



Not Just An Interview: Profile of a Baal T'shuva Yeshiva

by Avi Shamir

Amidst the decadence of a once proud Jewish neighborhood stands a monument of pride. It is a small and inconspicuous yeshiva—not a yeshiva in the modern sense, with billboards advertising summer camps in the Catskills and Thursday night bingo, but a yeshiva in the fundamental sense, whose dingy exterior shouts “return to the source.” Its aim is to attract Jews, who, like myself, have strayed from Judaism. Though surrounded by the ever-mounting decay of Far Rockaway—a deterioration due largely to the absence of influential but uncommitted Jews who abandoned the neighborhood out of selfishness or fear at the sight of the first blockbuster, this institution stubbornly persists in its mission at a time when Torah Judaism is on the decline. In a sense, this yeshiva is the sister counterpart of the more renowned Lubavitch Yeshiva in Crown Heights, another decaying Jewish neighborhood. I mention the decay of communities only because it is a symptom of the compromised faith of their leading citizens.

I entered the yeshiva one Shabbat afternoon after the mincha services. I walked through the lobby clad in my post-hippie garb for religious occasions: a leisure suit, boots, no tie, recently modified long hair, and a

microscopic kipah. One of the students approached me with a welcoming smile, which I gathered he wore whenever encountering a potential baal t'shuva. “A guten Shabbos,” he said. We shook hands. Though he wore a colorless gray suit and closely cropped hair, he seemed to attach no importance to our physical differences, which isn't always the case when an assimilated Jew walks into an Orthodox synagogue.

“When someone wants to come here and learn, it isn't important how he dresses or wears his hair,” he said. “In some other yeshivas they'd tell you immediately either to cut your hair or leave. Over here what's important is to instill in a baal t'shuva the ‘ratzon,’ the willingness, to learn Torah. Once that is achieved, the student usually cuts his hair out of his own free will.”

I was embarrassed to say that I hadn't come to learn, or to receive any religious guidance, but to arrange for an interview with his rebbe, Rabbi Freifeld.

“He isn't here at the moment,” he replied, “but you'll have no trouble getting the interview. That's his bag.” I smiled to myself at the euphemism.

“Are many of the students here so to speak leftover hippies from the sixties?” I asked.

“We get all types here,” he said. I was amused to learn that the sounds of zmirot which emanated from downstairs came from former acid freaks and revolutionaries.

The following week I had the privilege of interviewing Rabbi Freifeld, the unassuming leader of this unique institution.

The interview ran as follows:

Q—Are many of your students who are baalei t'shuva encountering Judaism for the first time?

A—Yes, the very first time.

Q—What approach do you use to attract a potential baal t'shuva?

A—We try to show them the relevance of Torah Judaism...we try to show them the depth and beauty of Torah Judaism and a person with a reasonable intelligence responds.

Q—How can you tell when they respond?

A—We see that it evokes a commitment on their part to be willing to learn and to invest energy...to come to yeshiva and learn. If we are not successful, then the person will not commit himself to a regimentation and discipline of learning...and according to his intelligence, that is generally the greater proportion of response.

Q—Do you find that many baalei t'shuva are disenchanted hippies?

A—In general today, in Western civilization, we are in a state of tremendous conflict and turmoil. There is a tremendous amount of decadence as far as social values are concerned, as far as moral and ethical values are concerned. It is our emunah and our faith that a Jewish soul cannot be satisfied with this type of life. You can enjoy the dolce vita, “the good life” for a while, but after a while it leaves a person high and dry. And the person begins to search...and at that moment it's the most fertile and ripe moment to expose the person to Torah. He comes, he experiences the Shabbos, the peace, the joy, the strengthening of a Shabbos.

cont. on page 30

What is Judaism? Judaism is a discipline that has to touch the real person. It has to touch his inner soul.

Not Just an Interview cont. from page 12

He becomes exposed to prayer for the first time, and then he becomes exposed to learning, unstructured learning, almost—not university learning with a lot of baloney subjects. He is thrown into the “yam hatalmud,” the ocean of the gemora. And all these things work on a person, appeal to his intellect, appeal to his emotions, and touch the inner recesses of his soul, and he begins to flourish in Torah.

Q—Yes, but isn't it true, I have heard that many students who come into your school were formally—well, to say that they were “hippies” is a generalization, but—

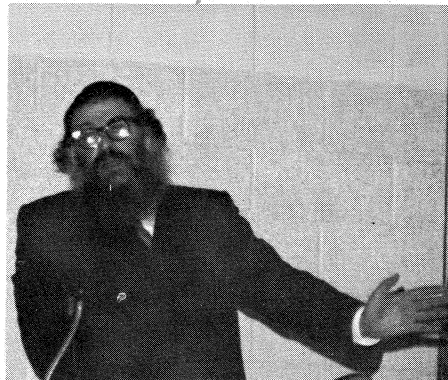
A—“Hippie” is only a symptom. The whole hippie movement, you have to understand in its social implications. The revolt of youth that went on the sixties is symptomatic of an inner restlessness, of an inner rejection of the values presented by Western civilization. What is this business of going back to the farm? I visited a number of so-called hippie farms. It's running away from the confusion, from the complications of society, and seeking a simpler, more honest and profound way of life. So the whole hippie movement is just symptomatic. You find it true, many of them were hippies. In fact we had a number of people here who were from the first hippies, who were so to speak leaders and pioneers in the hippie movement. But it wasn't because they were hippies that they became religious. It was because they had this symptom of an inner restlessness, of a vacuum inside their lives that drove them and motivated them to seek something else.

(Though I already knew the answer to the following, I was tempted to hear it in his words.)

Q—When a potential baal t'shuva enters your congregation with long hair, do you feel it is necessary for him to change his outer appearance before he can learn with the other students?

A—Definitely not. It is our policy never to make any comment about a person's long hair. Let me tell you something, and it happened very recently. A fellow, his name is Ezra, he came to yeshiva, an Israeli, very fine

boy, extremely good looking boy. He came with beautiful long hair. We greeted him warmly, with open arms. He began to learn. He had an extensive knowledge of Hebrew, but he had never learned Torah. He was brought up in an entirely secular world. It didn't take him a month, he cut off his long hair and said that now he belonged to a different world. . . . Our policy is that the external appearance is not important. What is very important is what's going on *internally*.



Rabbi Shlomo Freifeld

Q—I agree. . . I have heard that some of your students formerly took drugs. Is it necessary to refrain from drugs in order to learn Torah?

A—Yes. Look, drugs is essentially an “ersatz” life, it's not facing reality. The Torah Jews are realists. What is Judaism? Judaism is a discipline that has to touch the real person. It has to touch his inner soul. If you're dealing with a drugged up person, no matter what he sees, no matter how illuminated he becomes, no matter what revelations are revealed to him under drugs, that's not Judaism. It's something else. Judaism is a very sober, realistic religion that deals with a person on a real basis. Under drugs you're not dealing on a real basis. Therefore we categorically reject that.

Q—In other words, if you know that one of your students is using drugs, any drugs, you try to dissuade him from it.

A—Absolutely.

Q—Can you discuss your influence on Bob Dylan?

A—I prefer not to discuss my influence on Bob Dylan, but I can tell you a few

words that I think are very significant for people to know about Bob Dylan. Bob Dylan, I imagine it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say has reached the pinnacle of success. He has reached what many people dream and fantasize all day about. He is internationally famous. People are running after him. He has to travel around incognito, he has to hide. He finds it necessary to get into his Ferrari with his chauffeur and come out to Far Rockaway to visit and speak with someone who has a medieval appearance, someone who is out of the flow of society. Now, you have to understand he isn't doing this for kicks. He too feels a vacuum in his world. He is not contented. Contrary to what we think, a man who has amassed such wealth, a man of such enormous fame, a man of such enormous talents. . . you would think here is a man who has everything. And beneath this mountain of achievement, he is dissatisfied. He isn't fulfilled. He doesn't feel actualized. He doesn't feel fully creative. He has to come and seek out. . . something that is very important to him. This is what I can tell you about Bob Dylan. And I can tell you that he had a genuinely true interest in discovering the meaning of his Jewishness.

Q—Let's talk a little about the counter-movement away from religion. Why are many young people who attended yeshivas leaving religion?

A—Well, it's an interesting thing. You find in the Talmud, which is an amazing, mysterious body of knowledge . . . the Talmud says that all is not rosy when one studies the Torah. There is an aspect of Torah called Zoche: if one merits, one comes to the true meaning of Torah. And there's an aspect called Lo Zoche, he did not merit. To obtain the Torah knowledge, to become what we call a ben-Torah, is an arduous task. We must give up a lot. Believe me, if I tell you stories about people who come to yeshiva who have never studied in a yeshiva, who put in fifteen hours a day of learning, people who have studied in universities; with one or more degrees, extremely accomplished people. Now in the yeshivas there are many students who are not reached. I don't say it's the fault of the students, in many instances it might be the fault of the yeshivas. Being

dissatisfied, and the world having its alluring pull, many people fall away. But I earnestly believe that if these people were perhaps taught in a different way, if they were given a different approach to learning, a different encouragement, many of these people would remain and become b'nai-Torah. I don't want to condemn or criticize the yeshivas. There are many problems in yeshivas, mainly financial. They are understaffed and they cannot get the proper help that they need. But the people are good people, the boys and girls, and put in the proper climate, I believe that they can thrive. You have to understand that the Torah is the truth of the whole cosmos. A person must react to this. The difficulties we encounter is when a person is not taught properly. Some people need to be taught individually, and the yeshivas are not equipped for that. It's not entirely their fault.

Q—When you meet a Jew who went to yeshiva and who strayed from religion, what approach do you use to convince him that he's made a mistake?

A—Well, the only approach I have is first of all to establish a personal relationship. The best learning, the most creative and productive learning, is when there is a personal relationship. If the relationship is nonexistent, if it is nil and it's just a question of teaching a subject, you cannot influence a person. There has to be a respect for each other, an understanding of each other as people.

Q—Do you feel that that's what is lacking in the yeshivas?

A—Well, it's possible. That's a problem, yes.

Q—Do you consider assimilation and intermarriage a serious threat to the continuance of the Jewish people?

A—It's past that stage already. There is nothing to consider anymore. People like to think that there are six million Jews in the United States. There aren't six million Jews. I have doubts if there are two million Jews left in the United States. You know, I come to Chicago . . . I have friends there and visit there often. For many years it was understood that Chicago has half a million Jews. But I was in Chicago last year and had a conversation with someone from the federation who told me that there were only 250,000 Jews. I said, "What happened to the other 250,000?" He said: "That question bothers us too. They totally disappeared. Some have intermarried, some have changed their names, some are totally assimilated in goyish sections and don't want to know anything about Judaism. Half the Jews in the city of

Chicago have disappeared. And with the 250,000 who we know where their whereabouts are, many of them are disappearing too." The question of whether assimilation is a threat isn't a question anymore, it's an absolute reality. I spoke to someone in the higher echelons of the Bnai Brith. He said that three million Jews look forward for their children to intermarry. It's a status symbol for them. And there are two million Jews who are afraid of intermarriage and don't know what to do about it. This is an alarming situation. In a situation like this, the reaction of the Jews who are committed should be to go out into the street and grab Jews and start building and teaching again. But we're in some sort of soporific sleep, and we're lulled into believing that things are going to get better by themselves. It's not going to get better. It's going to get worse before it gets better.

Q—Do you put more of a stress on the rituals of Judaism, for example, putting on tefillin, or on studying Torah?

A—Look, Judaism is one indivisible totality. It's one truth. Carrying out the daily practice of Judaism is as important as the study of Torah. Now it's understandable that you can't tell a person who doesn't know anything about Judaism to put on tefillin, wear tzitzit, and sit in a succah. So Torah is the first priority. From that a person will see the light which will inspire him to the practice of Judaism. But to say that one is more important than the other . . . we can't say such a thing. It's indivisible. It's one entity.

Q—Do you agree with the Lubavitch approach for attracting baalei t'shuva, for example, enticing Jews on college campuses to put on tefillin?

A—I think that their approach is the most noble approach, the most admirable approach, and I wish we all did it. The Lubavitch are a people who are doing a wonderful, wonderful job. I don't say that theirs is the only approach, but what they are doing is the absolute call of the moment. They are reacting to the problem in the most sensible way. You've got to go out and meet these people.

Q—Are you doing the same thing? Are you trying to seek out baalei t'shuva or are you waiting for them to come to your yeshiva?

A—We are a small group of people. One of our biggest achievements in the twelve years of our existence is the fact that we have inspired teachers who seek out people. We seek out people wherever we can. But we are a small group. I'm not the Lubavitcher Rebbe and I don't have thousands of

chassidim. But amongst our group of men and women here in Far Rockaway we are over one hundred and fifty families, and there must be at least another one hundred and fifty to two hundred families who don't live in Far Rockaway. Wherever we have our people there are young men who started with nothing who now know how to teach other people. Of course you have to go out to speak to Jews today. Jews want to be spoken to. Jews have a thirst to be spoken to. But unfortunately there aren't enough proper and equipped people to speak to them.

Q—A rabbi once said to me that once you stop wearing a yarmulka you begin to lose all your yiddishkeit. Do you agree?

A—Well, again, this is a symptom. I would say once a person loses his pride in Judaism, that's one of the strongest symptoms that he's losing his yiddishkeit. Once you lose your courage and your pride and your emunah you're on your way down. A yarmulka is a symbol of your pride. It's something that's obvious, it's self-evident when anyone sees you in the street. I mean if you can feel weak enough and tiny enough to go out in the street without your yarmulka it's a symptom that you're losing your pride in Judaism.

Q—But there are a lot of people who don't look at it that way.

A—It's almost a statistic. A person who walks on the street and rides on a bus without a yarmulka . . . look closely, it's almost a law of nature. You can look at that person and say his Judaism is on the way down.

Q—What would you say is the single most important concept that a baal t'shuva has to come to terms with?

A—A baal t'shuva must come to terms with the concept of discipline in learning. We live in a society where the word "discipline" is an anathema. You do what you want and when you want it. That's the character and quality of our society. For a person to become a baal t'shuva he must have a yearning and a courage to face a discipline. That he can't do what he wants and when he wants anymore. That he can't live without thinking—he must use his head. These are the basic ingredients that a baal t'shuva must have.

As I left his house I pondered this last remark. It dawned on me after all these religion-free years why I had strayed from Judaism. It wasn't so much that my faith had been shattered after eleven years indoctrination in yeshiva. It was mainly because I had lost the capacity to discipline myself. ■