being introduced to or discovering Him for the first time.

Indeed, one must give special credit to those who grew up in our hedonistic, materialistic, and narcissistic society, and chose to accept the "yoke of the commandments." They never knew the

warmth and beauty of Torah life -- or even its potential for warmth and beauty -- and came to it anew. That is precisely why the captive child is coupled with the proselyte. Never, no matter what the provocation, must we deprecate the moral heroism that such teshuvah entails. Thus, in the 15th Century, R. Israel Isserlein wrote in his Terumat ha-Deshen concerning a Jew who converted to another faith and subsequently became a baal teshuvah, that "there are no greater and more horrible torments than such a person suffers every day that he foreswears the pleasure that the Gentiles enjoy and which would have been his too had he remained with them. Instead, he accepted upon himself to live like all other Jews, with fear and threats and suffering from anti-Semites -- which never worried him before he repented." (No. 198, in Omissions at end of Part II. See the almost identical remarks in Responsa Binyamin Ze'ev, No. 72).

The dilemmas of baalei teshuvah are often agonizing. Many rabbis and teachers have counselled young baalei teshuvah who have had jarring experiences with former friends, family, and especially unsympathetic and uncooperative parents. Yeshiva University makes special efforts to defuse such explosive situations. Honoring parents is no less a mitzvah than any other.

There is some justice to the complaint that some baalei teshuvah tend to be self-concerned, self-involved, and indifferent to the community at large. These baalei teshuvah are "into" learning or mitzvot, but are not overly in touch with



their local synagogues, with community-wide organizations, or with work for Israel or the many charitable organizations in the community. To an extent, this represents a continuation of their old pre-teshuvah narcissism raised to a spiritual level. Shalom alekha nafshi replaces shalom alekha gufi: the content is Jewish, the pattern is pagan.


But one ought not be quick to blame. First, it is a decided minority who practice such spiritual egotism. Most are very much involved in communal matters and do their duty and more.

Second, baalei teshuvah are entitled to their share of imperfections no less than the rest of us. I remember being terribly annoyed by a beggar who was harrassing me. An older colleague wisely pointed out to me that the poor have the same right to be obnoxious as the rich. The same rule holds for the native and the newly observant.

Moreover, if some baalei teshuvah seem supercilious, or manifest a perchance for authoritarianism, or do not assume their share of communal responsibility, whose fault is it? After all, they really have no recourse but to model themselves on the Orthodox community into which they are assimilating. And, unfortunately, not all Orthodox Jews are necessarily paragons of spirituality or modesty or respect to our fellow Jews or civility in speech and conduct or a willingness to sacrifice private advantage for the public good. Dare we expect more of baalei

teshuvah than of the rest of the observant community? Maybe it is time for the rest of us to -- do teshuvah!

The baalei teshuvah phenomenon, even after discounting the hype and the exaggeration, is one of the most promising developments in the history of the American-Jewish community. It has set people thinking; it has pierced the pompous balloon of the anti-Orthodox doom-sayers; it has exposed the vacuity of Judaism without Torah; it has brought hope to all who have long labored to reach out to all Jews, who were not satisfied to see Orthodox Jewry as a restricted club, as a denominational Shtibbel.

Pinchas Bak, , in whose memory this volume is published, was an outstanding exemplar of Jewish outreach. He served as a role model to hundreds of young people who saw in him the Heaven-sent opportunity to realize their own noblest ambitions and to fulfill a deep spiritual thirst of which they seemed but dimly aware in this highly secularized society.

He sought out young people who were thinking and feeling, intelligent and sensitive. He did not look for easy triumphs with the marginal neurotic types. He offered Torah and a life of mitzvot not as therapy for the addicted and not as an excuse for adolescent rebellion, but as the response to a deep spiritual need, as a way to rediscover roots, as the means to sensitize them to ancestral voices prophesying in the idiom of their personal discontent. He invited them into his warm and beautiful home, and into a life that was sane and balanced and moderate and

responsible -- and holy.

Pinchas's efforts must be continued as, indeed, they are being continued. And if indeed today's baalei teshuvah are in the category of the "captive child," we must undertake the sacred task of pidyon shevuyim, of redeeming the captives -- and make of the shevuyim true shavim. For this, most certainly, is the way to redemption:

All the prophets commanded us concerning teshuvah, and Israel will be redeemed only because of teshuvah. The Torah promised us that, ultimately, Israel will do teshuvah at the end of its exile, and thus be immediately redeemed. So does Scripture say, "And it will be when all these things are come to pass... you will return to the Lord your God ... and the Lord your God will restore you from your captivity," etc.

Maimonides -- Hil. Teshuvah 7:5.

Redemption is the drama of reciprocal return. When we return to Him, He will return to us and restore us to our ancient glory.