

Rabbi Mayer Schiller – The Biggest Challenges Facing Baalei Teshuva

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Rabbi Mayer Schiller is stopping teaching, so we are paying tribute to his wonderful career by reposting this great piece that he wrote for Beyond BT when we first started in December 2005.

Part 1 — Challenges

I have been asked to write on the “biggest challenges facing baalei teshuva.” Of course, every Jew in his life’s pursuit of Hashem and His Torah encounters challenges. However, the challenges we face and how we respond to them is forever colored by who we are and where we come from. Thus, much of what follows may be relevant to all Jews but it strikes me that these challenges are of particular concern to baalei teshuva.

The tikkun that each individual’s life is to achieve requires a realistic assessment of the nisyonos that are specific to one’s place in life, human/Jewish history and cultural context.

Also, any discussion of this issue must be colored by much subjectivity. We can, in the end, only speak with authority about our own “challenges.” Part of us is always alone in the world. Yet, life is also a shared experience. Hopefully some of what I – and others on this site – have to say may resonate in the heart of another and together we may be worthy of giving and receiving a bit of chizuk as we seek to ascend the har Hashem.

In all honesty, I have encountered so many challenges, born of the baal teshuva experience, that one almost doesn't know where to begin. Plus, the challenges change, some deepen, while others become weaker over the years, as one spends more time in the Orthodox community.

At the beginning, I think a baal teshuva is haunted by a certain loneliness in, and sense of alienation from his new environment. Everyone else practices Judaism as a matter of second nature. To baalei teshuva, at first, everything done, learned and experienced is new, startling and , at times confusing. Everything is a big deal. Everyone else seems to know what is a big deal and what isn't.

As part of this problem there is the, at times, blase attitude of FFBers who seem less than enthused about things that the BT has been taught are of the utmost importance. This too can be most disconcerting.

Before long, one realizes that Orthodoxy is not a monolith and that there are many different models of how to live in the Torah world. Should the baal teshuva select a significant sage to tell him where to go or, should he seek a derech that fits his own soul's needs as he perceives/experiences them?

Perhaps, the most daunting challenge faced is the ever growing awareness that not all Orthodox Jews are paragons of empathy or kindness or patience or even honesty; or even very much engaged in proper study and prayer. Further, to some of them, their religion is simply a rote practice, little cherished and almost no source of inspiration to them. The personal encounters with all the above can give many a baal teshuva moments of pain and doubt. To a degree that pain will never pass. We all entered Yiddishkeit in search of a good, more meaningful and certainly more spiritual, moral and ethical life. The grim knowledge that this is often far from the reality hits baalei teshuva very hard.

Indeed, the pain for the BT intensifies when he later confronts the fact that his children are FFBs and often far less passionate about the same things that inspired him.

Often the BT learns by experience that it is even those Torah teachers that may have once seemed so perfect to him that are, in reality, flawed human beings as well.

For the thoughtful BT the process of engaging with Torah and halacha may at times prove disquieting. Laws and ideas concerning non – Jews, women, the disabled, slaves and the like are apt to be unsettling and the proposed answers often apologetic and/or seemingly inadequate.

Finally, there is the general stance of Orthodoxy in relation to non – Orthodox (or haredi towards Modern Orthodox and, more surprisingly, Modern Orthodox to haredi) society both in Israel and America as self absorbed, insular tribes with little interest in or responsibility towards “outside” groups /individuals, be it of a material or spiritual nature. This attitude inevitably costs many BTs some sleepless nights.

All or some of the above are among the challenges BTs face. As a BT member of the Beth Shraga Beis Medrash said to me in the summer of 1968, “In the end we are different. It is not just that we can’t go home for Shabbos. We are built differently and always will stay that way.”

This is both a blessing and a curse. Just as the BT will often carry some alienation and doubt throughout life, he will also experience Torah in powerful, wondrous, insightful and joyous ways that might be inaccessible to most FFBs.

In my next entry I hope to discuss the possible means (thoughts, seforim, leaders, books, communities and the like) that will help a BT through the moments of darkness just outlined.

For the interim, the essential issue is to retain the fervor and devotion of one’s initial experiences in Torah while living in the real world with its ambiguities, complexities, paradoxes and disappointments. This is the calling of the mature, thoughtful BT.

May we all be worthy of success and joy in our service of the Ribbono shel Olam.

Rabbi Mayer Schiller

Originally posted on December 9th, 2005.