

ELIYOKIM COHEN

Cocaine to Amen

*My Unorthodox Journey to Orthodox
Judaism*



First published by The CHAI ON TORAH Foundation 2026

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Eliyokim Cohen asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

First edition

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B'syata D'shmaya

May the message of this book, written with every ounce of love from the depths of my soul, reach the hearts of all who seek meaning and purpose in life. May my personal story be the flame that ignites a transformation in your life, through the beauty and spirituality of Judaism and our holy Torah. Thank you to everyone who has impacted my life so profoundly over the years; each and every one of you is the reason this story is being shared today.

Reb Zusha famously said on his deathbed that he was not afraid of being asked why he wasn't as wise as Moses or kind as Abraham. Instead, he feared being asked, "Zusha, why weren't you Zusha?". This timeless quote emphasizes the importance of living up to your own unique potential and fulfilling your own customized purpose in this world.

REBBE ZUSHA OF ANIPOLI

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Preface



Hi everyone, my name is Eliyokim Cohen, founder of the CHAI ON TORAH Foundation. Welcome to my journey: COCAINE TO AMEN. My purpose in writing this story was to reach that one lost soul who thinks they'll never be able to extricate themselves from a seemingly endless cycle of addiction, depression, or failure, leaving them feeling hopeless. While this is my personal story, it reflects a struggle many face in modern times.

I spent much of my twenties believing the hole I had dug for myself with cocaine was one I would never be able to climb out of. Nights spent crawling on the floor, desperate for any spilled drop of cocaine, seemed more important than channeling the blessings G-d bestowed upon me to achieve my potential. Even more frightening than a life without cocaine was the prospect of becoming the best possible version of myself; the fear of truly searching my heart and soul outweighed the misery of a life I had chosen to drown in white powder.

To believe this world and everything in it exploded randomly

from a tiny dot is the epitome of delusion. It is easier to believe that fairy tale than to grasp that you were created as a masterpiece by G-d, with a vital role to play in the world. For Jews, actualizing this reality can only be achieved through our holy Torah. My sincere desire is that, after finishing this book, you will have the courage and determination to explore its depth and beauty and start your own journey.

Regardless of where you currently stand on the religious spectrum, this book is designed to help every person find the meaning and purpose they may be lacking in life. From a Jew struggling with self-awareness to a learned rabbi in Jerusalem, this book can ignite the same transformation within you that I personally experienced beginning January 4, 2008.

My Chai on Torah Foundation was created to be a shining beacon of light and hope for Jews around the world, helping them cultivate a pride in their Judaism they may never have felt before. I hope you will read this book and be inspired to help us on our mission: to revolutionize the Jewish nation one precious Jewish soul at a time.

I am here to be a guide, partner, or shoulder to lean on. My email and the website for my Torah lectures—which receive incredible viewership and feedback from Jews and gentiles far and wide—are included in the conclusion section of this book. I am available for anything you might need on your own journey to reach deep within and fulfill the great potential you possess.

If you would ever like to invite me to speak in your community, I would be deeply honored. I have enjoyed giving lectures to

communities in the US and Israel, and I believe many would be moved not just by my story, but also by my passion for helping every fellow Jew in their quest for personal fulfillment and inner peace.

Enjoy Cocaine to Amen, and please don't hesitate to reach out. Please also consider supporting Chai on Torah as a charity looking to have a meaningful impact on all those we touch.

With Love,

Eliyokim Cohen

Introduction



Had I known how life would turn out for me, I would've felt a lot better about having over 25 angry Georgia Highway Patrolmen pointing their pistols directly at me and screaming at me to get out of my BMW.

Their ensuing blows to my face and body would've been a lot less painful, the blood would've looked a lot less gruesome, and the scratches a lot less deep. In my mind, life at this point was over, a waste of potential and promise, a life as dented as the BMW that was now in shambles after having smashed into a brick wall. I almost died that fateful night in January 2008. There was a funeral of sorts; the life I once lived, the ideology I once had, and values I once coveted got buried in the windy streets of Georgia.

If I were watching someone pour a jug of water into a cup with a hole in the bottom, I would probably sit there and smirk, but there is nothing funny about this, considering it was the metaphor of my life. No matter how much pleasure, fun, and excitement I packed into my days, nothing tangible stayed in

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my cup. I knew the first time I did cocaine that it would end up ruining my life; I even had this thought in my head as I was snorting my first line in Cancun. What started out as just a recreational way to make the party more fun, the sex more pleasurable, or the day more tolerable turned into a nightmare that most never wake up from.

My embrace of Judaism transformed my life, and it can have a positive impact on anybody who reads this book as well. All the preconceived notions I had about what being a Jew meant quickly faded away as I delved into my roots. I desperately wanted to rebuild my life, and I saw my roots as the first place to start. If you're not the least bit connected to your Judaism, I sincerely hope something within these pages can spark your desire to learn more. If you're already observant, maybe reading about my story of redemption can spur you on to greater heights in your Judaism. People should always strive for inner growth, and I'm convinced that everyone who reads this book with an open mind will achieve that.

If you are not Jewish, and some of you reading this won't be, this is a story of faith, and how my faith brought me back from the depths of rootlessness, purposelessness, and the potential death that cocaine addiction brings. I did not write this book to convince you to become Jews, but to help you look in the mirror and plumb the depths of your own lives. This book will certainly give you a true respect for the beliefs and concepts facilitated by my people, the Jews.

My sincere goal is for people to read this book and place themselves in my shoes, feeling the agony of despair and the

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triumph of change. This is my personal story, but many Jews have traveled down a similar road. I hope this book will be the impetus that starts your own personal journey to inner peace and contentment. This book comes straight from my heart, as if I'm speaking to a dear friend. I hope you enjoy Cocaine to Amen, the story of my battle back from the depths of despair.

I

*BLUNDERING IN A
SNOWSTORM OF
WHITE POWDER*

One

High School High—and Getting Higher



Humans need to feel accepted; it's a basic element of our personalities. This need often becomes most apparent in high school. I wasn't in the most popular crowd in high school; I was a rung below. I wasn't a football player or the guy who dated cheerleaders, but I also wasn't a dork, dweeb, or geek, as many high schools have. I was fairly happy in high school. Sure, I always craved being in the more popular crowd, but I enjoyed the friends I had. I essentially gave up on school after eighth grade when I got my first "B." Figuring I could no longer claim straight "A's" my whole life, I saw no point in trying anymore. I experienced high school in a way few others did. I did what I wanted virtually every second of every day, whether it was staying home to play cards with friends, ditching school for golf, or just getting high and hanging around town. I was even on a work/study program my senior year, yet somehow remained

in it without even having a job!

I knew my life was pretty wasteful at that point, but like most teenagers, I was too absorbed in “being a teenager” to even care. I had no ambitious or challenging dreams. I just wanted as much fun and as few rules as possible. Interestingly, there is no ancient Hebrew word for “fun” because, in Judaism, aimless amusement is not part of our foundation. Every aspect of life has a purpose and an aim, but those attributes didn’t fit into my life at that point. I basically existed from one day to the next, always looking forward to college to reinvent myself and start fresh.

College wasn’t much different from high school, except I enjoyed a much higher social status. I was a member of a Jewish fraternity and always hung out with the “in crowd.” My days revolved around drugs, hooking up with girls, and attending as few classes as possible. I can honestly say I don’t remember a single thing I learned in any of my courses, other than a few songs from the “History of Rock n’ Roll” course, which I actually didn’t mind attending occasionally. I loved being around my fellow Jews, and always felt more comfortable with them than with Gentiles. Even my closest high school friends occasionally cracked a Jewish joke, and I realized that no matter how close I got to them, a barrier always remained because I was Jewish and they weren’t.

During college, I had no clue what I wanted out of life, but I knew what I was going to do. My parents bought a baby furniture retail store at the end of my freshman year and moved from Boston to Atlanta, only about an hour from my college.

High School High—and Getting Higher

No one grows up dreaming of owning a baby furniture store. I always had my sights set on the NBA until I realized I was Jewish and couldn't dunk. Plus, girls thought it was sweet that I dealt with baby things all day, and I certainly used it to my advantage at the bars, considering I had no shame or moral integrity at that point.

Everything in my life changed when I started using cocaine at the end of my junior year. Life seemed to matter less and less to me; I was constantly obsessed with getting more drugs. I started selling cocaine during my senior year, thinking it would save me money since it was such an expensive habit. However, I was foolish enough to break the basic rule of drug dealing: "do not get high on your own supply." No one ever knew how bad it was because, honestly, I was one of the most highly functioning coke-heads in history. Had it not been for a constant runny nose and weight loss, I don't think anyone would have ever known I was on drugs at all.

Drugs have an interesting way of prompting a bizarre, spiritual reflection on life. It sounds strange, but I know I'm not alone in this experience. I didn't view life as something precious and fragile. I actually viewed it with disdain, seeing it as an endless sea of years crammed together, leading towards inevitable death. With an attitude like that, it's hard to be motivated to contribute positively to society, and for years, I unfortunately became more and more of a recluse. I didn't feel good about anything I stood for or valued, so hiding behind drugs seemed like a more enticing option.

Many of you might be reading this, trying to identify with me

as a drug user, but that's not the right perspective. Drugs were merely a cover for the shame I felt inside, and if you look deep within yourself, I'm sure you can uncover a similar haunting feeling. My drug use might be your obsession with work, or your overindulgence in shopping, or your constant need to work out. We all mask things in our lives; unfortunately, my mask was far more harmful, and far more obvious. When I started learning about Judaism, it was easy to get to the root of my problems. Identifying cocaine as the blatant source of my distress in life was easy; it was what it covered up that was hard to unearth. Until I was truly honest with myself about not liking who I was, I couldn't delve deeper than the superficial. Once I finally identified my real flaws and weaknesses, I could also locate my positive attributes and strengths.

Two

On Top of an Upside-down World



It should have been the best night of my life. That alone was a sad commentary on my depraved moral compass. Every red-blooded American male dreams of sleeping with two women in one night, ideally best friends. I could blame society, television, movies, and role models for this cultural insanity, but we are all masters of our own choices, and I consistently made poor ones.

I felt like the big man on campus that weekend, plotting my fantasy to add another feather to the cap of my wasteful, sinful life. When my two female friends arrived, I had only one goal: to sleep with both of them that night. Was this a horrible way to think while attending college? Some people aimed to become lawyers or doctors; yet, this was my ultimate focus? It had almost worked the week before, and my roommates and friends

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were rooting me on to complete the mission. My fraternity brothers at the University of Georgia were mostly “nice” Jewish boys, but most of us still craved what society dictated we should desire.

I didn’t see these two girls as people, as fellow human beings in the drama of life. I saw them as stepping stones to a reputation and as trivial conquests. Sadly, I knew I wasn’t alone in that view. This mindset is so prevalent today that it’s glorified in movies and TV shows watched by millions of the world’s youth. We were at the bar that night, and I took turns sneaking off with one while the other stayed at the table, oblivious to my insidious intentions. All the while, my friends looked on in awe and jealousy, mirroring the feelings I often had listening to their escapades.

I remember the satisfaction and pride I felt that night as my plan unfolded. I felt like a movie star living out a dream, though such a dream was ignoble to begin with. How sad that people’s emotional states became a game for me. What kind of person views others in this way? Sadly, in today’s society, I was the norm, not the exception. This modern, selfish mentality sadly leads to the devaluation of everything meaningful in our lives.

In an age where men refer to women as “chicks,” “pieces of tail,” or “baby mamas,” why would anyone think another outcome is even possible? Have you ever stopped to think about this? I would guess probably not. Years of life pass by, and most of us never take the time to see how negative our surroundings and the people we associate ourselves with might be to our lives.

On Top of an Upside-down World

As the evening peaked, I felt euphoric, on top of the world. I was living every man's fantasy, a debauchery my friends would discuss for a long time. I remember the excitement I felt as the night unfolded. When those with low morals value certain things, they almost become a currency. The more girls you're with, the more currency you have, further fueling that degenerate "economy."

The three of us returned to my apartment, and after more drinks, I slept with the girl I was dating. After she fell asleep, I crept slyly into her friend's room and slept with her too. I fell asleep there. In the morning, I woke to my first conquest banging on the door. When she saw me with her best friend, her shocked expression contrasted only with my satisfied one. Her anger paralleled my happiness, and her disgust mirrored my elation. I was oblivious to the hurt I caused, because all I cared about was the knowledge that this event would be the topic of conversation for weeks. That excitement washed away any sympathy for the girl, whom I humiliated with yet another selfish decision.

Driving back to Atlanta for work the next day, I started feeling dirty and ashamed. I remember pondering life on that hour-long car trip, vividly disgusted by my own introspection. If that was supposed to be the pinnacle of my life, could I possibly have been a bigger loser? A few fleeting moments of gratification, some lasting glory, approval from my closest friends, and a story to tell at a bar—was this really my proudest achievement? At that moment, I could have reflected more deeply and turned my life around sooner. All the ingredients were there, and I truly felt something needed to change in how I viewed and lived life.

Sadly, true change requires self-belief, and I was the epitome of weakness. I reflect on this episode often now. That night was the epitome of what defined my priorities and what I sought from life. My reputation and what others thought of me were more important than what I thought of myself. Despite common perceptions of Judaism and current world press reports, no religion on Earth values women more than Judaism. Jewish Law includes a halacha requiring men to marry, while women are not obligated. Our Sages teach that Hashem created women as perfect entities, for Adam lost something of himself when Eve came into being whole through him. Only through marriage to a woman can a man become complete again.

That might sound crazy, but as a single person trying to find my soulmate in the years after I became religious, I experienced it every day. I can only hope that a longer wait to find my soulmate helped atone for how I treated women in my old life. I am ashamed of many past incidents and the chaotic aftermath I often left. If many of you took a hard look at yourselves, you might find similar things in your lives that you aren't proud of either.

Three

White Powder



A pile of white powder looks a lot different to me now. The only time I see it is on occasional Sunday mornings when I'm making French toast, a tribute to my late grandma, who made the world's best. Sometimes I just stare at the mound of powdered sugar, recalling the days when my deep, dark obsession with cocaine almost ruined my life. I remember the feeling of getting the drugs, the excitement before that first line of cocaine each day, and the horrible feeling of coming down once my high was over. I'm thankful that I don't have to deal with that roller coaster of emotions anymore. My life is far less complicated now that white powder only makes my favorite breakfast taste more delicious.

I started doing drugs because it was fun. There, I said it.

That's my honest answer: it was a way to make any night more

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enjoyable. Some people use drugs to remove inhibitions, but that was never a problem for me. I was never shy, nor did I have trouble talking to girls I didn't know. I did drugs simply because I got a rush from doing something forbidden and illegal. My first line of cocaine was memorable: as I was snorting the first line, I knew my life was heading down a dangerous path I had no business traveling. I knew in my heart that I was making a terrible mistake. The drugs didn't really affect me that night; I hadn't done enough. However, a scary line was crossed, and cocaine was now forever a part of my life.

I did cocaine on and off during my junior and senior years of college, seeing it as something fun to look forward to on weekends. However, things started unraveling during my fifth year. I began selling cocaine at my college, though not in huge amounts. It was just enough to make me feel like I was doing something cool and illegal, yet not enough to be serious if caught by the police. It worked well at first, and I had the best of both worlds: I was making some spare cash, and I had all the free cocaine I needed for my friends and me. But having unlimited access to cocaine, combined with the self-control of a toddler, proved a short-lived arrangement. Before I realized it, weekend usage had become everyday usage, as I again broke the cardinal rule of drug dealing: do not get high on your own supply. At this point, I was dipping into my stash of drugs hourly. I was constantly either doing cocaine or craving it. Life slowly but surely started careening out of control.

Little changed when I left college; cocaine was still just as accessible, and I enjoyed it even more than before. Making good money at our family's baby furniture business meant only

White Powder

one thing: more cocaine I could afford. My parents discovered my drug use when I checked myself into a hospital, convinced that my heart was about to explode from beating so fast. That night in the hospital, I only remember the staff mocking me for my drug use. I also remember the look of disgust, anger, and heartbreak on my dad's face. Instead of feeling guilty and ashamed, I felt an even stronger urge to do more. I figured if I could get through that night, then nothing could hurt me.

A few years passed, but cocaine remained a debilitating constant in my life. I could stop for a few weeks or months at a time, but that haunting voice was always calling me back. I missed it when I wasn't using, because it was the only thing that instantly made me feel good, no matter what else was going on. People always ask me how drugs feel, and I tell them the answer is obvious. Millions ruin their lives with these substances every year for one simple reason: they just make you feel good. It's as simple an answer as there is, but it's the truth. I cared about nothing in life but getting high, and I found little to no joy in anything else.

Even watching Alabama Crimson Tide football games, my one constant passion since childhood, took a backseat to my drug cravings. My life was a constant train wreck, a relentless pattern of destruction. I felt trapped and hopeless, but my apathy for life was even stronger.

I went to a rehab facility outside of Atlanta, but that was as effective as plugging a massive dam leak with a piece of bubblegum. The only thing I learned there was all the reasons my addiction might not have been my fault. I skipped days of

work, holed myself up at home, vanished from my social scene, and got high to mask the misery of my life. I never wanted to die, but I also didn't care about living. Honestly, that was probably the worst feeling of all. That constant state of limbo tormented me; I drifted from one day to the next with only one thought. I even resorted to stealing money from our family business to feed my habit, something that shames me to this day.

Had it not been for the arrest on the night of January 4th, 2008, it's doubtful that anything would have changed in my life. It's even more doubtful that I would be alive to write this book. I saw no way out, no light at the end of the tunnel. There was nothing that could keep me from free-falling even further. Millions battle this every day, yet such a small percentage actually overcomes the urge. What starts as fun and exciting quickly turns into a nightmare for most. It was a way for me to postpone life, to shirk my responsibilities to myself and my family. Dealing with problems felt overwhelming, but a line of cocaine was easy, and that always won out. I hid from everything and everyone behind a huge mound of powder, and had it not been for the car chase, I would probably have been another statistic, another example of wasted potential.

Four

The Folly of "Rehab"



When I look back on my month in rehab in 2006, I always chuckle. It may sound strange, but from my vantage point now, I see no other fitting reaction. When I compare what I learned in rehab with what I have learned in Judaism, the contrast is stark. One taught me that countless factors contributed to my downfall, while the other teaches that I alone dug the pit and I alone can climb out. Rehab was a temporary band-aid for a gushing wound, and it wasn't until I got out of that carefully constructed bubble of treatment that I realized I had actually regressed.

I don't think there is a more insulting adage in modern times than, "Your addiction is not your fault; it's a disease." Disease? Was my horrendous choice to snort powder, a choice that almost destroyed my life, a disease? I wonder how kids with cancer or adults who live with cerebral palsy feel when they hear this nonsense. I just lost the woman I was married to

and the mother of my child to a rare cancer in the last two months. That's a disease, and it's disgraceful to associate my selfish life choices with something so tragic. This chapter isn't a scientific discussion of drug addiction; it's about my reaction to it, shaped by my alternative path. I'm ashamed for even buying into this nonsense in 2006 because it was a complete shirking of responsibility for the problem's root cause. No one forced cocaine up my nose. I turned to it of my own free will, the same free will we all possess in making life's choices.

I didn't have a disease. I was just a selfish fool making poor decisions. Sure, when someone gets involved with drugs or alcohol to the extent I was, it becomes much harder to rid oneself of the physical and psychological cravings. However, to put me in the same category as a poor kid battling leukemia is just crazy. It really is. Rehab did nothing to get to the crux of the problem. It just gave me fancier-sounding excuses to justify awful life choices. I wish someone had just said honestly, "Wow, you are really making a mess of your life, what a complete waste of ability, shame on you." I think that would have hit me harder than the soothing words of reassurance I got from the treatment staff. Basic honesty was being swept under the rug, all in the name of a \$15,000-a-month system that perpetuated a cycle of irresponsibility.

I stayed clean for about five months after getting out of rehab, but that was a brief respite from my drug use. I wasn't the least bit happy because, with each passing day, I realized that the 12-step meetings, the support system of other struggling addicts, and the enormity of living without the one thing that had made me happy simply wasn't worth the effort. My life

The Folly of "Rehab"

felt like a kite that was reeled in for a moment, but in the end, it was once again controlled by the breeze. I didn't enjoy life without drugs because I had nothing substantive to fill the void. I did not fill that void until I returned to my roots and learned life's true meaning.

Sitting through 12-step meetings was as torturous as a root canal. Constantly talking about drugs, drugs, drugs made me do nothing but—you guessed it—want more drugs. I remember my last meeting before I left that world forever. I was already at my wit's end with the program, but one particular episode was the last straw.

A woman, tears in her eyes, related a tragic episode from her day. She told the attentive group that while driving, she had passed a mother deer standing over the body of a baby deer on the highway. I was a sensitive person then, as I am now, but what she told us next gave me the proverbial push out the door for good. She said that seeing this made her want to do nothing but go home and use crystal methamphetamine. As her words left her mouth, I glanced around the room from the sports magazine I was reading to see everyone's heads nodding in agreement.

I didn't think I was better than this woman, so don't misunderstand what I'm saying. However, I instantly felt profound shame that my life had sunk so low. I felt so feeble, having to sit among others who exhibited such glaring weakness. I couldn't believe that a nice Jewish boy was spending his nights at a place like this. Honestly, I would rather have died than spend another minute with people who did nothing but talk

about the substances that had ruined their lives. It didn't seem healthy to me then, and it certainly doesn't now. When you enter rehab, they tell you there's a less than 1% chance of staying drug-free on your first attempt. What odds are those? Why is everyone being sent to an establishment with a 99 percent failure rate?

Judaism isn't the reason I'm not on drugs anymore, but Judaism has made ME the reason I'm not on drugs anymore. The whole point of the Torah is to provide the skills to take responsibility for every action in life and to guide one onto a path where those actions can best benefit oneself. The realization that being Jewish wasn't a side gig, a weekend hobby, or a fad was life-changing. It was the crux of my existence and the link to something real and meaningful. I don't have a disease called addiction. I became addicted to a life of irresponsibility, one that minimized my talents and ambitions. I chose comfort, which was the easy way out. Judaism has made me realize that those very talents and ambitions must drive every second of my life, so that instead of shying away from my potential greatness, I actively seek it out.

Five

I Fought the Law and the Law Won



I used to watch the show *COPS* on television and marvel at the stupidity of criminals fleeing from the police in their cars. What kind of idiot tries to outrun a contingent of angry police officers? They're as likely to escape during a high-speed chase as I am to take a bite of a bacon cheeseburger today. I would ponder how desperate (or high) someone would have to be to flee from law enforcement, an entity with every tool imaginable to deal with such incidents. After January 4th, 2008, I didn't need to wonder anymore because I got a front-row seat to a car chase, but not from the perspective I used to enjoy.

That winter Friday night, I had done my usual after-work activity: driving about a half hour to my drug dealer's house to buy cocaine. Little did I know that this would be the last time I would ever see him again—something unimaginable given the frequency of our meetings. I bought a little over a gram, which might sound like a lot, but that barely lasted me a few hours.

That's why I frequently made another trip back to his house later in the evening. I left his apartment complex and did my usual snort or two of cocaine, feeling it would get me in a better mood for the trek back to my parents' house on the other side of town.

How I got all the way to Exit 14 on Route 400 in Georgia is beyond me, but somehow I drove seven exits past the typical turn back to my parents' house. It's hard to remember if I was looking down to do more cocaine or just oblivious to what was going on around me, but I ended up turning onto the wrong side of a four-lane divided highway in Forsyth County. I didn't realize this until a few cars started passing me on the wrong side of the road. I remember when the first car passed me coming from the other direction. I thought to myself, "What a moron! This guy is on the wrong side of the road." After a few more cars whipped past me in the same manner, to my horror, I realized I was the moron.

Whenever I was driving and felt myself getting too high to face my family, I would just continue driving all over town until the drugs wore off a little. As much as I spent in my life on cocaine—which numbered in the hundreds of thousands of dollars—I spent an equally obscene amount paying for needless gas on these driving excursions. I would drive up and down the highways because it involved the least amount of attention. Weaving in and out of suburban streets was more than I usually felt like handling while I was high.

As I was veering over to the lane I should have been in, I literally almost hit a police car that was parked there trying to

I Fought the Law and the Law Won

catch speeders. I immediately saw police lights flashing in my rearview mirror, accompanied by terrifying sirens bellowing as they came for me. I started slowing down to pull over, but then realized I didn't have a valid driver's license anymore, courtesy of the State of Georgia (okay, so it was suspended because of an unpaid speeding ticket the year before). In a moment of sheer panic, I continued to drive. Why I did this, I will never know, but thankfully what ensued next was the impetus that turned my life around forever.

The police officer repeatedly shouted at me to pull over using his car's loudspeaker, but my mind was numb, and nothing registered. I led him down the road for about five minutes at a fairly slow pace, then pulled into a marina, hoping he would simply give up and drive away. Of course, that's not how police officers operate, so he followed me into the facility. Clearly growing angrier, he then tried to aggressively ram my car. Panic began to set in, and I slammed my foot on the gas, speeding out of the marina and back onto the main road. This marked the beginning of what became a 45-minute high-speed car chase on the winding streets of Georgia.

What started as one officer's patrol soon escalated to dozens. My futile escape path became trickier once they deployed road spikes twice. For some strange reason, which my parents still can't fathom, a few days before the chase they had gotten me run-flat tires for my BMW. This meant I could drive over virtually anything and continue for a few hundred miles afterward. For years, they've questioned why they did such a thing, as it was completely out of character for them to provide the best for something I mistreated so much. God saved my

life that night, but perhaps His messengers were really durable radial tires.

People have often asked me, “What were you thinking when all of this was unfolding?” The answer is that I truly don’t remember. It felt like an out-of-body experience, as if someone else were driving and I were watching the chase like a movie. I honestly can’t explain my thoughts. I just recall a numbness and emptiness, where everything felt surreal, almost like a dream. A rational person would never do this, so at the time, I must have been oblivious to the danger I was putting myself in (not to mention those around me). Part of it felt like a video game; the other part felt like a dream. I suppose it’s something you have to experience to truly understand (but please don’t).

I forgot to mention that I also drove an ambulance off the road, and thankfully, no one was hurt. Eventually, I simply gave up on the absurd notion that I could escape. I somewhat came to whatever senses I had left and slowed my car down. At that moment, the lead police car hit the side of my car from behind, causing my BMW to hop a curb and smash into a wall. The destruction to my car was immense; the entire underside was in pieces, and I thought my life was as well. At first, I thought perhaps I had died, but quickly realized that I had not only survived but was in a tremendous amount of trouble.

Hearing dozens of sirens, angry screams from officers I’d just led on a 45-minute hell-ride, and seeing my window shattered by a nightstick did nothing to calm my nerves. They were screaming at me to get out of the car, which I did, only to look up and see about 25 pistols aimed right at me. Thankfully, I was

I Fought the Law and the Law Won

so high that I don't remember the exact details of everything that happened that night. The flashbacks and nightmares would be far more difficult to endure if I could recall this scene more vividly. I just remember being forced to the ground and manhandled while the arresting officers put on the handcuffs and checked for weapons. This was not the type of arrest you see on television, where they gently assist the criminal to the police car and carefully ensure their head safely enters the vehicle. These were justifiably livid police officers, endangered by a random guy on cocaine, who were all too happy to punish me.

I distinctly recall sitting in the back of the patrol car, looking out at the carnage I had just caused. My beloved BMW was in ruins, the officer's car was also damaged, police cars with blaring sirens were parked in every direction, passing cars gawked at the madness, police officers angrily stared at me, and my wrists felt like they were going to fall off from the tightness of the handcuffs. I don't wish the fear and panic I felt then on anyone. In all my days of partying, doing drugs, and dealing drugs, I had actually never experienced an arrest before. The horror of the unknown and the dread of what was next were now very real. After a quick blood test and physical checkup at the local hospital, they quickly took me to the county jail. It was upon entering the police station that the full weight of my actions hit home. During those haunting few hours that night, I realized that life as I knew it was certainly over.

I remember looking in the mirror in one of the county jail's waiting areas, and the look in my eyes was one of pure sadness and despair. I took one long sniff, and the residual cocaine in

Cocaine to Amen

my nasal passage at the time gave me a sudden jolt. I stared into the mirror, knowing reality was forever different. My first thought was trying to figure out how many years in jail this incident would probably cost me. Every worst-case scenario raced through my head, sinking me deeper into despair. I realized a few weeks later that the car chase would have been the exact time a delightful meal would have started at my rabbi's table on Shabbos.

||

*DIGGING DEEP TO DIG
MYSELF OUT*

Six

I Guess I was Jewish



It's sad to say, but for 27 years of my life, I had absolutely no idea what it truly meant to be a Jew. I'm also certain that many of you reading this now don't have a clue either. I don't say this to be rude; rather, I'm trying to describe how far Jews, as a people, have fallen in modern times. So many of the cultural and moral norms we hold so dear are actually the antithesis of everything Judaism stands for. What, then, does it truly mean to be Jewish?

Is there a G-d Who actually cares about our lives? Why were the Jews called the Chosen People? Are we a race, a religion, a nation, or all of the above? How are we to regard ourselves compared to the peoples of the world? Why is there so much hatred for Jewish people? What is the reason behind the world's loathing of the State of Israel? Most secular Jews ponder these questions during their lives; I certainly did. Unfortunately, I

never cared enough to seek the answers because they seemed irrelevant to me.

I find it almost comical how oblivious I was to Judaism, despite my family having a very strong Jewish identity. It was a given that I would attend a boring Hebrew school a few days a week; it was a known fact that I would join a Jewish fraternity in college; and it was sacrosanct that I would marry a Jew. The question was, why were any of these life truths important enough for my parents to cultivate in me? The even better question is, for a kid who spent his whole life rebelling against authority, why were all these Jewish expectations so easy for me to accept?

I always savored the fact that Jews are unique; even more, I relished that the overwhelming majority of the world hated us. It was easy to discern that jealousy was the root of this hatred, because how could a minuscule number of Jews have such an oversized impact on the world? To this day, it puzzles me why I never explored these feelings that struck such a chord with me. I'm not sure why I never tried to understand the reasoning behind such blatant anti-Semitism that has spanned generations. Like most, I was content to feel that being Jewish was whatever I wanted it to be—something I was born into that had no daily expectations of me. Clearly, most Jews in the world feel this way. They look at the laws and customs of Judaism and shrug them off as unnecessary, archaic traditions and superstitions. However, the fact remains that never in our history has the Torah been more relevant and essential to our lives.

Growing up in Framingham, Massachusetts, I had absolutely no

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interest in Hebrew school or Sunday school. They felt like just more boring classes and tedious homework that stood in the way of playing with friends or competing in sports. The Reform day school I attended did absolutely nothing to strengthen any nascent interest in Judaism that might have been dormant inside of me. I went for the same reason hundreds of other local Jewish kids went: because our parents forced us to go.

It's heartbreaking to see what many secular, modern Jews now deem Judaism to be. I know this well because my youth was based on this shallow, erroneous misinterpretation of our religion. It's a frightening disconnect from the roots of what being Jewish truly means, having morphed into a new-age blend of tolerance and liberalism that has wreaked havoc upon the Jewish people and the State of Israel. The secular Jewish moral compass is completely off balance because the vast majority of our people have no clue what's written in our holy Torah.

To me, the Torah was just a collection of stories, like a fairy tale or some other work of fiction I could buy at a bookstore. Nothing inside me drove me to go any deeper than the print on the page. I know I'm not alone in that respect, but to this day, I scratch my head trying to understand why. Unlike many of my brethren, I had nothing against the Torah or Judaism, but nothing ever propelled me to dive deeper into my heritage. However, even in the heightened years of my drug use, I would sit on the couch for hours and read the first book of the Torah. It gave me some sense of peace in a tumultuous time, but I still had no desire to go any further.

There was something magical about those nights reading the famous stories of our people's past, but a vast chasm always

existed between any Jewish feelings I may have had inside and translating those feelings into action. When looking at my Orthodox relatives, the gap between us seemed too wide to be bridged. I didn't understand their unique traditions and culture, nor was I interested in learning more about them. I guess, in some ways, I just felt it didn't matter in the scheme of my life, but something inside me always burned with curiosity, even if it was a slow burn.

I developed a "what's the use" approach to Judaism because closing the gap with my observant relatives required too much effort. I will never know why I never looked at Judaism like learning to play golf, where all the effort involved is not just a means to an end, but part of a journey of growing excellence. I could have gradually incorporated Judaism into my life by learning a little at a time. I could have read some books and watched some videos, or I could have simply taken some classes with a local Orthodox rabbi. In the end, I lacked motivation and did none of these basic things. I was so close to finding something special in life, but I never crossed the threshold between interest and action.

When I look back on my Jewish past now, I see so many missed chances at true growth, so many ignored opportunities for finding value in life. Seeing Judaism as a hobby, like learning to play the guitar, was probably the biggest flaw of all. It turns out that Judaism isn't a part of life; it's life itself. Our Torah is a guide for every aspect of life at all times and in all situations. I wish I had seen this earlier, but in the end, being Jewish mattered to me only enough to have strong pride, but not enough to actually find out what my purpose might be in this world. I suspect that

I Guess I was Jewish

my former outlook sounds very familiar to the outlook that many of you, my readers, have now. However, just know that by simply reading this book, you're taking the first steps towards potentially changing that.

Seven

Hezbollah Positively Affects My Life Forever



One of my earliest childhood memories is the chaos that followed what appeared to be an ordinary night in Framingham, Massachusetts. I was watching the news with my father while he and my mother tied up some loose ends before their first trip to Fenway Park for a Boston Red Sox baseball game that evening. A special news bulletin flashed across the screen, then cut straight to a story about the hijacking of a TWA flight from Athens, Greece. As my dad listened more attentively, it became apparent that my mother's younger sister and her new husband were passengers on the plane, returning from Greece on their honeymoon. My father and I look back on this moment and laugh now. He recently revealed to me that his primary concern during those first few moments was, "I wonder if they can clear up this whole hijacking thing in the next two hours before the game starts."

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Granted, my father's priorities might have been a bit misplaced at that moment, but then again, it was his first trip to the revered Fenway Park. The following weeks were a blur of activity. I remember being rushed to New York with my family to join the rest of our relatives, who were all waiting anxiously for news about my aunt and uncle's safety. I can vividly recall falling ill from Nesquik Chocolate Mix, and the terror on my relatives' faces as they contemplated the possibility of my aunt and uncle not surviving the ordeal. Thank G-d, they both survived the horrifying ordeal physically unharmed, but understandably, they still carry the emotional scars of such a traumatic experience. The most amazing thing about this entire incident is that it wasn't just my aunt and uncle whose lives were saved that day; the seeds of my own salvation 22 years later were also planted during the hijacking. The irony of it all is a little shocking, considering it was Hezbollah terrorists who were responsible.

I grew up with a sense of fierce pride in being Jewish, and much of it stemmed directly from that hijacking. I was shocked by the lengths these Islamic terrorists would go to in order to take Jewish hostages. My uncle became a hostage in Beirut, Lebanon, which was a perilous place to be a Jew or an American in the 1980s, much less an American Jew. These monsters risked their lives to achieve their goals in this hijacking, and their target was, of course, Jews. That they didn't care which Jews they took hostage really struck a chord with me. This incident gave me a profound sense of Jewish unity, showing me that it could have been any of us on that plane. It showed me how, even though we are all unique, we are all connected by the common thread of our Jewish identity.

The hijacking changed the course of my aunt's life most significantly, as she embraced Judaism more deeply in the years following the incident. Growing up, I always viewed observant Judaism as somewhat bizarre, seeing it as merely a collection of constricting rules and prohibitions. I distinctly remember my mother telling me, during visits to my aunt's house, that bringing a bacon cheeseburger from Wendy's inside was forbidden. While it wasn't a big deal—I simply ate it on the way home from the drive-thru—it left me with a negative impression of Judaism. I wanted the freedom to eat what I wanted, when I wanted, a common human desire to resist confinement or boundaries.

It was my aunt who recommended I speak with a rabbi during the dark, lost period leading up to my car chase. She wasn't attempting to convert me to a religious lifestyle, but she knew my love of Judaism would at least make me receptive to wisdom and advice that might prompt me to reconsider my current life. Without her intervention, I don't think I ever would have turned to Judaism as a means of rebuilding the shattered pieces of my life. Knowing I had a family member who also experienced something so traumatic and life-changing provided immense solace, making it much easier to call the rabbi for the first time after my own incident.

The events of that June are almost surreal to me now; I have only fleeting memories of what I was truly experiencing at such a young age. However, every time I reflect on it, I feel a sense of numbness, knowing those terrorists set in motion a chain of life-altering events that unfolded over many years. I can't say for sure how life would have turned out without this experience

Hezbollah Positively Affects My Life Forever

my family endured all those years ago, but I know it would have been drastically different. In my mind, the path back to my roots began with this tragedy, underscoring an important life lesson: we never know what people, moments, or events will initiate a ripple effect that forever alters the course of our lives. The hijacking became a metaphor for life itself, demonstrating that every experience, even the most tragic, holds lessons and messages that last a lifetime.

Eight

Was Today the Last Day of My life?



There's an old saying, "There are no atheists in a foxhole," and it's one I always find amusing. Despite popular belief, it's quite rational to believe that the world we see today didn't appear by chance or at random. We universally accept that a top artisan finely crafted a beautiful and expensive watch. How, then, does it make sense that galaxies, seas, mountains, and more simply formed on their own, without purpose? I always believed in G-d, but I had absolutely no concept of how — or even if — I should relate to Him. The interesting thing is that the times I felt the closest connection to G-d were when I was about to do drugs.

Cocaine isn't like marijuana; it's a far more debilitating drug that can be fatal on first use. I'm of average height and build, yet somehow I ingested an inordinate amount of cocaine. There was one night in college when I consumed enough to last some

Was Today the Last Day of My life?

people a month: three “eight balls” of white powder, more than enough to kill me several times over. For many years, I indulged in an obscene amount of cocaine, and deep inside, I always thought the end was probably near. I wasn’t trying to kill myself by any means, but it doesn’t take an astrophysicist to realize that such a large amount of this drug running through my system every day was not the least bit healthy.

I honestly lived for years wondering if “today” would be my last day, a feeling that contributed to the general malaise of my life. What’s the point of putting effort into life when it might end so abruptly? I know I wasn’t alone in struggling with this, as it seems to be a phenomenon gripping the masses in Western society at the moment. Surprisingly, I actually thought about G-d a lot during this time, not in any religious way, but merely as a minuscule creation to an impersonal Creator. I always quietly asked Him to just let me live a little longer, hoping that maybe at some point I would pull myself out of this mess, or (even better) maybe He would pick me up and spare me the effort.

I remember one year in particular when Yom Kippur fell in the middle of the week, and I was very excited. Fasting and going to shul didn’t really appeal to me then, so I abandoned the day completely and looked forward to a pleasant reprieve from work. My drug dealer came over early in the morning, and I bought enough cocaine to last me the entire day. A deep feeling of dread came over me because no matter how far a Jew has strayed, Yom Kippur is still “the holiest day of the year.” I remember walking to the car, asking myself how someone so proud to be Jewish and so connected to my ancestors could be

so excited to buy cocaine on this specific day. I figured if G-d was going to pull the plug on me, then this was going to be the day it happened.

There were many nights that I would fall asleep wondering if I would even wake up in the morning. It's an agonizing way to go through life, but that agony never surpassed the excitement I got from doing drugs. It's like an agonizingly slow death; even if you're not physically dead, the spiritual death is much worse. I turned Yom Kippur into just another day, and being conscious of that was a powerful indicator of how far I had strayed from my roots. Sandy Koufax didn't pitch in the World Series because of this Holy Day, but I was just treating it as a day off from work and a chance to do drugs. That Yom Kippur enlightened me as to just how far into the depths I had fallen.

I thought about times like this when I was deciding to become more observant, and I often wondered why G-d spared me to begin with. It's a horribly guilty feeling knowing that so many others lost their lives from doing drugs, most in far fewer amounts than I was consuming. I felt a touch of shame that G-d granted me multiple chances to turn my life around, while others were not so fortunate. Guilt can be a very positive motivator if internalized correctly, and thankfully I learned through Judaism that gratitude is a basic principle for all of life. Judaism compels us to act not just with gratitude to G-d, but to those around us as well. My biggest motivation in writing this book is to have a tangible way of saying thank you to G-d. I am desperately hoping these words have a positive impact on other Jews' lives as well.

Nine

I Hate Orange Jumpsuits



Watching movies with jail scenes doesn't do justice to the experience. The unnerving feeling of being trapped in a truly horrific place doesn't quite translate to the big screen. The moment my cell door shut was by far the lowest point in my entire life. I took my freedoms for granted until I was in a place where they no longer existed. To add insult to injury, I was dressed in a bright orange jumpsuit, the color of all my least favorite sports teams. I entered my bleak new surroundings early in the morning when everyone was still asleep, my ego even more battered than my bruised body. I naively thought that if I just lay down on my bed, I would wake up free of this nightmare, but I suppose that was just the cocaine talking.

We were all one big happy family, forty cellmates crammed into one large pod. All of us were "winners" in the game of life. It wasn't until late that morning, after the effects of the previous

night's cocaine binge had worn off, that the enormity of my situation truly sank in. I looked around the room, and a wave of terror washed over me; not out of fear of the other inmates, but because I was now one of them. I almost chuckled at the irony that of all the dumb things I had done in my life, I had surpassed them all with a 45-minute car chase.

I grew up in a nice, upper-middle-class American family with loving parents and a tight-knit connection to my siblings. I had every opportunity to succeed in life, but I squandered them all with my poor choices. Many of the people in my cell never had the advantages that I did, so I felt even lower than they were. Some of these people never stood a chance in life, without education, skills, or dreams. They were just recycled bodies playing out the often-seen saga of lifelong criminals. This realization hit home even harder as I could see that they were as shocked to see me there as I was to be there.

It took hours to get in touch with a family member because no one had informed me that the jail's phone service could not connect to outside cell phones. As call after futile call went unanswered, a dreadful feeling crept over me: my family had finally given up on me. To be honest, I wouldn't have blamed them if they had. As each attempt to reach out to my family failed, the reality of my situation became increasingly bleak. I knew how slowly things moved in the justice system, and so I resigned myself to a very long incarceration.

I remember sitting on my bed that first day, looking around the room in utter bewilderment. My thoughts drifted to my grandfather, who had always been my hero. He passed away when I

I Hate Orange Jumpsuits

was 16, and the thought pained me, knowing how disappointed he would be in the grandchild who most embodied his spirit. The guilt and shame I felt were overwhelming, and I understood why years later. Judaism teaches that when we reach the next world, we see a picture of what our lives could have been and should have been. We see what we might have achieved with the capacities that G-d gave us. Hell isn't just the fire and brimstone that other religions portray. It's an eternity of knowing what we might have been, but weren't. This haunting feeling became my hell on earth, knowing that my potential was now irrevocably lost.

Wasted potential is life's greatest tragedy, and that realization consumed my thoughts during my time in jail. I experienced true self-reflection, and I became absolutely revolted by what I saw. I realized with sorrow that I valued nothing in life. I had no goals, no dreams, no motivation, and no purpose. I was just drifting from one day to the next, and one line of coke to the next. Nothing mattered to me in life, or if it did, I had no desire to make the effort to pursue it. Such profound reflection flooded me for the first time in my life, and only then did I realize just how precious life truly was. Sadly, many live their entire lives without such difficult moments of truth. For the first time, an overwhelming sense of life's preciousness consumed me.

While incarcerated, I made a solemn promise to myself that if I ever left Forsyth County Jail, I would wholeheartedly commit to changing my life, not with words, but with deeds.

Ten

Are Jew Kidding Me?



One of the major tenets of Judaism is that everything happens for a reason. There are no random events or occurrences in life. Everyone we encounter or speak with is there for a reason, and we can learn from every situation. Never in my life have I experienced this more clearly than while I was in jail. Some background on the county where my car chase occurred might help illustrate my point. My stint in jail was in Forsyth County, Georgia, a well-known bastion of the KKK to this very day. We all know the Biblical story of Daniel in the lion's den, but I felt I was experiencing something similar when they were processing me at the jail.

One police officer taking my information had a ring on his finger. I glanced at it quickly and immediately snapped my head back when I realized it had Hebrew writing on it. With a big smile on my battered face, I asked, "Wow, you're Jewish?" He

Are Jew Kidding Me?

told me he wasn't, but he just liked the Hebrew writing because he thought it was special. My smile turned to seething inner anger. Why was a gentile wearing a ring with Hebrew on it? That's our language! I laugh to myself now when I think back to this. Who was I to get so livid that a gentile was wearing a Hebrew ring, when Judaism meant so little to my life? He at least found something holy in the letters, while I had just spent the previous five or six Yom Kippur holidays skipping synagogue and doing cocaine in my house.

I realize now how the dominoes were all lined up for me while in jail; the ring was the second incident of the night that reminded me I was actually Jewish. Earlier, when the ambulance took me to the hospital for a blood test and to clean my wounds, the crew asked me a series of questions, including my religion. I never hesitated saying, "I'm a Jew," but I was more than a little curious why they would ask me that to begin with. The older lady filling out the forms paused when I said I was Jewish because very few of my brethren have ever been in this part of Georgia, especially not ones in handcuffs with blood streaming from their face.

The final Jewish piece of the puzzle stunned me that Sunday morning, when we could finally leave the cell for a half hour and gather in the courtyard. You're probably thinking, "Wow, Eliyokim, a courtyard, that doesn't sound so bad at all!" However, this courtyard was merely a precise square of concrete, littered with a few tables and barbed wire above. I looked everywhere for some geraniums and a little brook, but they weren't to be found. I struck up a conversation with an inmate who had lived in Tampa for a time, and during our conversation he described a radio announcer from there as

having “a big Jewish nose.”

I wanted to slug him in the face, but I figured starting a courtyard brawl would get me into even more trouble, as we would all have to go back in early, and the other inmates would turn their wrath on me. I ended up just ignoring the comment, but then a few minutes later he came back up to me and said, “You know I’m Jewish, right?” There is no time in my life when I can recall being more shocked.

We both smiled and did one of those patented guy hugs, where we only put one arm around each other and smack the other’s back. A guy hug can always be awkward, but even more so in a jail courtyard. We became fast friends, knowing that we were most likely the only two Jews ever locked up in this jail. We relished the fact that someone else from “the Tribe” was in the same predicament. However, I soon learned that his reason for being in jail was much more noble than mine.

He told me the reason for being jailed was that he took punishment for a large bag of marijuana that actually belonged to his son. I was in total shock at the admission and asked him why he had done it. He told me that his son was only 18, and he didn’t want him to start his legal adult life in a bind, so he gladly took the blame. I felt as if G-d was talking to me. It felt as if this man was alongside me just to send me a message. I didn’t have to be an observant Jew to see the amazing chain of events that had befallen me. The man could have been in there for armed robbery, for beating up an old woman, or for theft, but he was doing time solely to protect a son who probably didn’t even appreciate it.

Are Jew Kidding Me?

Our mercy and our devotion to family are two prominent traits of the Jewish people. I found myself in the worst predicament of my life with a fellow Jew who embodied both these qualities. I marveled at his courage and his self-sacrifice; it had a tremendous impact on me. It felt as if G-d was screaming out to me, "Wake up already, you're a Jew! What more do I have to show you!" Thankfully, for the first time in my life, I heard the message loud and clear.

We're not a religion like people claim; nowhere does the Torah call us a religion. We are so much more than that. I always knew we differed from the rest of the world, but I just didn't know why. I mean, be honest with yourself; how is it possible that we have outlasted all the nations, groups, and people that have persecuted us throughout the generations? Why are we the focal point of the overwhelming majority of United Nations resolutions? How do we make up such a disproportionate amount of societal influence compared to our numbers?

An accurate assessment of the Jewish people shows that something is statistically askew, and I always pondered this blatantly obvious reality. However, I never cared about the answer until I was in the confines of my jail cell. So many people have to hit rock bottom so life can finally elicit meaning, but it doesn't have to be this way. I'm hoping you, the reader, will ponder what makes us so special as Jews as you're reading this book.

Eleven

What a Difference a Week Makes!



How does someone ten days removed from a drug-induced, 45-minute high-speed car chase speak to an Orthodox Rabbi for the first time? Have two people on Earth ever met who were on more opposing life paths? These were a few of the questions I asked myself on the way to my rabbi's office. Interestingly, I wasn't the least bit frightened to sit down with him, although I was in a state of total uncertainty about what to expect.

I had met him for the first time a few nights prior, on the first Shabbos following my stint in jail. I went with my father and my uncle to Friday night services at the synagogue where my rabbi serves the congregation. My uncle made a brief introduction after the service, and as I was shaking the rabbi's hand, he told me how excited he was about our meeting on Monday. To be honest, I was as well. I could sense that he was a person to whom I could open up, confide in, and learn from.

What a Difference a Week Makes!

My aunt, who had also returned to an observant Jewish way of life after her own “hijacking,” had recommended meeting this rabbi months before my car chase. I had even dialed his number a few times, only to hang up once I heard a cheerful voice on the other end say, “Hellllllooooo?” There was such an aura of serenity and contentment in his voice, and I remember the feeling to this day.

Sadly, I wasn’t ready to give up a life of drugs, parties, and no responsibility. I knew that deep down, if I met with him, I would take a hard look at my life and be disgusted with what I saw. Hanging up was my way of prolonging a life with nothing and no one to answer to. Before my car chase and subsequent arrest, I chose the comfort of agony over the possibility of breaking out of the destructive rut my life had become.

People always ask me why I immediately chose an Orthodox rabbi to speak with. Part of the reason was my aunt’s suggestion. However, the main reason was that he knew my grandfather, having grown up in Minneapolis alongside my mother’s family. In jail, I made the choice to connect with my Jewish roots more deeply, and I decided that an Orthodox rabbi would give me the best chance to do that. I want to stress that I had no intention of becoming an observant Jew, and I didn’t even have a real concept of what that meant. I just knew that of all the streams of Judaism out there, only one truly lived how I envisioned my ancestors living, and there is no debate on that issue. For over 3,000 years, Jews have observed Judaism more or less the same, but only in the last 200 has it morphed into some charades of Judaism that we see today.

I met with the rabbi in the shul's library, a room with an imposing domed ceiling and holy religious books everywhere. It even had rows of seats for people to learn in and a holy ark for weekday prayers. You could hear a mouse in this room because it was so tranquil—quite a contrast to the jail cell I'd graced with my presence the week before. I felt a calming feeling come over me, as if this was exactly where I needed to be at this time and in this place. We sat down at a table, and I looked across at him and asked a very simple question I had waited a week to ask. I swear to this day, had I not asked him this one particular question, I don't think I would've turned out the way I did.

"Why do you live like this, Rabbi?"

It seemed like an innocuous question, but there was a deeper meaning behind it. I had lived my whole life with no boundaries or rules, and I was now staring into the eyes of a man who immersed himself in nothing but them. Orthodox Judaism seems like a constricting lifestyle from the outside, yet this rabbi, from what I saw and was told, was the most upbeat, content, and positive person on Earth. Was there something I wasn't seeing? Was there something I didn't understand about life? I wanted to tap into his obvious source of happiness, and this was the only question I could think of that would glean insight into his thought process.

"Only G-d could have given the Jewish people the Torah; once you prove that, you'll live the exact way."

Wow! An apparently straightforward answer to such a complex question!

What a Difference a Week Makes!

“That’s it?” I asked him. “That’s it,” replied my rabbi. In some ways, it was the simplest answer I’ve ever gotten, and in others, it takes a lifetime to truly grasp. Essentially, it’s the only answer you need to know about Judaism and all that it entails. If you don’t believe that G-d gave us the Torah, then there is no Judaism. However, if you know that G-d gave us the Torah, then living outside the rules and guidelines laid out in it makes no rational sense. G-d commands the Jewish people to live a certain way, just like a boss commands employees. How long would employees last at a company if they continued to spurn the directives of its leader?

I told my rabbi that I wanted him to be completely honest with me about the Torah. I told him I just wanted the truth for once in my life. No political correctness, no thoughts about my feelings, no concern for what I’d be able to handle. I conveyed clearly to him that I was serious about learning about the roots of Judaism, and thankfully he took me at my word. After hitting the absolute lowest point I could hit at that stage of life without dying or killing someone else, I was ready for a whole new way of thinking about the world. I wanted it based on the Judaism that my ancestors learned, not the farce I found it to be in modern times.

I can honestly say that I had no intention of ever becoming an observant Jew. Even after this powerful first meeting with my rabbi, the thought of living like he did was as unrealistic as it was comical. I was so clueless about what Torah observance was that the thought had never crossed my mind. I figured that even if I could prove to myself that there was a G-d, I could still just fit Judaism into a nice little compartment in my life. It

would be like golf to me, a hobby that I enjoyed immensely, but still just a hobby. However, as my meetings with him became more frequent, and my knowledge of Judaism became deeper, the question was not if I would become an observant Jew, but when.

Looking back, I find it fascinating how many people treat Judaism differently from every other area of life. People spend so much time and effort trying to be the best, working to get ahead, and yearning for more growth. However, for Judaism, most Jews are just content to be average. They have no desire to advance and couldn't care less about attaining more knowledge. I know this because I was that person—a Jew with so much pride in being Jewish, but one who never took the time to actually figure out what it meant to be Jewish. Like many others, I just formed my opinion on the subject, never opening my mind to what it could truly mean to be something I took so much pride in. I vowed to myself not to pass up this unique opportunity to seek answers, to ask questions, and to learn new ideas. Clearly, this was the best decision I ever made.

Twelve

Who's the Boss?



I always find it amusing to be on the road and see everyone's brake lights illuminate when a police officer suddenly appears, waiting to catch speeders. It's almost as amusing as watching someone's personality completely transform the moment their boss walks into the room. Fear is a powerful motivator, gripping everyone in life the same way. However, some people's fears are deemed more normal and mainstream than others. As a result, since becoming an observant Jew, I've been labeled with many demeaning things, which I shrug off because I see the hypocrisy in the condemnations. "I'm brainwashed," "I'm weak," "I'm unable to think for myself"—sound familiar? Authority is a basic principle of human existence, and the only difference between me and those who like to label me is our view of who actually wields this power.

I grew up with a concept of G-d, but like most other Jews, it

was *my* concept. In fact, I used to have frequent discussions with Him. I vividly remember standing in the shower after a long night of doing cocaine, begging G-d to free me from the shackles of the drug that was ruining my life. The realization that G-d existed was clear to me, but my understanding of what G-d actually wanted and expected from me was sorely lacking. People often paint G-d as they would a person they've never met but have heard rumors about. They assume many things are true based on modern sensibilities or mainstream thought. It's true we can't associate with G-d the way we can with another human being. However, it's extremely logical to think that if He does exist, He probably gave us a clue about what He expects and demands of His creations.

When I started learning about Judaism, the information I was delving into was riveting. I had always assumed that Judaism was whatever you wanted it to be, and you were a "good Jew" if you chose to label yourself as one. Where would this apply anywhere else in life? Professions have standards, expectations, and demands. Yet, somehow Judaism has become a buffet where Jews pick what makes sense, what applies in modern times, and what things are acceptable to shirk. Sadly, I never applied the reasonable logic of everyday life to my Judaism until I actually started making Judaism part of my everyday life. Thankfully, I had the advantage of being at such a low point that I was open to anything that could positively affect my life. If I had come into contact with my Judaism a few years before, it's doubtful I would have given it the same chance.

The best thing about starting fresh on a new topic is that you learn the basics and begin from the very beginning. I realized

Who's the Boss?

that if G-d created the world, it's logical to think He had an intent. This seems so basic and mundane, but a deeper look at this is the true crux of what it means to be an observant Jew. If you believe in G-d, wouldn't you want to look into the only book He supposedly gave to the Jewish people? Then, once you've looked into that Torah given by that G-d, doesn't it make sense to actually abide by it? It was just a rational series of connecting dots that furthered my growth. I ignored all the nonsense in the world that desperately tries to steer people away from Judaism, or that claims a 200-year-old demented form of Judaism replaced the one that is thousands of years old—the one all our ancestors observed. I just kept trying to get closer and closer to the root of our heritage, and it was exactly as my rabbi had said: the core of our being as Jews is the belief that G-d gave us a Torah. So I asked myself a simple question: if G-d did indeed give us the Torah, as I now accepted as fact, then why would I, and every other Jew, not be following it?

When one develops a rational concept of G-d that they honestly believe in, they then start adjusting the way they live. Becoming a believer (and even more, a KNOWER) means that G-d is now the police officer on the side of the road and the boss that just entered the room. The believer has a concrete basis for expectations and the knowledge of what it takes to meet those expectations. Life comprises an endless amount of choices from one second to the next, and as I became more conscious of G-d, my choices reflected that as well.

For instance, I used to swear all the time; I literally couldn't go more than a sentence without a curse word. Suddenly, I realized G-d probably thought I could articulate myself more respectfully, so I stopped swearing. It didn't happen overnight,

of course, but it wasn't long until I realized every word out of my mouth contained so much power. I then concluded G-d values time and probably thought I could use it more constructively, so I stopped watching television for so many hours a day until I basically stopped watching it at all. The more Torah I learned, the more my life changed. Anyone who knew me realized something had changed in my life.

I became no different from the person who slams on their brakes upon seeing the police, nor was I different from the one who starts feverishly working the second their boss walks into the room. The common link in all of this is a fear and respect for authority, in a way that is for our own benefit. It was not brainwashing or inner weakness that led me to behave differently, nor do drivers or employees suffer from that either. Everyone is making clear and rational decisions based on personal benefit and self-preservation. I started valuing life and my role in this world. This led to a determined effort to ascertain what G-d would want from me in certain situations. The driver values their money and driving record; thus, they slow down when a police officer is on the side of the road. The employee values their job and paycheck; so they try to make a good impression on their boss. These are all parallel cases, but somehow in modern times, only two of them make sense to most of the Jewish population; the Torah observer doesn't get the same common sense recognition.

III

*THE FEELING OF REAL
TRANSFORMATION*

Thirteen

Judaism is the Needle in the Haystack



“Why are we different?”

That question dominated my thoughts as I began to learn more about my heritage. Growing up in a Western society, we’re taught that everyone’s viewpoint is valid; we can all worship G-d in our own way, and there are no wrong answers regarding religion. I reasoned that since Christianity and Islam both stem from Judaism, it made sense that many aspects of our religion were important enough to be adopted. It made me feel a sense of shame that I didn’t know more about my religion, and it sparked an urge to learn more. I had to find out for myself why we were so unique, and why we were the only ones to receive G-d’s Torah.

Amazingly, Judaism makes a claim no other religion dares to make. The Torah clearly states that we received the Torah

on Mount Sinai in a mass revelation in front of millions of witnesses. Every other religion and cult starts because one person or a small group of people claim to have talked to G-d or an angel. Not a single one dares to make such a claim. That alone was striking to me, and the reason is quite logical. If one person witnesses something, the entire picture of that event is from his perspective. Judaism doesn't claim one Jew or a handful of Jews received the Torah. Our religion is based on the knowledge that 600,000 males aged 20-60 accepted the Torah, bringing the total number of our people witnessing the miracle to many millions. We have an unbroken chain of tradition from rabbi to student and father to son, a tradition that has spanned the generations and still speaks powerfully to us today.

What I find most interesting is that the Torah itself states, at its conclusion, that a mass revelation has never happened before and will never happen again. No religion will ever claim in the future that G-d appeared to a mass of people who then lived to tell their descendants. After hearing my entire life that all religions were the same, I had just found a major blow to that theory, one that makes us truly unique. Again, this book is not a religious discussion or opinion piece. It is my logical journey to Torah observance that might spark others to look deeper into their roots as well.

You must admit this is an interesting prediction for the Torah to make, knowing that just one instance of deviation from that statement would negate the entire Torah.

"If G-d exists, and He gave us the Torah, then that Torah must be perfect."

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Imagine if we had believed in a god for all these years that predicted things which didn't come true, told us things that never happened, or promised us things that never came to fruition. One would be completely foolish for following that god. It would be a complete waste of time and highly illogical. The easiest way to determine if Jews were truly following a Torah given to us by G-d was to examine the Torah for flaws, because any flaws would render the entire religion invalid.

I spent months uncovering aspects of Judaism that it would be impossible for a human being to have put into the Torah. I won't delve into the details here, as rabbis and scholars have already written amazing books on the subject, which you'll find listed in the Further Reading section at the end of this book. There are aspects of the Torah that absolutely blew my mind and continue to do so to this day. How is it possible that so much of world history and current events are so clearly reflected within the text of our holy Torah? How is it possible for a book to so accurately describe events that would happen thousands of years later, such as Jews returning to Israel after a 2,000-year exile?

People often get so caught up in the stories of the Torah that they overlook its true wisdom and beauty. They condescendingly point out that a sea cannot split itself, a man cannot survive in a whale, and the world cannot be a certain age. However, archaeology and science have done wonders to enhance the Torah's validity—two fields that intellectuals once thought would rid the world of religion once and for all. There's a reason the Tanach (the Hebrew Bible) is the number one guide for archaeologists in Israel: it is the most truthful reflection of

what has occurred in this area. Countless books demonstrate that scientists are now uncovering much of the information Jews knew thousands of years ago. One of the saddest things I see in the Jewish world today is fellow Jews who think our Torah is a child's fairy tale, irrelevant in the modern world. The Jewish world has never needed our Torah ("teaching" in Hebrew) more than it does now.

None of us has anything to lose by opening our minds to the idea that there might be a deeper meaning to life than what we currently hold true. Judaism contains so many interesting facts and fascinating proofs, but its utmost beauty lies in the endless sources of wisdom we glean from it. If you're a Jew reading this book, why waste such valuable information at your fingertips? My intention in writing this book is not for Jews to put it down and thoughtlessly run out to buy a kippa or start lighting Shabbos candles. My biggest desire is to inspire you to take the first step toward self-growth and inner peace, which our Torah illuminates.

Fourteen

Nazis Hanging and My Mind-Blowing



There was no seminal moment that made me become an observant Jew; it was a culmination of months of learning, observing, and doing. However, one thing did spur me to delve into Judaism more fervently than any other: the astonishing parallel between the Purim story and the Nuremberg trials. My rabbi and I were studying together in early 2008, and as we explored this connection in the weeks leading up to Purim that March, I was in utter awe. It was a link so improbable that even to this day I get giddy just thinking about it. Interestingly, I was recently interviewed on a podcast by a famous rabbi in Israel, Yom Tov Glaser, and he excitedly shared that this Purim-Nuremberg connection was his biggest spark in Judaism as well.

Many organizations use “Torah proofs” to demonstrate the

divinity of the Torah to their fellow Jews. I strongly advocate for this, though I also realize it's just a start. It's not a surefire way to inspire people, but I think it's a great way to pique interest. The Torah states, "so that you shall know that I am HASHEM your G-d." This made a profound impact on me, because knowing and believing are two distinct entities. G-d will not simply appear to us as He did on Mount Sinai, for the days of clear revelation ended on that day. If He appeared to us, it would remove humanity's free will, thus undermining the main purpose of creation. Every human being has a choice to come closer to G-d or not.

Most of us know the basics of the Purim story: the Jews are on the verge of annihilation, and G-d miraculously saves them in the end through the efforts of Mordechai and Esther. We all rejoice yearly at the hanging of Haman and his 10 sons, but a closer examination reveals something more. The text in the Megillah (scroll) refers to Achashverosh (the then-ruler of Persia) as either "King Achashverosh" or simply as "King." Although G-d does not reveal Himself overtly in the Megillah (His Name doesn't appear even once), our sages tell us that whenever the text refers to Achashverosh solely as "King," it is an allusion to G-d Himself. In the text, Esther says, "If it please the King, let tomorrow also be granted to the Jews to do as today's decree, and let them hang Haman's ten sons on the gallows" [Esther 9:13].

What makes this so striking is Esther's request to the King (G-d): to permit the ten dead sons of Haman to be hanged on the gallows the next day, something forbidden according to Jewish Law. Even more perplexing is that Haman's sons are already

Nazis Hanging and My Mind-Blowing

dead; why hang dead men on gallows at all? The verb used also hints at a distant future, which has puzzled rabbis for centuries, leading to extensive commentary on this enigmatic verse. To add to the mystery, four letters in the verses listing Haman's sons are oddly sized: one larger than the rest and three smaller.

The final piece of this puzzle comes from a Midrash – a body of Jewish teaching that fills in many gaps in the Torah's narrative regarding events and personalities that are only hinted at. A Midrash tells us that Haman also had a daughter who committed suicide during the Purim story, after mistaking her father for Mordechai and throwing her chamber pot on his head. Even without this piece of information, the story is fascinating, but this adds another layer of intrigue as the connections unfold. I know this might seem confusing now, but I will tie it all together shortly.

To summarize: the Purim story features a list of Haman's 10 sons, killed by the sword and, at Queen Esther's request, subsequently hanged the next day; Haman's daughter, who committed suicide; and four oddly sized letters within the list of sons, whose significance will become clear. During the Nuremberg trials, 10 Nazis were hanged by the Allies; Hermann Göring, a prominent Nazi, committed suicide; and all this took place in the year 1946. I hope you're beginning to see the pattern.

Here is where it gets interesting: the date and one of the hanged Nazis tie this amazing parallel together. Adding the numerical values of the smaller letters in the list of Haman's ten sons yields 707, while the larger letter's numerical value is 6, indicating

“the sixth grouping of 707.” This translates to the year 5707 on the Hebrew calendar (the sixth millennium, 707th year). The Hebrew year 5707 corresponds to the period between Rosh Hashanahs 1946-1947 on the Gregorian calendar. The actual time of the Nuremberg executions fits precisely into this timeframe, occurring in the Hebrew year 5707.

You might be confused or excited now, but the best part is yet to come. Julius Streicher was a Nazi known as one of the most virulent anti-Semites of his time. He was one of the 10 men hanged during the Nuremberg trials, and his last words were nothing short of bizarre. As he struggled, dragged to the gallows, he screamed, “Purimfest, 1946!” – conclusively linking this chain of events from a most unexpected source. This isn’t fantasy, fake news, or a conspiracy theory. These were his actual last words, and they’re well documented in news stories of the era. This whole puzzle, containing pieces spanning thousands of years, culminates in the words of a vicious Jew-hater who was about to be hanged.

I remember telling everyone about this mind-blowing parallel in Jewish history, which I had just gleaned from my rabbi, but the responses were largely uniform. They thought it was truly amazing, but the amazement never translated into further action. I understood the sentiment, because in college I experienced the same emotion after reading the Bible Codes book. It was so fascinating to me that the Torah might accurately predict the future, yet it never spurred me to search deeper. For days, I excitedly read that book in my fraternity house, but the excitement wore off quickly. I never thought to explore why it had seemed so fascinating. It just faded into the

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background like everything else potentially meaningful in my life. I would not repeat that mistake this time.

I pored over this Purim-Nuremberg connection for days, and with each new piece of information came renewed excitement. I was awestruck. This didn't make me instantly believe in G-d, but it certainly was a powerful impetus to learn more about Him until faith took root. Some things in life can be chalked up to coincidence, and even this could be one of those events. However, the more I learned about Judaism and the Torah, the more "coincidences" seemed to emerge. I came across too many fulfilled prophecies in the Torah, too many scientific discoveries corroborating its accounts, and too many details that only a divine author could have known, to attribute them to mere happenstance.

I never believed or acted with blind faith, nor do I now. That is not what Judaism is about; we vigorously ask questions and pursue truth. I prided myself on rationally approaching my new way of life and have never deviated from that principle. The Purim parallel is one of many in an endless stream of incredible knowledge and wisdom I discovered through my studies, but I will always hold it close to my heart. This was truly the impetus for my transformation, and anyone who has learned about this Purim parallel can attest to its power.

Fifteen

Can We Honestly Say We're Good Jews?



The more I sought knowledge in the months after my jail stint, the more I realized how different the world is on opposite sides of Torah observance. I didn't consider myself a better Jew than anyone else for exploring my roots; I was simply interested in learning about my heritage, like anyone else might be. If a person never shows up for soccer practice, never listens to the coach, treats his teammates poorly, and doesn't put in his best effort in the game, then how on earth could he consider himself an ideal soccer player? Yet, for Judaism, everyone seems to label themselves a good Jew based on their often limited understanding of what Judaism actually is. It's an irrational phenomenon that wouldn't fit anywhere else in life, but is so readily found in the Jewish world.

It's difficult to open one's mind to a completely new way of

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thinking because old habits keep trickling back. We resist change as much as possible, and we look for excuses to back away from our fresh path. I knew myself well enough to see that staying the course would be a monumental challenge, and I tried to identify the symptoms before they reared their ugly heads. What made it difficult was constantly hearing from others that being “a good Jew” had nothing to do with the path I was now choosing, that Torah observance wasn’t qualitatively different from being non-observant. This is such irrational thinking that is incongruent with every other aspect of life. We search for the best doctors, we look up to the best athletes, we want to learn from the tops in their field; but in Judaism, it makes sense to people that they identify their status.

I saw some Jews putting in an enormous amount of time and effort to live the way the Torah commands, and I saw others who lacked any connection to those commands. Taking a step back, it was impossible to see how this made sense to people. I reasoned that if I could get to the root of the cause of this common phenomenon, then perhaps it would help me grow and be able to influence others as well. It wasn’t rocket science; it was just common logic. Change is hard for people, especially when venturing into something new is at direct odds with their current way of life.

As I became more aware of my actions, I noticed the very foundations of my persona changing dramatically. The guilt I used to drown in drugs began to surface; a clear sense of right and wrong, previously obscured by a past clouded by failure, became more lucid; and a desire to maximize my neglected abilities started to emerge. I realized how precious life was and

how much there was to get out of it. Judaism catalyzed these burgeoning thoughts for me, and it gave me the well-laid path to explore these emotions further.

I also came to realize that the motto I used to base my life on, “You only live once,” certainly applied to living as an observant Jew as well. I used to think that since life was so fleeting, I might as well try to cram as much physical pleasure into it as I could. That seemingly practical logic turned my life into prolonged misery, and I’ve seen countless others fall into the same trap, too. We only live once in this world, and with our one existence, we can transform the ordinary into the holy, becoming shining beacons of righteousness. The selfish and arrogant attitude, which was once my badge of honor, morphed into the humble and modest outlook I strive for today.

I stopped viewing Judaism as constricting and started viewing it as liberating. The desire to forge foreign paths in life faded once I realized my ancestors trod a path that contained so much meaning. It felt like being in one of those British mazes of finely manicured bushes, seeking the exit, only this time I knew how to find my way. Previously, I would refuse to listen to others, even though deep down they could guide me. Now, I trusted and looked up to others who could easily tell me where the end of the maze was. They would kindly point out potential pitfalls while leaving the ultimate decision-making up to me. People don’t like being told what to do, and that is not what Judaism is all about. It’s a guide to life, not a gun being aimed at one’s head. It’s a comfort knowing that whatever situation arises, there is a clear-cut path that is always available for us to take as Jews.

Can We Honestly Say We're Good Jews?

For the first time that I could recall, I truly felt like I was doing the right thing with my life. I had always loathed going to school, but with Judaism, I quickly realized I couldn't absorb enough information because I was always yearning to learn more. The structure of my life, primarily comprising work and home, also contributed to this focus. I had virtually no social contact with anyone from my past. I put myself in a somewhat self-imposed exile because it was the only way I could leave my old life behind, and I desperately wanted to do so. It became apparent to me that the more I tried to live as G-d wanted me to live, the better I felt, the more I respected myself, and the more others respected me as well. Torah wasn't just a bunch of rules that some rabbis concocted to make life less enjoyable. It's the blueprint for true self-improvement and reflection, and a foundation for inner peace and acceptance.

Sixteen

Good Boy, Bad Boy



Reward and punishment are a basic foundation of civilization, and Judaism is no different. In fact, the Rambam (Maimonides, of blessed memory) states that without a concept of reward and punishment, Judaism ceases to exist. Having just been involved in a serious incident with law enforcement, this concept became very personal for me to explore. Most Jews view Judaism in ways that run contrary to their normal thinking, and that was something I tried to avoid in my initial stages of transformation. My entire approach to Judaism was one of rationality, and it is completely rational to think that if there is a G-d in this world, there must be some way that He judges and rates His creations.

In my younger years, I spent a good deal of time in my room being punished for various things, such as talking back to my mother or yanking my sister's hair. The concept that G-d has His own system for evaluating us made perfect sense to me. I

think people overcomplicate Judaism, hoping to find excuses and rationalizations to ignore their obligations. It's sometimes difficult to understand the conversations I have with Jews from all over the world, who tell me with absolute certainty that they believe in G-d, yet are just as resolute about not following the Torah. How long would someone last at their job with this mentality, ignoring company directives or simply choosing which ones to fulfill?

The lowest level of serving G-d, according to Jewish thought, is through fear of punishment. In fact, it is clearly the most basic foundation of our relationship with Him. Fear is a feeling that can dramatically affect a person's actions, and depending on how it manifests itself in that person's behavior, it can be either positive or negative. As I mentioned before, everyone slows down when they see a police officer on the side of the road, and everyone usually perks up when their boss walks into the room. The difference between those examples and our relationship with G-d is that His view of us is constant and permanent; He clearly delineates in His Torah what He demands of us. There is no escape from it and no opting out of it. I discovered that one of the major differences between observant and non-observant Jews was simply how one internalizes their fear of G-d.

We all grow up with knowledge of Heaven and Hell, but these terms are so misused that we often scoff when we hear them. The terms and what they represent are Jewish concepts, but various other cults and religions of the world have badly distorted them. It's logical to assume that Jews and non-Jews who do things right in this world will be rewarded when it's all over, and those who don't will receive punishment. This

system applies to every other area of life, yet for life itself, it doesn't even dawn on most to use the same rationale.

Even more difficult for Jews to accept is how the actual process of being judged in life happens. "Good" and "nice" are the two most common terms that people use to define themselves, as if they are the obvious measuring stick for determining their life's worth. If we were all able to judge ourselves in this world, nothing but pure disaster would result. I can assure you Hitler thought he was a good and nice person, as did Stalin, Charles Manson, and every other deranged individual that has ever lived. You'd think the more rational approach would be to understand how G-d, the only Judge, determines how He rates humans.

There are plenty of nice people who get fired from work, and plenty of good people who fail major tests. Life requires living up to standards, goals, and expectations; why would Judaism be any different? If we believe in G-d and we know that there is only one body of work that He gave us as Jews, then why not investigate it? Even if we don't believe in the Torah, wouldn't it be worth figuring out why we don't believe before simply ignoring it? Rationally, the Torah is the only clue we might have as to how G-d judges us; no one claims there might have been another book given to us as Jews. Given that I was facing a situation where serious punishment might be an outcome of my actions, no other approach to life's judgment made sense at this point.

It was these important questions and topics that I focused on during my period of growth. I didn't want to make things

too difficult by steering away from the basics, and my rabbi did a great job of helping to ensure I wasn't overcomplicating things. This is a major problem in modern times, as evidenced by the mass flocking to psychologists, the abundance of pharmaceutical drugs for so many issues, and the general sense of disillusionment with the world. If one tries, one can truly simplify things in life and in Judaism to basic, understandable levels. If G-d exists, then He judges us how He wants to, not as we want Him to. He was also kind enough to show us what the judgment is based on, through the laws and guidelines in the Torah. Everywhere else in life, this logic makes perfect sense, and if you truly think about this rationally, you will see it makes perfect sense within the context of Judaism as well.

Seventeen

The Buffet Line



Is there anyone who doesn't love a buffet line? All those neatly arranged choices laid out before you — it's like an amusement park for the appetite. Sadly, my experience has been that most modern Jews have turned Judaism into something quite similar to the buffet smorgasbord we see today. A little from this area of Judaism, a smattering of that custom, a dabble of this holiday, a serving of that rule to follow, and a serving of this law. The only things missing from this scene are the tray, the check-out counter, and the woman named Flo giving you your change. I noticed this tendency in many modern Jews within a few months of learning about our heritage, and this awareness truly spurred me on.

I grew up in a typical Jewish home in America. We observed the High Holy Days, held a Passover Seder, and always lit Chanukkah candles. When I began learning more about what

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it meant to be Jewish, I thankfully had a solid foundation to start with. My ultimate desire in my search to define Judaism was for an answer predicated on truth, not modern thought. The Burger King “your way, right away” approach no longer appealed to me. I would not take the easy way out of what the Torah truly expected of me. I wanted to do it right, and for the first time in my life, I could truly say I didn’t cut corners or take the simple route.

If being Jewish meant changing certain aspects of my life, it was a sacrifice I would happily make. I lived in the secular world, as most people cannot say they have. I gleaned every physical gratification I could from that lifestyle, yet I still found it to be nothing but a dead-end road. Fulfillment and satisfaction were impossible to achieve because if you base your life on physical or material success, it will never be enough. In fact, it’s actually spelled out blatantly for us in the Jewish Bible when King Solomon says, “He who loves silver shall never be satisfied with silver; nor he that loves abundance, with increase; this is also vanity” [Ecclesiastes 5:9]. I wanted to define myself the way G-d wanted me to be defined, and learning how to do that could only happen through applying the Torah. This seemed completely logical to me, since G-d’s only body of work ever given to the Jewish People was this very Torah.

Just because people behave irrationally or even hypocritically doesn’t make them bad people. It was fascinating to observe how some individuals were deeply committed to certain aspects of Judaism while openly disregarding others. For instance, I observed people who meticulously kept kosher but did not observe Shabbos. Others faithfully lit Shabbos candles on

Friday night, despite being married to a gentile. I witnessed countless such combinations, many of which struck me as hypocritical. Even more striking were the rationalizations that made these incongruent actions perfectly acceptable within their personal practice of Judaism. This experience highlighted the immense power of the human psyche and the lengths it goes to resist personal change.

In no way am I saying I'm perfect because, in reality, I'm far from it. I don't do everything in Judaism that I'm commanded, but the desire to grow and the yearning to learn from mistakes is where I might differ from you. Ridding oneself of detrimental habits and traits takes time, and even religious Jews can make mistakes in their efforts. However, I don't make rash decisions to never do something in the Torah, like many I know. From the first day of my transformation, I tried never to make Judaism my private buffet because it doesn't make any rational sense in other areas of life.

Imagine if your boss gave you a checklist of things to do for a new company project. There is no way you would sit there, examine the list, and then decide that some of these just didn't fit into your lifestyle right now, or that others make little sense currently. You can substitute work for any other aspect of life, and you'll see it's not logical to think this way either. Only in Judaism does this irrational concept of picking lead a Jew to abandon all rationality and common sense to hop into the proverbial buffet line.

What I found even harder to understand was when Jews were actually performing a commandment, but incorrectly. For

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instance, someone would fast on Yom Kippur but end the fast whenever they felt like it, even though it concludes at a specific time according to Jewish law. I would ask them why they fasted for an entire day, minus a few hours, and the answer was almost unanimously, “G-d appreciates that I fasted, period.”

I’m scratching my head while typing this argument. Nowhere else in life does this erroneous logic make any sense. Imagine if a child said to his parents, “I know you’re appreciative that I took part in the SAT test,” having only bubbled in 60% of the answers. The parents just spent thousands of dollars on a private tutor, yet the child completed only part of their obligation. Or maybe the boss asked his employee to fill out a 10-page report, and the employee decided to only do 6. Yom Kippur ends at a specific time in every city around the world; how does it make sense to decide your own ending?

My goal was to open my mind to a new way of thinking, to learn everything that Judaism stands for. I refused to close myself off just because something seemed strange or confusing initially. Judaism encourages asking questions because we as Jews don’t live with a blind faith, like many other religions do. The things I didn’t understand only spurred me on even harder because it gave me the urge to seek answers to quench my curiosity. Buffet Judaism is plaguing us all over the world, and sadly, it’s even crept into the observant community. No one is immune to this illogical way of approaching Judaism. It takes a bigger person to be open to new ideas than it does to cut them off hastily. I promise that the more you learn about the Judaism that our ancestors passed down in an unbroken chain for over 3,000 years, the more it will make you.

Eighteen

Tear Down That Wall



Jews intentionally build walls around Judaism, knowing they will never attempt to scale them. They have a distorted image of what they believe Judaism stands for, and this flawed reality they've created then negates any growth in Judaism they might achieve. They hear or read things in the mass media or from friends and relatives, and based on that erroneous information, they decide what Jewish ideals are. However, this usually differs vastly from what our religion teaches and instructs. Academics call this a "straw man"—an intellectual fabrication designed to scare Jews away from their heritage.

We learn nothing in life without effort, yet so many Jews have dismissed Judaism without any attempt to study what G-d has instructed in our Torah. I too held these false notions, believing they accurately described Orthodox Judaism and its adherents. However, the more I explored each facet of Torah

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observance, the more I realized my perception was flawed; there was nothing askew with Judaism.

Every book I read and every lecture I listened to online eliminated more barriers. Every question I had or difficulty I had with Judaism slowly coalesced into a clear picture. It was as if for every question posed, there were dozens of compatible answers. It was amazing to me how, by giving Judaism an honest chance, I got so much more out of it than expected. Judaism became more and more inspiring, and the deeper I searched, the easier it was for me to accept its foundations. However, something was always looming in the distance that had plagued me for years, and at some point I knew I would have to ask my rabbi about it.

There is one event in Jewish history that brings out a flurry of emotions in every Jew. Of course, I'm talking about the Holocaust.

It seems ridiculous to think that we could be the Chosen People, yet endure something as horrific as the Holocaust. The most tragic consequence of the Holocaust is that many people contemplate this very thing but never attempt to reconcile themselves with such a frightening reality. I grew up with a fascination for the Holocaust and for World War II as a whole. It was perhaps the single most defining event that befell the Jewish people since Mt. Sinai, and certainly the most devastating. Countless individual incidents seemingly could have derailed the outcome of these events, yet they unfolded precisely as they did.

If one only glimpses a parent spanking a child, we might think that the parent seems cruel and unloving. But maybe we missed the child running into the street, or putting his hand on the stove, or biting his baby sister. Without seeing the entirety of a situation, it's tough for us to sit here and judge the actions of this parent. This same logic should extend to our view of G-d's role in the Holocaust as well.

G-d is the "loving Father of the Jewish People," and one way we relate to Him in Judaism is as a child to a father. We contrast this beautiful imagery with the events of the Holocaust, and something seems deeply awry. I spent a lot of time reading descriptions of the religious Jews who were in the death camps, and their accounts were staggering. Many seemed to actually see G-d more in the death camps than they did in serene Europe, before places like Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen became infamous. Hundreds of thousands of observant Jews who survived came back with even more faith in and love of G-d than before. If so, why are we questioning G-d's presence during the Holocaust when we weren't even there?

In every relationship, each party has expectations of what the other side is going to do and how they're going to act. A boss wants his employees to arrive on time, a teacher requires her students to turn in homework, and a coach expects his players to give it their all in practice. G-d also has these expectations, and they're laid out perfectly in our Torah.

I logically concluded that G-d expects the Jewish People to keep the 613 mitzvot (commandments) of the Torah, as they are the basis for every Jewish ritual, practice, and custom. I came to

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see that the Torah contains an elaborate system of reward and punishment that permeates its entire text. In fact, most of the Shema prayer—recited every morning and evening—alludes to this concept. For example, it explicitly states that our material prosperity as Jews in the Land of Israel is directly based on how we behave.

There is a horrifying section of the Torah, in Parshas Ki Savo [Deuteronomy 28], where G-d tells the Jewish people all that they will enjoy if they stay on the path that He laid for them. Conversely, the subsequent paragraphs describe some of the most gruesome predictions imaginable. G-d warns of 98 curses that will befall our people for a failure to adhere to the Torah. Some are beyond the capacity of our imagination, such as women eating their own children because of a lack of food. Yet, we know this incident, as well as the other curses, occurred in our history. We commemorate many of these in the Fast Days we observe during the year.

This brings me to the crux of my point. We will never know exactly what G-d was thinking, or why certain people survived and others did not. We will always question why the events of the Holocaust seemed to defy everything we hold sacred as Jews. However, to be fair, we need to look at things from G-d's perspective.

I'm not passing judgment on the generation of the Holocaust, nor on any other generation. However, a basic principle at the very heart of Judaism is that no suffering comes to the world or an individual without a reason. There are no random punishments or penalties because that is just not how the world

operates. I had a much easier time coming to terms with the Holocaust after looking at it from a different perspective. After reading about Jews dancing and singing in the showers as they breathed their last breaths, and giving away their last morsel of food to put on tefillin, something within me changed. So many victims of this unspeakable tragedy not only didn't give up on Judaism or vent their anger against G-d; in fact, they did just the opposite. I logically concluded that if many of those who endured this unspeakable tragedy didn't cast Judaism aside, then what right did I have to do so, never having experienced the Holocaust myself?

I can understand punishments, but some tragedies of the Holocaust seemed to go beyond the realm of human suffering. However, looking at the entire picture, one understands that this life is but a grain of sand on the beach of eternity. When taking a step back and internalizing what befell our fellow Jews from that perspective, it's easy to see why they clung to Judaism with all their strength. They realized that everything a Torah-observant Jew strives for was waiting for them after their pain ceased. Observant Jews live with a concept of the next world; it is one of the core tenets of Judaism. You may or may not yet agree with that statement, but without an afterlife, there would be no justice for victims of the Holocaust. Judaism teaches us that our eternal life starts once this ephemeral one ends.

Seeing the Holocaust through this lens doesn't eliminate the heartbreak of what occurred to our people, but it eases the pain by making it finite. There was a purpose to the Holocaust, and a warning for it in the Torah. Why that generation had to endure it and not ours is a question we may never answer. However,

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we cannot let the Holocaust derail our own Judaism, for if it does, we will have succumbed to its horrors. The goals of our enemies were to eliminate the Jewish people and our entire way of life. By using the Holocaust as an excuse to not seek Judaism's beauty and spirituality, we ensure the triumph of our enemies—which would truly be the greatest tragedy.

Nineteen

Yeah, We Were Chosen, Do Somethin' About It?



I don't know of anyone who didn't want to be chosen first on a team in elementary school; it was a badge of honor, knowing that people thought you were the best. We all like being chosen, whether it's for a promotion by the boss at work, being singled out by a teacher for an excellent paper, or getting a compliment from the coach. It's simply part of human nature to feel good about being needed or appreciated. G-d chose the Jewish people to entrust them with His Torah; it is such common knowledge that even our enemies admit it in their own religious books. You would think that our people would have a sense of pride and gratitude as the sole recipients of the Torah, but sadly, the opposite is often the case.

No other nation claims to have received the Torah from G-d. While other nations might distort many of its facets for

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their own benefit, they have never had the audacity to say that the Jews did not receive the Torah. That alone should be a source of pride for every Jew. We have no reason to be haughty toward others for accepting the Torah. In fact, G-d clearly states it was not because of our righteousness that He chose us. The Torah describes how much we frustrated G-d with our characteristic stiff-necked actions, and He threatened to destroy us on multiple occasions. Our ultimate purpose as Jews is to be a light among the nations, a role we hold solely due to our lineage. We are the direct descendants of our cherished forefathers, who earned the eternal merit of accepting the Torah. This, and this alone, is why we enjoy the privileges and benefits of being Jewish today. It is a heritage earned and passed down to us by our righteous ancestors. It's no different from a wealthy person passing on an extravagant inheritance to his offspring.

Imagine being given a winning lottery ticket, only to rip it up because you wanted to be ordinary like everyone else. It's such an insane notion, yet so many of our fellow Jews apply this exact irrational approach to our unique national identity. Without studying the foundations of Judaism and what the Torah teaches, it's tough for many Jews to truly feel chosen. Many see it as a burden, or a mark of shame—something unfair, undemocratic, or even racist. Whatever the reason, it's such a tragic way for our people to think, shunning the ultimate expression of love and connection to our Creator. I honestly cannot think of anything sadder.

The analogy used by our sages is that many Jews are like a prince whom the king banishes from the castle. He becomes comfortable living in huts and tents and never yearns to return

to the palace. Then the king rides by with his men and sees the prince perfectly content to live like a commoner, and it utterly breaks the king's heart. As a nation, we are the prince, perfectly satisfied with being ordinary, just like the rest of the nations. However, the very foundation of Judaism teaches the opposite: that we are special and have a unique purpose. Imagine how it breaks G-d's heart when He sees millions of Jews shrugging off our holy purpose to live like other nations. He chose us from all the nations of the world, and many of our brethren refuse the honor that comes with it. They happily resign themselves to living a life outside the palace, thus forfeiting the pleasures that come with such a special recognition: being the children of the King.

The Torah G-d gave the Jewish people was not a gift in the conventional sense, as its acceptance holds us accountable for many actions that would be of no concern to gentiles. Our relationship with G-d is unshakable; it's a guarantee that He will never completely desert us. However, it's also a relationship based on expectations and requirements, and this makes many Jews feel it's not worth the trouble. We've outlasted every person, nation, or group trying to destroy the Jewish people. That alone gives many Jews a sense of our people's uniqueness, which is unparalleled in the annals of history. However, others shrug it off as mere coincidence and claim our survival came through other means. I can understand someone's opposition to Torah observance, but what I'll never understand is the lack of pride in being a Jew.

I have always had a fierce pride in being a Jew, and that is tremendously helpful during one's spiritual growth. My biggest

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hurdle wasn't changing the way I thought about Judaism. It was figuring out how to channel that pride into the observance that the Torah demands of us. Internalizing that life wasn't always about me and what I wanted at every moment was enlightening. As a Jew, I have certain obligations, and these turned from burdens to badges of honor as I learned more Torah. I felt like a soldier doing my duty as a Jewish soldier in G-d's army, and that was a powerful feeling that spurred constant dedication. I always relished the fact that we were different, that we were both the envy of the world and the object of its scorn simultaneously. Now I understood the root of this reality, and my pride swelled to new heights.

I cherish being a part of a group that has endured so much, yet thrives to this very day. Without a sense of Jewish pride, I don't think a Jew stands a chance in modern times, where the distorted ideologies and moralities of the Western world bombard us constantly. Being chosen is nothing to shy away from: it should be the impetus that entices a Jew to find out why G-d cares so much about us that only Jews are called the children of G-d in the Torah. Jews seem to be so scared to take that first step, as if there is something dark and foreboding around the corner. What could be negative in learning more about your roots?

I kick myself to this day that I never had the urge to do so sooner. If we view Judaism in the same way we view other areas of life where we seek so much recognition for growth and success, we will naturally want to understand why G-d singles us out among all the peoples in the world. It's not racist or elitist to be deeply proud of the fact that we have this unique blessing.

Cocaine to Amen

Sadly, the only ones who usually fight this characteristic of the Jews are Jews themselves. The title “chosen” is special and meaningful, something that every Jew should cherish for their entire lives.

IV

TORAH. TORAH. TORAH

Twenty

Good Shabbos



What is our purpose in this world? This was a question I started asking frequently during my first few weeks out of jail. I quickly realized that the way I had been living was diametrically opposed to life's true purpose. Accumulating wealth, indulging in pleasures, and ignoring moral obligations had proven to be a miserable endeavor and a complete failure. Interestingly, a few thousand years ago, King Solomon, one of the most powerful, wise, and wealthy people in history, also wrote about the futility of his pursuits and observations.

He lamented that after all his searching and pondering, the true essence of life was simple: fearing G-d and observing His commandments. Reading this, I realized I wasn't alone in my disenchantment with the world I saw around me. I knew that if my grandparents, and their parents, and generations before them, could find something special in Judaism, then surely I

could as well. It didn't take long to realize that the backbone of Jewish existence is Shabbos, a day completely set apart from the rest of the week. When I asked my rabbi what the most important thing I had to do to be considered a "good Jew," his immediate answer was observing Shabbos.

Shabbos is the most misunderstood aspect of Judaism—a tragedy, considering it is also among the most important commandments. The Fourth Commandment in the Torah is to "honor the Shabbos," which struck me as odd, given that it precedes the commandment prohibiting murder. The punishment for breaking Shabbos in the Torah is actually more severe than for murder; both carry a death penalty, but Shabbos also includes the spiritual excision in the next world. It took a lot of effort to free myself of any stigmas or preconceived notions about Judaism when I started my learning process, and this was especially important when approaching Shabbos. Instead of thinking I knew best, or that I had heard it all, I first let my rabbi and my books explain their view of Judaism; only then did I form an opinion.

A problem I've observed over the past few years is that most Jews already consider themselves experts in Judaism. Nowhere else in life would this make sense: people spending so little time learning about a subject and then subsequently spouting off like experts. I concluded that since my rabbi lived more like my ancestors than the Reform rabbi who officiated at my Bar Mitzvah, it was worth giving his opinion an honest chance. The assumption that Orthodox rabbis brainwash their pupils, forcing their views and will on uneducated followers, is pervasive and insulting. The reality I experienced was the

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complete opposite. He never told me to do anything or urged me to try anything. He simply explained and outlined what the Torah set forth as the path for a Jew, leaving the ultimate decisions about my observance solely to me.

I told my rabbi I had one major problem with Orthodox observance of Shabbos. My favorite sports team, the Alabama Crimson Tide, plays its college football games on Saturdays, meaning that observing Shabbos on most weeks would entail missing the games. Instead of giving me the runaround or trying to skirt the issue, he gave me a very simple answer: "Tape the game," he said. I stared at him for a few seconds and replied, "Rabbi, I know you have lights on Shabbos, so you obviously leave them on from the day before and don't touch them. Couldn't I just leave the game on before sundown on Friday and watch it without breaking Shabbos, right?" I thought it was a clever response, but he smiled and calmly told me that after I kept a few Shabboses, I would never even dream of doing what I suggested because it was not in the spirit of Shabbos. As usual, he turned out to be absolutely right; in the last 17 years, I've missed some major Alabama football games to observe Shabbos, but have never regretted it for a second.

What struck me most about my first few Shabboses were the conversations around the table. I was so used to being around people gossiping about friends, discussing celebrity mishaps, rambling about sports, bragging about girls, or fantasizing about dream cars. I was shocked to find that Jews were actually discussing interesting things at a dinner table that didn't involve trivial matters. Conversations about people's life goals, improvements they'd made, areas they wanted to

work on, charity work they'd done, or amazing Torah insights from a recently attended lecture dominated the night. For the first time in my life, I felt truly connected to life itself, not just existing from one day to the next. When you surround yourself with people who desire constant improvement, it inevitably rubs off on you.

After a few months, I started observing Shabbos as I do today. Initially, my mother would drop me off at shul Friday night for services, and then pick me up around midnight from my rabbi's house after dinner. I feel guilty about that now because I was causing my mother to break Shabbos, and even though we were not an observant family, it was still a violation of the day. Here's an analogy: If a person accidentally or unintentionally drinks poison, it is no less harmful. So too, with breaking Shabbos; it is a blemish on the soul. Even though it served a good purpose and helped me grow, I still look back on that fact with a touch of remorse today.

From my first Shabbos onwards, every week I tried to give up something I knew was a Shabbos violation. Many Jews view Shabbos in a purely negative light, always focusing on the "can't-do's" instead of seeing the day's true beauty. Perhaps it seems strange to them that I choose to spend an entire day without answering phone calls, waiting in lines, sitting in traffic, returning emails, getting up for work, meeting a deadline, or rushing from place to place. If those who shun Shabbos would just open their minds to a different way of thinking and put their egos aside, they would understand why millions of Jews would never give up Shabbos for anything on Earth. It is something Orthodox Jews look forward to the moment the

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previous Shabbos has ended, because it is the cornerstone of our lives.

I always look at Shabbos from G-d's perspective, and it is quite ingenious in its design. Observing Shabbos, Jews separate themselves from the physical world for a day to focus on life's spiritual aspect. Being free to spend time with friends and loved ones, sitting around a table talking, enjoying each other's company at a kiddush after services, or taking a walk with them during the afternoon are all blessings of this day. Children especially fall in love with Shabbos—a joyous day of hanging out with friends or family, free of phones, computers, and television. This is precisely what G-d intended when He gave the Jewish people Shabbos for our souls: a means to recharge ourselves spiritually after a long and grueling week. Friday at sundown, life stops for a day, and we take a much-needed reprieve from the grind of everyday life.

There is nothing on Earth I would trade for even one Shabbos; it always seems to arrive precisely when I need it most. Life is draining—a simple fact—and Shabbos is the balm for the anxieties we accumulate during the week. The more Shabboses I observed, the more I stepped back and looked at the day rationally. I saw how necessary and integral it became to my life. All misconceptions about Shabbos quickly faded away as anticipation of its arrival filled my thoughts throughout the week. While many see this as cumbersome, those who treasure Shabbos recognize it for the gift it truly is. There is a saying that could not better encapsulate Shabbos: “Jews do not keep Shabbos, Shabbos keeps the Jews.”

It is also disheartening to realize that millions of Jews might never experience how special this day can be. They see all the rules and regulations of Shabbos and automatically view it as restricting and outdated. I used to do the same thing myself. This obsession with all the prohibitions is just another excuse for many to ignore their roots; in their minds, it justifies scorning the observant and ridiculing their choices. It's frustrating for me because I've been on both sides of the fence, and the differences are so vast that it pains me to see so many Jews shunning the very thing that brings such joy and togetherness. All I want in life is for Jews to give Judaism a chance. Whether they become observant is not the focus; all I seek is a desire for people to learn more about their heritage. Most Jews have completely shut their minds and hearts to our precious way of life, and nothing could be more heartbreaking in my eyes.

Twenty-One

The Clothes Don't Make the Man



I'm sure you've all heard the expression, 'the clothes make the man.' Honestly, could there be a more pathetic way to view a person? Sadly, this expression accurately defines modern Western culture. I epitomized this way of thinking, always trying to impress others with the clothes I wore or the car I drove. There isn't a more unfulfilling way to go through life than constantly basing your happiness or self-worth on material possessions. The obsession with this materialistic mindset is so corrosive, yet most people unfortunately succumb to it today. It wasn't until I experienced the emptiness of a world based on superficiality that I realized there had to be another way of thinking—one that would bring the inner peace and contentment I so desperately sought.

I don't think that 'the clothes make the man,' and I haven't for a few years now. This change in my outlook didn't occur in jail;

instead, it happened a few weeks later when I met my rabbi's two sons at my first Shabbos dinner. I walked into their room and was completely stunned by what I saw. Most kids have pictures of athletes or movie stars filling their walls, proudly displaying people whose moral compasses are typically either off-kilter or completely broken. These two boys had pictures of the most famous rabbis in Jewish history on virtually every inch of their walls, along with a depiction of what the Third Temple will look like. I was speechless for perhaps the first time in my life; suddenly, so many life lessons converged in my thoughts at once.

If we spend our lives looking up to people who value depravity, who are selfish, who treat others as objects, and who are driven by materialism, then what are the odds that we will turn out any different? Think of all the horrendous role models that today's children worship: athletes who won't play unless they receive obscene amounts of money, actresses more famous for the drugs they do than their performances, or politicians whose lists of accomplishments pale in comparison with their lists of scandals. How did our society become so pathetic, and how is it that no one truly recognizes this futility and considers how to eradicate it?

I'm embarrassed to even admit this, but before I became observant, I was obsessed with those trashy Hollywood magazines we see while checking out at every grocery store. Whenever I went, I would pick up one—or usually more—of these ridiculous magazines filled with useless Hollywood gossip. I guess watching the train wrecks of other people's lives made me feel better about the misery of my own. Not only that, but

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it continued to fuel my lifestyle because I reasoned that if these celebrities had all this money, fame, and power yet were still miserable, then what possible happiness could I extract from life?

Then I saw the walls of this room and the two remarkable Jewish adolescents who occupied it. They were two boys with outstanding personalities and big smiles on their faces, eagerly pointing out rabbis on their wall to me. Even more amazing to me was that they did it with the same zeal that I displayed when talking about college football. “This one was the Rosh Yeshiva of Torah v’Da’as in New York,” they’d say, “and that one was the biggest Torah learner of his generation in Europe, and this one spent his whole life helping the poor.” They were as excited telling me about the rabbis they looked up to as I was bragging to friends about a girl I hooked up with. I just stared at their faces; in those memorable moments, I got a dose of reality, and it made me smile inside. These kids valued and strove for things truly worthwhile, and they pursued a life worth living.

I didn’t see these boys using religion as a crutch, as so many erroneously believe, even among Jews. That is one of the most insulting terms people use to slander observant Jews. Judaism is a long process of self-improvement, growth, and understanding. It’s not a cop-out for the weak, or an avenue for the brainwashed. These boys were learning what made the rabbis on their wall so special and so revered. They were trying to emulate icons in Judaism who spent their entire lives doing charity work, helping their fellow Jews, learning Torah, and raising amazing families. Why does society view these boys as weak or different, while glorifying athletes or actors with questionable behavior?

Cocaine to Amen

The clothes don't make the man, but the actions and integrity of the person wearing the clothes do. My moral compass was coming into focus, and I was very pleased with my progress.

Twenty-Two

Bite Your Tongue



I believe if the average person were to receive a transcript of everything they said in a single day, the results would be quite humiliating. One aspect of Judaism that initially impressed me the most was its obsession with pure and holy speech. Having been inundated with vices like rap music, R-rated movies, and reality TV my whole life, my speech often mirrored the nonsense I absorbed. I gave as little thought to the words that emanated from my mouth as I did to the destructive powder I snorted up my nose. I never saw speech as a gift, nor did it seem like something to be guarded with care.

Judaism teaches us that evil speech is as grave a sin as taking a life. That might sound strange at first glance, but a deeper look reveals a powerful aspect of reality that often goes unnoticed. Do we truly consider how destructive speech can be, and more importantly, how productive it can be? Think of how many

relationships or friendships have been irrevocably severed or damaged because of a few words. Ponder how many parents or teachers have forever marred the self-esteem of young ones because of careless comments. I found it unbelievable that I had lived for over 27 years without truly contemplating the one human attribute that distinguishes us from every other creation on Earth: our gift of speech.

I started recalling all the people in my past whom I had hurt with my insensitive comments. Whether I was trying to be funny or serious, much of what I said was truly damaging or completely unnecessary. I thought of all the times I tried to be the life of the party, usually at the expense of someone else. In fact, I still often wonder to what extent my past speech continues to negatively affect people's lives years later. It wasn't just the troubling comments, but also the constant cursing, negativity, and unintelligent drivel. I wasn't born a complete idiot, but I sadly acted like one constantly, my speech mirroring my atrocious behavior.

People with self-confidence speak with conviction; those with compassion convey their presence through speech. You can recognize anyone who wants to make the most of life by the words they utter. The first step I took on the path to becoming a better person was carefully guarding my words. I realized that although I couldn't dictate situations or events, my speech was fully under my control. I was proud to work on and develop this skill. It was a pleasant surprise to find myself conversing intelligently and meaningfully, realizing I had significant insights to share.

Bite Your Tongue

One of Hillel's basic teachings in Judaism is, "Treat your fellow as you would like to be treated." This seems like basic common sense, yet it's so rare in the world. I became more cognizant of others' feelings, and in doing so, began feeling better about myself. The easiest way to interact positively with someone is through speech. By simply offering a compliment or showing appreciation, I could positively affect someone's life. It didn't take long for me to understand that just as speech could be damaging, it could likewise uplift those around me when used properly. Through this awareness, putting myself in others' shoes became a basic reality of life. Of course, I had slip-ups and made plenty of mistakes along the way. But knowing I erred — and actually caring that I had erred — made all the difference.

Nothing in Judaism has meant more to me than understanding the basis of evil speech. Our Sages teach that G-d gave humans two gates for our words: our teeth and our lips. That made a profound impression on my thinking as I began learning, because it seemed so simple, yet its reasoning is so deep. Being constantly aware of our words can improve our lives and those around us immensely. This might seem logical and rational, but it's a forgotten "formality" in the modern world, and the results sadly speak for themselves.

I constantly think about what I say now, but I still see how far I have to go. As a person infused with so much zeal, I have to be extra cautious not to break any of the laws of forbidden speech. I'm far from perfect, but by learning what perfection in this area entails, I have a clear goal to progress towards. There are volumes of books written on the topic, each tackling this

critical area of our lives differently, yet striving to ingrain the same concept. One needn't be an observant Jew to recognize the importance of speech. I could have focused on this concept years ago, but never cared to.

The foundation of all that we are as a people is our compassion, a character trait that should naturally lead to kindness in our words. Sadly, we seem to have lost this awareness with each passing breach of speech that brings strife among Jews. Slander is becoming so commonplace in our world that we've almost become immune to it. Newspapers in Israel don't let a day go by without bashing a different sector of our public, and the results have been catastrophic for our people. I may not have the power to change the world, but I possess the power to change myself, and by starting with something as easy as words, the rest falls into place.

Try this for the next 24 hours: pay attention to everything you say, even without actually changing anything. I bet you'll be as shocked as I was at how many things you could say differently, more respectfully, or not at all.

Twenty-Three

Girls, Girls, Girls



That first summer I was embarking on my journey to observance, I was fortunate enough to witness a scene that would forever change my perception of women. My rabbi's wife (my rebbetzin) runs Camp Shamayim, a camp for observant Jewish kids in Atlanta. Counselors, all observant Jewish women, come from all over the country, handpicked by the rebbetzin based on the qualities she values most. She selects these girls based on their morality, dedication to Judaism, love for children, and many other qualities characteristic of the observant world. I was attending a Shabbos lunch at my rabbi's house during this camp session, unaware that about 25 teenage girls would also be present.

I remember walking back from synagogue that Friday evening with the rabbi and a few congregants. Walking ahead of everyone, I reached the rabbi's house first. I opened the door to

see these modestly dressed girls in the living room schmoozing, laughing, and enjoying the Shabbos. The second I walked in, the conversation stopped; everyone looked up and stared as I entered the house. You could literally hear a pin drop. I said “Gut Shabbos” with a big smile, then made my way into the kitchen to say hello to the rebbetzin. As I left the room, the giggling and chattering resumed. I laughed to myself at how strange this situation seemed for both of us.

I marveled at these girls that Shabbos evening because they were bursting with righteousness and purity. They were helpful, respectful, modest, caring, sweet, affable, and each one was as remarkable as the next. They were the exact opposite of the girls I had tried to surround myself with in college: girls with loose morals, skimpy clothes, and a love of partying. These Jewish girls walked into the kitchen and kissed the mezuzah; they placed the food on the table with huge smiles and spoke with such respect to their elders. I could tell they were thoroughly enjoying their Shabbos observance, joy emanating from their faces. Any normal person would want a girl like this as a wife, daughter, or sister; they were such special souls. It was spellbinding, realizing that everything I had ever valued or admired in a girl was utter nonsense. I was now shown the benchmark of what a true Jewish girl was supposed to be, based on the ideals of our holy Torah.

The next day, at the Shabbos lunch, my rebbetzin asked them all to share something about the camp session that had made the most impact on them. Their answers were as pure and special as the image they projected with their modest dress and speech. One girl spoke of how much she enjoyed a lecture

from a woman in the community; another found satisfaction in seeing smiles on the kids' faces, and yet another talked about her personal growth during the summer. It was as if these girls were from a different planet than me. What I had thought a desirable girl was, based on previous experience, disappeared that day. I realized then that Judaism played a pivotal role in these girls' lives, shaping their character and helping them to think and act with purity. I reasoned that I not only wanted my future spouse to be like that, but I also wanted to project those same qualities myself.

It was on that Shabbos day that the differences between the two worlds I was now caught between became apparent. The moral compasses of the girls at that Shabbos table and those of the girls I used to know in the secular world were like day and night. A cult controlled by dark and foreboding rabbis did not brainwash these teens. These were sweet and caring girls enjoying their summer vacation, just like any other girls enjoying summer camp. In a world where so many teenage girls idolize trashy Hollywood stars—who are in and out of rehab, constantly getting into trouble with the law, and dating a different guy every 30 seconds—these girls were a testament to what a Jewish girl should strive to be.

Any of these girls would have been an ideal daughter, and as that thought spun through my head, I marveled at how amazing their parents must be for raising such wonderful children. It gave me a strong sense of what a nice, observant Jewish family might be like, and I decided it was something I wanted in my life as well. I wanted to surround myself with people who cared more about being respectful and compassionate than about

binge-watching the latest reality show. That Shabbos was a tremendous culture shock for me, but a needed one that helped steer my path in the right direction. At that lunch, I also saw how influential a person's actions can be on someone else's way of thinking—in this case, my own. I realized that if I kept growing and progressing, maybe at some point I, too, would honor my own parents with my behavior, like these incredible girls did.

Twenty-Four

Chinese Food Gone Horribly Wrong



1.

When a non-observant Jew sees an obnoxious doctor, they don't vow never to go to a doctor again. Nor do they decide to defend themselves in future court cases if they witness a lawyer acting rudely. Yet, many non-observant Jews completely discredit Judaism whenever they see an Orthodox Jew behaving inappropriately. This thinking is illogical, a purely emotional reaction stemming from a basic principle: most people abhor being uncomfortable. A Torah-observant lifestyle often conflicts with the desires modern society encourages. As soon as many Jews can find an excuse to justify not living a life of observance, they pounce on it.

The night before I started my first day at yeshiva, I went out to

dinner with some family members as a “send-off.” We chose a kosher restaurant in Monsey, a town home to one of the country’s largest populations of Orthodox Jews and where my yeshiva was located. Two of my family members were observant, the other two were not. At the table next to us sat a man decked out in a kippah, black suit, and tzitzis—the “uniform” of many pious Jewish men. Unfortunately, he was also one of the most obnoxious people I had ever had the “privilege” to be around, acting in a manner completely at odds with what his attire represented.

I watched one of my non-observant relatives stare at him for most of our meal, and my anger burned as the situation unfolded. This man, whose attire embodied everything a Jew is supposed to be, behaved in a way that exemplified everything the Torah condemns. I could see the deeper meaning behind the look on my relative’s face. An inner sense of satisfaction seemed to radiate from him, as if thinking, “If this is how observant Jews act, I’m glad I’m not one of them.” In my 16 years of online outreach, I’ve heard this exact sentiment about as many times as I’ve eaten kosher pizza—almost daily.

How illogical is it to think that the Torah would condone this man’s behavior? It’s like hearing about bizarre cases of nurses killing their patients and concluding that the nursing field preaches murder. This man chose, through his own free will, to act rudely that evening, making a poor decision just like the rest of us often do. Becoming observant isn’t a potion one takes, where perfect behavior magically appears out of nowhere. Becoming a better person is a lifelong process, requiring dedication and hard work to embody what the Torah

wants us to be. I saw this man as a sad aberration, but many of my brethren continue to use such individuals as a sweeping generalization that turns them off and away from Judaism.

In less than 24 hours, I was about to start yeshiva, and everything I had come to admire about Judaism was being tarnished by this man's behavior. I could have concluded, as all too many Jews do, that if this is how the Torah teaches people to behave, perhaps I was wasting my time at yeshiva. However, that thought never occurred to me. I refused to abandon my journey because of another's actions; to do so would be a blatant sign of weakness and desperately illogical. Just because I'd seen one man act in a way that was obviously unacceptable by his own religious standards did not mean that Judaism itself was now besmirched. That night had a tremendous impact on me, a memory that has stayed with me to this day. The Torah is perfect, but its adherents are not; anyone thinking otherwise is just trying to give themselves a convenient excuse to continue to shun Judaism.

It amazes me how many unobservant people use the same excuse, believing they are unique. Many vividly recount unpleasant experiences they've had with an Orthodox rabbi, a Chassidish merchant, or a Charedi business owner. When it comes to negative incidents with an Orthodox Jew, they miraculously gain a photographic memory. It saddens me that my people treat Judaism differently from every other aspect of their lives. Nowhere else in our lives does this logic, clearly concocted to avoid observance, make sense. Yet, this detrimental way of thinking is prevalent today. Honestly, when many of us heard about Bernie Madoff, did we run to become

Catholics, reasoning that if one non-observant Jew acts like that, we couldn't possibly remain non-observant?

This double standard extends to other areas of life as well. Liberal Jews seem to respect every other religion except authentic Torah Judaism. If a Muslim eats only halal meat, he's seen as following noble family traditions. But if an observant Jewish mom denies her child a chocolate bar because it lacks a kosher label, she's labeled cruel, medieval, superstitious, and so on. Is the non-observant grass greener? Or are we deluding ourselves? How did we, as the Jewish people, reach the point where adhering to thousands of years of tradition and culture becomes strange and unnecessary?

I sought truth when changing my life, determined not to let anyone or anything stand in my way. What the Torah teaches and how a Jew ultimately behaves are two separate concepts. With an awareness of this reality, I saw my growth become tangible and truly bear fruit. Only feeble people let the outside world influence their decisions, as many modern Jews do. That way of thinking was certainly the old me, the one who used cocaine as his crutch. But the new me realized that rational thinking was far more appealing than cheap excuses.

That evening, I enjoyed more than just the delicious Chinese food; I savored the feeling of having passed a very important turning point. This incident might seem mundane, but to me, it was monumental. This man epitomized everything I had come to despise: an exterior appearance that didn't match his inner intentions. I had spent months changing my life for a way of life that he could trample in a few seconds. Do you see the

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power observant Jews have over our people? They can dictate a person's entire view of their Jewishness in an instant. This dinner didn't set me back or cause spiritual disillusionment; quite the opposite. Instead, it gave me the jolt I needed to reach new heights. If this man could taint Judaism in the short time it takes to eat some sweet and sour chicken, imagine what I could do to elevate it.

Twenty-Five

A Few Rotten Apples



Though this next vignette piggy-backs on the theme of the one preceding it, the topic is so important that I think it needs to be elaborated on some more. I don't think there is anything more corrosive to modern Judaism than the theme being discussed here. In my many years of doing outreach work online, this is the number one stumbling block for non-observant Jews, each one thinking their case is so unique and justified. However, nothing is unique about it because each stems from the same root cause. People will make any rationalization or excuse that will allow them to continue living in a manner that is comfortable for them.

When I first arrived in Monsey, New York, in the fall of 2008, my aunt told me about an incident that had rocked the large Orthodox Jewish community there a few years earlier. This involved an observant Jew, one of the town's biggest kosher

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butchers, whom virtually everybody in the community knew. Unfortunately, it turns out that this man had been selling non-kosher chickens to his customers for years, under the auspices of being completely Glatt kosher, meaning they were sold as adhering to the highest level of kosher standards. Almost every single home in Monsey had to re-kosher their kitchen, throw out their silverware, and get rid of their dishes. It might not sound like such a big deal, but this was an enormous expense and a huge emotional toll on everyone. Many families threw out precious and valuable china that had been in their families for generations because non-kosher products were unknowingly being served on them. It was an absolute catastrophe for this Orthodox community, and people were still reeling from it years later.

I looked at this story with disgust, and while it made me want to act exemplarily, it has made other Jews feel that observing Jewish Law is futile or hypocritical. They see an incident like this and use it to justify their own non-observance. They assume that if a few religious people are acting abhorrently, then that somehow besmirches the entire Torah world. Yet, you will never see these same people use the Bernie Madoff affair to make non-observant Jews rethink being non-observant. Is every Jew who does not lead a Torah-observant lifestyle lumped together with a man who robbed his victims of billions? Do these Jews vehemently decry a non-observant lifestyle as they would if it were an observant Jew who bilked his victims of all that money? The answer, obviously, is a resounding "No!" The same rules never seem to apply if it would entail being critical about how the individual already lives.

The principle of not attributing the actions of a few individuals to an entire population applies to all aspects of life. For instance, consider a man who stops watching football because his favorite player committed a serious crime. Think of someone who chooses not to marry because of the infidelity of a few married acquaintances. Similarly, envision a woman who refuses to send her child to school because a teacher has been involved in inappropriate conduct with a minor. Such reactions are clearly unreasonable. This reasoning is equally relevant to Judaism; the misconduct of a few individuals who violate their own ethical standards does not justify the dismissal of the entire community to which they belong.

Judaism is a profound and spiritual tradition. Its teachings and wisdom enrich life with significance and direction, fostering connections among its followers across generations. Why should the essence of Judaism diminish because of the poor decisions of some adherents? Why is Judaism criticized when certain individuals misrepresent its true values? Such perspectives are detrimental to our unity and progress; they continue to divide us, despite our understanding of the necessity for solidarity.

Rather than focusing on those who commit wrongdoings in our society, we should shift our attention to individuals who exemplify the true essence of Judaism. Rabbis exist in our time whose purity and holiness inspire even non-Jews. A prime illustration of this is the profound reaction to the passing of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, a prominent figure in American Orthodox Judaism for many years. The overwhelming expressions of grief and support from the Gentiles he interacted with serve as

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a genuine reflection of the 'light unto the nations' mentioned in the Torah. They recognized in him a person whose life was a genuine representation of Torah principles, earning him deep respect and admiration from all who knew him. Why do so many Jews want to see Judaism in the worst Jews when they could just as easily associate it with our very best?

One does not need to be the foremost Torah scholar of the generation to make a significant difference. There are countless honest Jews in business who operate their enterprises in strict accordance with Torah principles. Indeed, our sages instruct us that one of the initial inquiries we will face upon leaving this world is whether we conducted our business dealings with integrity. Not everyone can study the Torah all day long and share its teachings with others. The Jewish community requires professionals such as doctors, accountants, and lawyers, as well as essential workers like truck drivers, bus drivers, gravediggers, and farmers. Individuals can exert considerable influence in these fields as well, provided they serve as exemplars of honesty and integrity. We often idolize celebrities and athletes for actions that are morally questionable or trivial, while the religious community is replete with individuals of humility, devotion, and generosity whom we ought to admire. Should we allow the transgressions of a few Jews to overshadow the virtues of the many?

Twenty-Six

Hey, Me Too



Individuals find pleasure in the company of those who share similar beliefs and values, as it fosters a sense of community and support. This is why people join after-school clubs, become members of college fraternities, have a drink with buddies after work, and are so rabid about their favorite sports teams. We all like feeling comfortable in our surroundings, and that comfort persisted when I became more Torah observant. I appreciated the company of those who cherished their Jewish identity, which made the prospect of attending yeshiva more bearable for me, a child who had always disliked school.

When I began my studies with my rabbi in January 2008, he suggested that my understanding of Judaism would significantly improve if I devoted time to learning in a yeshiva. However, I

dismissed his recommendation as if he were proposing a trip to Mars. I was 27, had a full-time job, and was out on bail while still facing a substantial amount of jail time. To top it all off, I had no clue what a yeshiva actually was. As I began to appreciate and enjoy learning Torah more, I realized how nice it would be to be in a place where I could focus on my learning all day. What I found even more attractive was the opportunity to be in the company of individuals who shared a similar level of dedication and focus. It also didn't hurt that my parents wouldn't have to drive me to my learning sessions with my rabbi anymore, as I was beginning to feel like a five-year-old kid being dropped off at kindergarten.

In the summer of 2008, I resolved to enroll in a yeshiva, reflecting on the irony of my situation, given that I had not completed my college education. I had found the final calculus course overwhelming, resulting in my departure from school just a few credits shy of obtaining my diploma. During my time in college, I achieved a perfect 4.0 GPA in one semester, and I took pride in displaying the certificate on my refrigerator. This served as a reminder to counter any potential criticism from my parents regarding my aversion to formal education, allowing me to pontificate on my "semester of achievement." I was now enrolling back in a place of learning, but it didn't feel like a chore this time, and I was actually quite excited.

My rabbi recommended a yeshiva in Monsey, New York, which in itself was quite interesting. Imagine a nice rural town in the suburbs of New York, packed with tens of thousands of ultra-observant Jews, many dressed daily in black hats and suits. This almost seemed like an adventure to me, and I just decided at

some point it was time to take the plunge. I felt as if the stars were aligning in my life; my openness to returning to a learning system just felt like the right thing to do.

The learning at the yeshiva was memorable, especially the teachings from the rabbi that I could relate to the most, as he too had not grown up observant. I used to go to his home for Shabbos each week, and the joy of spending meals with people who personified what a Jewish family should be was truly a joy for my soul. It was during gatherings at his home, amongst so many other Shabbos meals with local families, that I began crystallizing an even better focus for what I wanted out of life. That aspect of being in yeshiva was undoubtedly the most significant for me, and I will forever treasure the friendships and memories I was fortunate enough to experience.

What was so fascinating about yeshiva was being around 100 other young adults, all of whom took time out of their lives to learn what it meant to be Jewish. Each of us came from varying degrees of observance and knowledge, but the tie that bound us all together was an insatiable thirst to learn more about what Judaism embodies and teaches. My story was far more dramatic than that of the other people I came into contact with, but in actuality, it made their journeys that much more impressive to me. The car chase, which transformed my life significantly, forcibly brought me back to reality. For my classmates, the time felt right to research their heritage. Some came from colleges that had terrific Jewish programs that turned them onto Torah; others knew a friend who gained so many valuable life skills by going to yeshiva, and still others came just out of pure curiosity. Each person was seeking something special, as no one winds

up in yeshiva to pass the time.

My roommates were my two closest friends from yeshiva, and their backgrounds represented two vastly different motivations for attending. One was robbed at gunpoint while employed by a gold trading firm, and he vowed to G-d that if he survived the incident, he would attend yeshiva. The other was positively influenced by his older sister, who recently embraced a Torah-observant lifestyle. Initially resistant to her changes, he eventually recognized that he too might be overlooking something meaningful. Everyone else typically fell somewhere in between, but each seemed to appreciate how seemingly insignificant events in their past propelled them to where they were now. It was so special being in an environment that encouraged not just growth in our Jewish knowledge, but in every aspect of our lives as well.

This was the singular occasion in my life when I can genuinely assert that I dedicated myself entirely to achieving my goals. I gained extensive knowledge about Judaism by attending daily lectures, diligently exploring the books in the yeshiva library, and engaging in group studies with my peers. The other students exhibited a wide range of abilities and personalities, akin to those found in any university setting. There were athletic individuals, extroverted personalities, intellectual thinkers, and those with a hilarious sense of humor. Thankfully, the trivial distinctions that often divide individuals from elementary school through higher education didn't exist in our yeshiva setting. We all shared a common desire to deepen our understanding of the unique aspects of being Jewish, and the shared experience of this journey rendered our differences

insignificant. I believe we all fostered a profound sense of appreciation and respect for one another, particularly given our individual motivations for enrolling.

My time in yeshiva was truly one of the greatest periods in my life; the immense knowledge I gained paled when compared to the growth I experienced. Most of what I understand about Judaism came from the time I spent studying and observing in a yeshiva. Most Jews will never get to experience what I did: the ability to take time out of life to actually learn about life itself. Judaism really is the foundation of our existence, wrapped in customs, laws, holidays, and education. It always saddens me to think how many Jews could gain so much priceless wisdom and perspective by setting aside minimal time daily to learn about what makes them special for being Jewish. Knowing this isn't realistic for some, I vowed when I left yeshiva that I would do my part to spread Judaism to my brethren, hoping maybe they could glean some of the knowledge and understanding as I did.

Twenty-Seven

The Same Ole' Me



Ironically, I have always been hesitant to take medication due to my concern about losing my personality. I take pride in my sense of humor, and the idea of transforming into a medicated automaton was unbearable. I'm sure many expected a transformation when I embraced religion, and for a time, I feared they might be correct. Regrettably, individuals undergoing significant life changes often experience a profound transformation that doesn't reflect their true selves. However, I made a concerted effort to prevent this. I remain the same affable individual I was before my Torah observance; I have simply altered my approach to engaging with others and, most significantly, with myself.

Many kids in my yeshiva pretended their old lives never existed. I don't think that's healthy, as blocking out the past makes it difficult to learn from it. Everything in life happens for a

reason, and by denying a significant portion of your past, you block out valuable life lessons essential for the present. For instance, I once enjoyed being the life of the party, but for all the wrong reasons. I loved being the center of attention, a craving I indulged whenever possible. I still like making those around me laugh; it's just who I am, but now the laughter isn't there to fill a gaping void. Other elements of my personality never needed changing, only redirection—a skill I'm learning to master more each day.

Judaism teaches that virtually every character trait can be positive, even if commonly perceived as negative. Part of life's goal is to identify one's strengths and weaknesses, and learning what Judaism embodies has made it much easier to search within myself for these traits. I found many aspects of my previous life that I could build on, and that was my starting point. I aimed to avoid transforming into a completely different person, unrecognizable to my family and friends. Instead, I began cultivating the positive traits of my character that had been suppressed for most of my life. The hardest thing for most people is to search their souls, to truly examine themselves with a magnifying glass to see who they are. This was the first step of my journey: realizing I had nothing to fear from finally taking a hard look at my inner self.

Jewish law provides detailed guidance on our conduct. While some may view it as restrictive, I find it refreshing to have clear direction for the right course of action. The most rewarding aspect of performing a mitzvah is the positive feeling it brings. Just as one feels satisfaction from achieving a high score on a test or receiving recognition on a sports team, there is immense

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joy in giving to charity, treating fellow Jews with respect, and fulfilling the desires of G-d.

Each individual possesses unique traits and qualities, some of which may remain unexpressed. Through my exploration of Judaism and my efforts to amend detrimental habits, I came to understand that I was not the malevolent being I had perceived myself to be. Rather, I was merely a misguided individual who had made poor decisions, and I recognized that with dedication, I could make better choices. The process of self-reconstruction compelled me to set aside my ego and acknowledge that truly resilient individuals embrace change, while weaker ones remain apprehensive. Although I was still not fond of many aspects of my character, I discovered powerful and positive attributes that began minimizing this discomfort.

Regrettably, individuals often spend a significant portion of their lives desiring to be someone else, failing to recognize their own unique value. Many aspire to be taller, slimmer, or more athletic; yet how many truly acknowledge the remarkable attributes they possess? We spend an inordinate amount of time thinking about how much better life would be if we were a certain celebrity or athlete, forgetting the immense value we possess within ourselves. For me, the most crucial aspect of self-reflection was embracing my positive characteristics. During self-reflection, I uncovered beautiful, prideful qualities, hidden by years of substance abuse and discontent. Judaism teaches that G-d endows us all with specific traits that contribute to our life's purpose. It was quite shocking to realize that many traits of my character, which I previously thought were obstacles, could in fact be quite beneficial.

We all inhabit this world for a finite number of years, presenting our sole opportunity to grow and draw nearer to God. Unfortunately, many of us squander nearly every moment, wishing we could become something we're not. Embracing a more observant Jewish lifestyle did not entail discarding my former self in favor of a 'righteous' persona. I see the same face in the mirror as before, albeit a more refined and purified version. While I have not yet reached the level of righteousness I aspire to, I am genuinely appreciating the journey of growth. I am still the same person who once indulged in excessive drug use at fraternity gatherings, faced expulsion from high school classes, and binged countless hours of cartoons. However, I now possess a greater appreciation for life and its intended purpose. Ultimately, this encapsulates the essence of Judaism, our foundation and guidance for maximizing our existence.

Twenty-Eight

Where's the Fun At?



When I started becoming more entrenched in an observant Jewish community in Atlanta after my police chase, I realized how little “fun” the Judaism I grew up with offered. Let’s be honest, when you’re not an observant Jew, Judaism is something like this: two tortuous days in synagogue for Rosh Hashanah, fasting on Yom Kippur, a drawn-out Passover Seder, and maybe having to eat nasty-tasting “Jew crackers” for a week instead of real bread. Okay, so we’ll throw in Chanukkah to even things out, perhaps you received some nice presents to offset the equation. Boredom filled even the most significant occasion in a Jewish individual’s early life, the Bar or Bat Mitzvah.

You spend months preparing to chant words in a language you don’t understand, from a book you’ve hardly ever read, just to appease your parents, who more than likely experienced the same scenario in their own lives. In the end, you hoped your

friends gave you lots of cash, and that, with the Big Day over, you wouldn't have to return to the synagogue for Friday night services ever again. I'm sure many of you reading this may have held similar beliefs during your upbringing, but this perspective stems primarily from a lack of exposure to Judaism's genuine beauty.

We are missing out on so many amazing things in Judaism because of how most of us view it in modern times. It's sad that the few aspects non-observant Jews have preserved in Judaism are those that are, on the surface, the least exciting. Sitting through synagogue services when you don't know what's going on, can barely read Hebrew, and are thinking of everything you're missing out on is not a conducive way for a Jew to become passionate about their heritage. If Yom Kippur is the worst day of the year for you because you're bored and hungry all day, what are the chances you'll want to do anything else that's Jewish? How can a person get excited for Passover if they spend the entire month before dreading the lack of bread for a week? These are critical questions we need to ask ourselves as Jews because we are clearly not viewing Judaism as it should be viewed.

I trust you can appreciate the humor in this, dear reader. How is it that those who possess the least knowledge and understanding of Judaism often find themselves entangled in aspects of our culture that repel them the most? I often thought about this irony while I was exploring Judaism at yeshiva. I found myself equally enthusiastic about reading a new book as I was about cherished Alabama football games. In no time, I began looking forward to Shabbos at my rabbi's house with

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the same enthusiasm I previously reserved for evenings spent at bars. Even more surprising was the realization that Judaism, which I previously perceived as tedious, was not, in fact, an unending source of monotony.

As a kid, I thought Halloween was the greatest day of the year, but that was only because I had never experienced a real Purim. The only thing I ever really did on Purim was try to eat a hamantaschen (if I was feeling especially religious, I'd have two hamantaschen) because that was all I really associated with the day. I was unaware this day represents the pinnacle of excitement in the Jewish calendar, and I was even more astonished to discover that many aspects I cherished about Halloween also originated from this holiday.

Purim in Monsey was an unforgettable experience that had a profound impact on my life. I was in a quaint town that literally became a sea of costumes, festivity, and joy. Like everything else in Judaism, I came to see the deeper meaning behind the day through the customs associated with it. Many of these customs demand sharing the day with others, whether by sending gifts to a minimum number of people or fulfilling the commandment to eat a festive meal with those around us. It was further proof that there is not a trace of aimless fun in Judaism because everything we do is infused with holiness.

Sadly, we also miss out on Shemini Atzeres (Simchas Torah) as non-observant children. Sure, we might realize the Torah has concluded for the year, but we don't really get to see how it's truly meant to be celebrated. The festivities surrounding that day are truly a sight to behold. You'll see holy rabbis dancing

with Torahs in their arms, kids running around shul trying to catch thrown candy, l'chaims that put everyone in an even more festive mood, and a strong sense of community togetherness—all aspects that make the day stand out. I sit in shul every year now with pure amazement that I was fortunate enough to rediscover things in Judaism that I either saw as bland and uninteresting, or, sadly, never knew existed at all.

I could write volumes of books on the amazing and enjoyable customs of Judaism, but my goal is just to be a one-hit wonder, like Don McLean's song "American Pie." I can't stress enough how much excitement many Jews are missing in their own culture. We know more about Easter egg hunts and Christmas trees than we do about our own amazing traditions. That's as ridiculous as knowing your rival team's cheer, but not your own. Isn't it a shame that we know exactly when Christian holidays fall on the calendar and the customs involved in their celebrations, yet are so clueless about our own holidays? Each holiday imbues Judaism with so much depth and wisdom that it takes a lifetime to even scratch the surface. The more you see the days for what they truly are, the more you can turn even a long Passover Seder into something you treasure every year. The goal of this book is just to open your eyes to the beauty right at your fingertips.

Go to an Orthodox shul for Purim this year, check out a Shemini Atzeres celebration, and look into why we light Chanukkah candles. I know many of you do a lot of Jewish things during the year, but there is so much more to be experienced that could give you a deeper appreciation of what Judaism truly is. If our faith appears unremarkable and dull for you, please understand

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Judaism is not to blame. The true issue lies in a deficiency in understanding our traditions, which is something one can easily address. Life starts with the simple understanding that the foundation of being Jewish, and everything Judaism entails, lies in our Torah and sacred texts.

Twenty-Nine

Niddah 'Nother Look at This One



I was constantly uncovering new pearls of wisdom during my learning, and each day brought a different discovery that explained more about some customs of Judaism. My understanding of Judaism was constantly changing, painted on a canvas of unwavering respect and admiration. Each law I tackled was a world unto itself; I ceased seeing them as restrictions and started appreciating the inner beauty they bring to our lives. Some seemed quite logical, others required more thought and effort to understand because they appeared to contradict everything I had grown accustomed to. None of these drew my attention more than the Niddah (family purity) laws that observant Jewish families cherish so dearly.

Before hitting rock bottom, my life was consumed by lust;

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satisfying primal desires was the root cause of pretty much everything I did. I concentrated on obtaining whatever I desired, whenever I wished. It didn't matter if it was a beautiful girl, a juicy steak, a new golf club, or a flashy car. I know I wasn't alone in this futile endeavor, as Western culture glorifies this type of selfish behavior. The main area of my life where this weakness manifested itself was in my drug use, which became a bottomless pit, sucking me into the hell that had consumed millions of others. Upon comparing my previous perspective on women with the family purity laws in Judaism, it became clear how opposite my views on desire were from the righteous standards prescribed by Judaism.

Without delving into excessive detail, the fundamental aspects of the law I wish to address are these: We all know that women menstruate at a certain time during the month, and most couples, regardless of observance, refrain from having relations during this part of the woman's cycle. Jewish law doesn't stop there; it takes the separation a step further. Not only are relations forbidden during the five-day period after the woman gets her period, but the entire week after that five-day period is also prohibited for physical intimacy. I'm not just talking about sexual intercourse; I'm talking about even the slightest bit of touching. No hugs, no kisses, no holding hands, nor any other physical contact is permitted for that entire period, roughly 12 days per month. I know it sounds crazy, because I thought exactly the same thing when I first learned about Niddah Laws. However, you need to go a little deeper to discover the beauty and wisdom of this special aspect of Judaism.

Imagine how happy you would be when the one you love returns from a 12-day trip to a foreign country. You've been longing for him or her the entire time they're gone, constantly thinking of that special moment when you will be together again. When he or she finally gets back, your reunion will be pure bliss, practically as if you were newlyweds again. Observant Jews enjoy this sensation every month; it's a law designed by G-d that ensures an essential component for a thriving marriage is inherently present from the very beginning. Each month, the couple takes a 12-day physical vacation and gives deference to the spiritual and emotional side of the relationship.

When you're starting a long-term relationship, you can usually talk to your significant other for hours over the phone. After a while, and especially after you get married, you might find that at some point there isn't as much to talk about. Even more than just making the sex better (but don't discount that part), the laws of family purity force a couple to maintain the ability to engage each other emotionally and spiritually, to show affection for each other in ways that aren't strictly physical. So now, instead of sex being used to mask a lack of communication in the relationship, it will actually come to enhance your connection to each other. That's the genuine beauty of the Niddah Laws; it takes one of the most animalistic things we do and transforms it into a holy mitzvah.

When the woman's 12 days are over, she immerses in a ritual bath known as the mikvah, and husband and wife are then required to have relations that night. For individuals who believe that Judaism is based on rejecting pleasure, my previous

Niddah Nother Look at This One

statement may be surprising. That's right, my fellow Jews, the couple is required to have relations; it's not just a mere suggestion. For my feminist readers, you might also be interested to learn that the husband has a biblical obligation to satisfy his wife sexually. I was stunned when I started learning about family purity laws, and was even more shocked to find how much they appealed to my common sense. Around 18 days a month, a couple can enjoy the physical side of the marriage and all the joy it brings to a relationship. Subsequently, there is a short intermission to rejuvenate, to engage on a more profound level, and to appreciate the other qualities of your beloved.

No other mitzvah I have encountered has made the contrast between my previous life and my current life appear so profoundly distinct. What would have been abhorrent to me a few years ago, I now see as the most divine and powerful aspect of Judaism. Upon initially discovering this, I felt a slight tinge of regret for altering my life for something that appeared so irrational; the very thing I once desired constantly would now become a prohibited aspect of my month. However, it's impossible not to see the beauty in this aspect of Judaism, a built-in mechanism that is supposed to make each month of a marriage as fresh as the very first one. With all the failed marriages and relationship disasters that we encounter in modern times, the very low rate of divorce in the Orthodox world is a reflection on Judaism that we should be proud of. The best marriage counselor of all is G-d, and He was kind enough to put the deepest wisdom into our Torah not to confine us, but to truly help and elevate us.

Thirty

Welcome to the Team



Judaism's approach to proselytization is distinctive: it not only refrains from seeking converts but strictly forbids Jews from attempting to persuade individuals of other faiths to convert. This stands in stark contrast to Christianity and Islam, both widely known for actively spreading their ideologies globally, sometimes even by force. Should a non-Jew wish to convert to Judaism, the desire must originate from within, and the individual must be absolutely certain of their decision. Furthermore, a rabbi is obligated to discourage a potential convert, offering a brutally honest assessment of its demands and the expectations of Judaism. Thousands of non-Jews have converted to Judaism via Orthodox standards, which, logically speaking, represents the only legitimate path.

While many may view that statement with contempt, consider this: how can a rabbi legitimately convert someone to Judaism

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if they do not observe Shabbos, kashrus, or many other fundamental laws? This would be akin to a first-year medical student issuing medical school diplomas, thereby “creating” the next generation of brain surgeons. Few would consider such a diploma viable, or the “doctor” issuing it legitimate.

For those not born Jewish, discovering Judaism later in life is an immensely meaningful and profound experience. Many sacrifice everything to embrace a new life of spirituality—and I mean everything. Yet, for me, this also carries a distinct sadness, a troubling reality that frequently plagues me: Why do these non-Jews perceive such wisdom and spirituality in Judaism, while millions of my brethren do not? It was through conversations with many of these converts that I truly grasped the pride and gratitude I should feel for having been born Jewish. What some relinquished or lost, simply to live by G-d’s truth, was nothing short of inspiring. I admired their courage and determination and sought to use their stories as fuel for my own spiritual growth. How could I, as a Jew, possibly fail to give my religion the utmost attention when so many gentiles sacrificed so much to embrace it?

Accounts of individuals entirely excluded from their families and friends, evicted from their homes, and cast out from their communities evoked profound feelings of guilt within me. For 27 years, I had overlooked Judaism, lacking any desire to investigate the factors contributing to my Jewish identity. My pride in being Jewish had never been directed toward its true purpose. Interacting with converts led me to reflect on the possibilities that could have arisen had I devoted myself to Judaism earlier in life. I reflected on my wasteful college

days, when I was content simply to join a Jewish fraternity without truly understanding why. There is nothing worse than untapped potential, and this was the sinking feeling I experienced when surrounded by such extraordinary converts.

A crucial element of life is harnessing regret to one's advantage, as wallowing in sorrow is neither healthy nor productive. I refused to allow feelings of loss or shame to hinder my progress; instead, I aimed to transform my experiences into a source of positivity. Surrounding myself with inspiring individuals inevitably propels one forward, and forming friendships with these converts would ensure I always appreciated the unique significance of being Jewish. This, in turn, further ignited my passion to share the beauty of Judaism with my fellow Jews, hoping to inspire them to explore our heritage through reading books or attending lectures.

I believe Jews would find great interest in the stories I encountered, and I am confident these narratives would significantly impact them. For instance: a man whose mother declared him dead to her after he embraced Judaism; a congregation in Texas that transitioned to Judaism after their pastor delved deeper into its teachings; an individual who transformed their lifestyle after discovering a distant Jewish ancestor; a preacher whose entire family resolved that Judaism was the path to follow; and a young woman who sought meaning in various religions but ultimately found it solely in Judaism. Each of these offers a true and inspiring glimpse into the lives of people who overcame immense hurdles to come closer to G-d.

For my Jewish reader, my hope is that this section enriches

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your perspective on Judaism. My intention is not to cause discomfort or shame, but rather to illuminate the profound beauty and significance of the heritage into which you were born. We received the gift of a life so pure and powerful, and it is worth the time to investigate why this is so. Through my Jewish outreach work on Facebook, I have encountered hundreds of people who would give anything to convert to Judaism but currently lack the means. Recently, I spoke to a young woman who expressed feeling no connection to anything in this world other than the beauty of Judaism. She plans on converting, but financial issues currently make it impossible. Unable to move to a community that could support her through the process, her heart is breaking. I hear stories like this constantly, and then I observe what much of the Jewish world has become, neglecting its heritage. It is truly a heartbreaking tragedy that so many from the outside wish to join us, yet most of us refuse to appreciate how special it is to be Jewish.

Thirty-One

The Beauty of Charity



My favorite night of the week in college was Thursday, and that thankfully didn't change when I went to yeshiva. Thursday was the quintessential night for partying during my college years, and I relished the idea of heading out to the bars while the majority remained at home engrossed in their studies. Though the source of my excitement was unclear, it was undeniably exhilarating. Thursdays signaled the onset of a weekend filled with indulgence, but in yeshiva, the evening held an entirely different significance. Thursdays in the Jewish world of Monsey, New York, still evoke anticipation, but now it's the excitement of knowing another Shabbos is right around the corner.

Tomchei Shabbos (Supporters of the Sabbath) is a religious organization in America dedicated to feeding less fortunate families for Shabbat. I volunteered with this organization on

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my first Thursday night in yeshiva, and it made an impression on me that will last forever. My fellow students and I piled into a big white cargo van the yeshiva often used for outings, and we drove about 15 minutes to the Tomchei Shabbos facility. Everyone was excited about what we were going to do, but at that point, I didn't yet understand how anyone could be so exuberant about doing volunteer work.

As we pulled up to the warehouse, I saw dozens of Jewish men with kippahs and tzitzis standing outside the building, each engaged in their assigned tasks; the same scene repeated itself inside. What seemed like a disorganized frenzy of activity was actually a meticulously engineered system guaranteeing the maximum number of finished packages in the shortest possible time. There were teams of men placing fruit into plastic bags, sorting through boxes of challahs, separating containers of grape juice, and throwing out all the trash. Each task was part of the overall plan, ensuring those in need in the area would get the same wonderful Shabbos experience we cherished. A box, carefully packed with all the Shabbos necessities a Jewish family might need, was sealed and labeled with the recipient's name. It didn't take long for me to appreciate the beauty of the scene unfolding before me, and even less time to feel fortunate to be volunteering with my peers.

I wasn't the only one whose heart stirred there. You could tell by the look on everyone's faces that the experience was equally wonderful for them. We were all united in helping our fellow Jews, and we were all cherishing every moment of this special mitzvah. Unlike my old, wasted Thursday nights, this time I knew my actions would have a real impact on someone's life

other than my own. Helping the less fortunate truly warmed my heart, and this became something I eagerly looked forward to each week. Fathers brought their young sons, grandfathers their grandchildren, brothers came together, and friends brought friends; it was truly a remarkable experience. I realized that in these precious hours each week, we were embodying our highest teachings and values in Judaism, and I felt so privileged to be a part of it.

The most affecting aspect was watching the teenagers diligently complete their tasks each week. In a society where many youth seem adrift, seeing these teenagers consistently apply themselves with such dedication really impressed me. What was even more special was watching a teenager teach his younger brothers how to neatly and efficiently pack items into a bag, or how to properly tape up a box. It was a tradition passed down from sibling to sibling, and everyone was eager to contribute. In reality, I believe those volunteering in this great mitzvah benefited even more than the recipients. Food is transient, but the impact this had on our souls remains for a lifetime.

On those nights, I looked back on my old life with disgust and guilt. Years of wasted nights chasing fleeting pleasures, while others were giving of themselves for a higher cause. Guilt, when internalized correctly, can be a powerful motivator, and that's what I strived for every Thursday. It felt like I was making up for lost time, soaking up as much as I could from my new experiences. People spend so much time planning for the future or regretting their past that they don't even seem to appreciate living in the now. I was determined that each week at Tomchei Shabbos, I would make an imprint on my soul, driving me

The Beauty of Charity

forward and ensuring I would never return to a life where Thursday nights meant nothing more than a bar tab and a wicked hangover.

Thirty-Two

Déjà Vu All Over Again



I realized the extent of my personal growth on the day the yeshiva requested my permanent departure. I had recently created a Jewish outreach website, and its content was not well-received. We held differing approaches to spreading the beauty of our holy Torah to fellow Jews, and ultimately, there is no definitive opinion on the matter. Having lived a non-observant lifestyle for most of my life, I felt compelled to connect with others who once shared my perspective on Judaism. It's always easier to hear life lessons from someone who has been in your shoes. I had an underlying awareness that my website would not meet the yeshiva's approval; however, I believed it was a necessary endeavor and was prepared to face any repercussions.

I was called into the office to meet with the Rosh Yeshiva (literally “yeshiva head,” the top administrator and lead rabbi). He told me that my site's content was too radical for their

Déjà Vu All Over Again

ideology and that they wanted me to leave immediately. I didn't appreciate the manner in which it was done, but I never asked them for permission to create the website, so I completely understood. Many of the rabbis at the yeshiva expressed shock at the abruptness of my departure because they had truly enjoyed the passionate honesty of my website. I accepted my fate respectfully; no yelling or arguing ensued. They had every right to ask me to leave, and I was perfectly content with starting the next phase of my journey outside of yeshiva.

This might not seem like such a big deal, but it really had the potential to derail all my progress. A few years earlier, I was told not to return to the drug rehab center I attended because I had the audacity to tell the staff that I felt they were treating a girl there poorly. After lengthy meetings with my parents, they admitted that the way they handled my expulsion was totally wrong, but the damage had already been done. I put my trust and faith in people who let me down at a time in my life when I wasn't strong enough to handle it. Within a few weeks, my entire support system broke down, and it was only a matter of time before I started doing cocaine again. As I was packing up my dorm room at yeshiva, I thought about the similarities between my current situation and what had happened in rehab. I realized then that I was in a completely different place from before, and this incident would not destroy me like the previous one had.

When I called my parents to tell them I was no longer enrolled at the yeshiva, I could tell by the tone of their voices that they were deeply concerned. I calmly reassured them both that I was perfectly fine and that everything was under control. For the

first time in a long time, I sensed the trust in their voices. It was a big disappointment to be thrown out of a yeshiva in the manner I was. I had been there for so long, worked so hard, and become so close to many of the rabbis teaching there. However, instead of reverting to the “old me” and blaming others, I realized that the blame was squarely on my shoulders for not being more forthcoming with my plans for my website.

Accountability is one of the most valuable lessons I’ve learned from Judaism. Sadly, it’s a characteristic so lacking in modern times. People are always looking to pass the buck and shirk responsibility for mistakes and failures. In the past, I would consistently blame others for my own actions and choices in life, which was a character flaw that may have plagued me more than any other. It is undeniable that specific individuals or occurrences can adversely affect a person’s life; however, ultimately, the choice of how to react to these situations rests solely with the individual. A huge part of my growth was accepting responsibility for my own choices and realizing which things I had the power to control and what was beyond my control. Ultimately, one cannot alter others, only oneself, and this understanding marked a significant turning point in my personal growth.

The thing I’m most proud of from this incident was not letting the way my yeshiva experience ended affect all the positive things I’d learned there. I used to be someone who would focus too much on the negative, letting one person or occurrence tarnish the whole. Ending my studies in this manner was disappointing, but I didn’t let it ruin the memorable times experienced there. Given the modern obsession with excuses,

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many people might have let this sever their connection to Judaism in similar circumstances. I tried to see the complete picture, and I realized that my days in yeshiva were probably the best I ever spent. Focusing on the good in life is a way we can ease many of its troubles, and I experienced this firsthand with my expulsion. My greatest fulfillment, however, was the realization that history does not need to repeat itself if one takes measures to prevent it. I left this yeshiva a better Jew and a better man, and I'm eternally grateful for the special moments there that I will always cherish.

V

*TRUTH AND
CONSEQUENCES—MY
GET OUT OF JAIL
(ALMOST) FREE CARD*

Thirty-Three

Swords Hanging Over My Head



After a car chase, I was released from jail in January 2008, having posted bail like any other arrested criminal. The bail bondsman warned me to do nothing that would send me back, and for once in my life, this felt like advice worth taking. The first few days out of jail were surreal; I felt as if I were floating in limbo—partly free again, yet partly confined by my new reality. Uncertain about the future, I nonetheless felt fortunate to be alive and recognized a renewed opportunity for life.

The no-nonsense lawyer I hired was from the town where I had been incarcerated, and he knew the local system backward and forward. I had hoped for some reassuring words—anything to ease the fear and uncertainty that gripped me in the days following the incident. Those words remained unspoken; instead, he unequivocally stated that I was in significant trouble and a severe consequence was likely. In our first meeting after

my release, I finally heard the list of criminal charges against me. It seemed to go on forever, one felony after another, each recited as I sat in his office in a daze.

If I remember correctly, the total count was 16 felonies—about 15 more than needed to ruin my life forever. I used to think that weaving was an interesting arts and crafts project, but I quickly learned that it was also a felony when done at 95 miles per hour on a quiet side street in northern Georgia. A few days earlier, while I was still in jail, he had told me his expectation was a sentence of one year. Nothing had changed in his outlook; after hearing all the charges, I now understood why. A year doesn't sound like a long time until you've actually spent a night in jail. The thought of so much jail time was a constant stress, but I realized my only option was to turn my character around and embrace this as a life-changing experience.

He echoed the bondsman's speech, hammering home the point that my old life was over and a new one was beginning. He said my life needed to be spent at work, staying home, and keeping away from potential trouble. To be honest, this new life didn't seem so horrible to me; I knew it would give me the necessary space to reflect on all that had happened and where I wanted my life to go. For months before I enrolled at yeshiva, this was my routine: I worked to pay my lawyer, and the rest of the time I spent at home trying to learn more about Judaism. The best part about my new life was that I truly had no opportunity to slink back into my old one. I had no money, no car, and no friends. That was exactly the situation I needed, as it was the most conducive way for me to revolutionize my life.

Swords Hanging Over My Head

The major charge I faced was assault with a deadly weapon on a police officer, my vehicle being the alleged weapon. This baffled me from the outset because I was driving away from the police at high speeds, not towards them. I also never attempted to ram them with my car; in fact, they had rammed me. My lawyer assured me that in situations like this, prosecutors throw the proverbial “kitchen sink” of criminal charges at you, hoping at least some will stick and lead to convictions. After reading the list of charges against me, I agreed with him; it seemed like they charged me with everything other than sneezing.

The lawyer was most concerned with the assault charge, which carried a maximum sentence of 15-30 years and a minimum of five. Upon hearing this shocking news, I went looking for the nearest hole to crawl into and cry. I experienced a slight sense of relief upon discovering that the five-year sentence could be reduced to probation, avoiding incarceration. However, the prospect of enduring this distressing situation for such an extended period remained deeply troubling. Until my final sentencing, I lived each day not knowing what was to come, and in the end, that uncertainty was its own punishment.

Living under a lingering cloud of doubt takes its toll. I requested my attorney seek an extension of the case, hoping to demonstrate my reform and improve my life. He assured me he would do his best but warned me that my trial could be scheduled at any time. I lived every day dreading that phone call from the lawyer telling me it was time to face the music, but thankfully it took a while for that call to materialize.

The more I learned about Judaism, the more I realized how

many things in our lives are beyond our control. We harbor a false illusion that we are the kings of the castle, but a closer look at reality tells a different tale. Millions of cigarette smokers live long lives, while many health fanatics die young. Many foolish business owners strike it rich, while smart ones go broke. The list is almost endless, but the underlying theme is consistent: most results are not under our own control. In a way, it was comforting to know that the outcome of my court case did not solely depend on me. If I thought that my case hinged only on my own actions and I still received a harsh sentence, that would have been quite damaging to my psyche. I resolved to do my utmost with whatever was within my control, ensuring I would never look back and wonder what could have been.

Judaism teaches that we all must do our hishtadlus—put in our best effort—and the rest is then out of our hands. I did everything I could to turn my life around, and I was proud of all my achievements. Rebuilding myself from the inside out, knowing that I had so much untapped potential waiting to be unleashed, was very rewarding. I also knew that my efforts were no guarantee of a smooth exit from the mess I had caused. It was a large part of the equation, but not the entirety of it. In the end, I wasn't changing who I was to potentially evade a jail sentence; I was changing for peace of mind, satisfaction, and contentment. Change for any other reason is worthless; it must come from within and be genuinely meaningful to effect a real and lasting difference. Obviously, in the back of my mind, I hoped the court would see my improvement and take it into account when punishing me. Yet, even if that wasn't to be the case, my turnaround in life was reward enough.

Swords Hanging Over My Head

After months of change and growth, I came to peace with the potential outcomes of my court case. I realized I had done everything in my power to show the courts that I didn't need prison to reform me, because a deep connection to the Torah had already done so. However, that peace of mind didn't dampen the excitement I felt when, in May 2009, my father informed me of the dismissal of assault charges due to insufficient evidence. I guess the prosecution also realized it would be tough to charge me with assault using my car, considering I was fleeing from the police. Even better news followed: my father told me that the litany of felonies had all been reduced to misdemeanors. Legally, the difference between felonies and misdemeanors is like the difference between a large wedding cake and a cupcake. Though Chanukkah comes later in the year, it sure felt like I unwrapped a few of those presents on that sunny day in May.

I immediately called my lawyer to thank him for whatever he did to lessen my charges, and his response was quite amusing. He informed me that the District Attorney had contacted him to convey the dismissal of the charges. He said he had absolutely nothing to do with this decision; his exact words were, "It came out of the blue." I took this as a hint from G-d that my thanks should, naturally, be directed Heavenward. We say things in life without actually knowing what they mean. "Out of the blue" clearly means from the blue sky of Heaven. While others gave me a long list of potential factors causing the dropped charges, I knew Who was truly responsible.

After 17 months of waiting, hoping, and praying for my efforts to bear fruit, things were finally paying off. As my lawyer said,

we won the war, but there were still battles to be fought. He encouraged me to continue with my studies and to focus on bettering myself. The next few months would be another period of waiting before my ultimate fate was determined, but after this incredible turn of events in my case, the stress was easier to shoulder.

Thirty-Four

Judgment Day



The terms of my court settlement were just sinking in when a huge smile spread across my face. What had seemed like a bleak ordeal nearly two years earlier was now about to end with an unexpected twist. In September 2009, my lawyer faxed me the official plea agreement as I was leaving for my rabbi's house to celebrate my last Shabbos in town before returning to New York. The long, torturous prison term I had initially feared transformed into a mere two-week sentence; with good behavior, I would only serve half. A potentially crippling fine became just a few thousand dollars in penalties. What I feared would be burdensome probation turned out to be only two years of mild discomfort. As my lawyer said, "You agree to this now and you fax it back to me before they change their mind." His tone was all I needed to hear before I accepted the deal—the sweetest deal I'd ever seen.

I had dodged a massive bullet, and I knew that while my efforts were admirable, G-d was ultimately responsible. My appreciation was so immense that I almost felt ashamed to be the recipient of such unbelievable kindness. "Thankful" isn't even the word to describe the emotions that flooded my thoughts. I had gone from near-death to imminent freedom through a string of fortuitous circumstances that, to this day, still seem almost incomprehensible to me. I had hit a new low in my life that night on the streets of Georgia, never thinking I would recover from the horrifying situation I had put myself in two years earlier. However, the following week I learned there was a catch: the judge did not have to accept the plea deal, as it was merely a suggestion for his consideration. So, the waiting would continue for another two months.

The day of my court case was actually less daunting than I thought it would be, and I remain at a loss to explain why. I slept like a baby the night before, knowing it would be my last time in a comfortable bed for at least a week. The sentence wasn't long, but a full week of confinement can feel much longer than it seems. One hundred sixty-eight hours of jail time was certainly better than 168 days, but it was still an entire week of my life confined to a cell. I dressed for success on the day of my court case, even though my presence there was the very antithesis of success. My parents were more nervous than I was, and their repeated questions about my nervousness did little to alleviate the tension.

We arrived at the courthouse. I walked in by myself as my parents parked the car, much like being dropped off at school, except I carried prison gear instead of a cool G.I. Joe lunchbox.

Judgment Day

The lobby was bustling, with metal detectors and police officers a prominent feature. I wondered if any of them remembered me from about two years earlier, but realized the kippa and tzitzis I was wearing probably effectively disguised my former self. It wasn't until they asked if I was in court for felonies or misdemeanors that I fully grasped the miracle of the plea deal. The felony section of the courthouse was far more foreboding and tense than the misdemeanor area, and thankfully, I entered the door of the lesser evil.

As we sat in the courtroom waiting for the judge to arrive, my mother again asked if I was nervous. It was then that I recalled a moment of profound serenity, the greatest I had felt in years. It was a true realization that this saga was concluding; I had done all I could to change my life, and the rest was solely up to G-d and out of my hands. The judge finally entered the courtroom, and we all rose, just like on the television court shows I used to watch for laughs (though today's episode didn't seem as humorous to me). My lawyer gave me some last-minute instructions about what to expect, and then it was just a few more minutes of waiting my turn until I walked the plank of life to await my fate.

My turn to appear before the judge arrived, and I walked up there as confident as I had ever been. I could see the bewilderment on his face as the court reporter read my charges, not to mention his quick glances at my kippa and tzitzis, which are about as common in this part of Georgia as a visitor from outer space. It took the woman a few minutes to read aloud all the charges because there were so many. To be honest, it was almost exciting to hear the complete list again; I had almost

forgotten how crazy that night had been. The shocked judge looked at me and asked what I had to say for myself, and in those moments, I captured not only his attention but that of the entire crowd in the courtroom.

An Orthodox Jew in the courtroom already sparked people's curiosity, but hearing my charges was almost as shocking. I calmly explained to the judge exactly what happened that night, my state of mind when committing such an offense, and the true remorse I felt for having done so. It was clear he was curious about me and fascinated by my story. I detailed my transformation, my time in yeshiva, my day-to-day commitment to Judaism, and the values I now cherish. He was just as surprised as many in the room about my journey, and to be honest, I could not have been more proud to share it. The judge asked how I quit cocaine abuse, curious about the treatment program I had entered. My response was that I had not gone to any rehab center, and he was absolutely stunned. He was incredulous about how I had stopped doing cocaine. I answered him confidently, saying, "Your Honor, doing cocaine is a disgrace to Judaism, so I quit, and I haven't done it since that night." That was all he needed to hear from me. He told the prosecutor that he was accepting my plea agreement and was kind enough to wish me good luck in my new life.

After hearing the judge's gavel strike the desk, a wave of relief washed over me. I'll never be able to describe that sense of relief. Almost two years of dreading 'what might be' finally gave way to 'what actually was.' I was spared the harshest fate through my own hard work and even more, Divine mercy. I was perhaps one of the few people ever to be beaming with a

Judgment Day

smile as I was handcuffed and led away from court to start my brief jail sentence. The pride in my parents' eyes was palpable and memorable. I know it sounds ridiculous, given I was being led away in handcuffs before them, but their pride was clear to see. My parents knew how low I had sunk in life and how much effort I had put in to overcome my demons. This was as proud a moment for them as seeing their well-mannered son finally end the nightmare that had almost claimed his life.

The best part about that day in court was the sanctification of Judaism in the eyes of a gentile audience—a true Kiddush Hashem. They saw someone well-mannered, respectful, and remorseful for what he did, a stark contrast to many of the other defendants present that day. It was only after leaving jail a few days later that my mother told me the judge had not accepted the plea deal of the person directly after me, who neglected to take responsibility for driving while high on marijuana. The judge asked him if he thought he should have been driving while abusing drugs, thus endangering everyone around him. The man, for some inexplicable reason, replied that he was confident in his driving abilities. This blatant lack of remorse and responsibility was all the judge needed to hear before sentencing him to jail for a lengthy term. His plea bargain was revoked, and this gave me an even greater appreciation for my adherence to the Torah values of accepting responsibility and verbalizing regret.

Thirty-Five

My New 8x8 Box



My return trip to jail was the opposite experience from my initial stay 22 months earlier. This time, I walked into the county jail with a big smile on my face, instead of battered, blood-stained clothes. Upon my arrival, the warden presented me with a gracious gift, informing me that my one-week sentence had been shortened to four days. I wasn't as fortunate as Lindsay Lohan or Paris Hilton, who always seem to spend a mere hour or two in the slammer, but I certainly wasn't complaining. It definitely beat the 15 to 30 years I was initially facing. Seeing the inside of the jail again brought back vivid flashbacks. It was easy to remember the horror I felt when I sat waiting to be checked in the first time, thinking that my life was officially over. I tried to put those thoughts out of my mind because I wanted to stay in the moment and make the best of

my new four-day vacation.

About an hour earlier, as I left the courtroom, I was handcuffed and taken to the holding cell at the courthouse to await transfer across the street to the county jail. Accompanying me to the holding cell were four imposing police officers, who appeared utterly astonished to encounter their latest detainee wearing a kippa and tzitzis. I had brought everything I needed for jail in a large plastic trash bag, and the police officers started rifling through it on the elevator. They continued until they got to the soft pouch that contained my tefillin. One of them asked me what was inside the bag, and I told him, “long black straps with black boxes,” knowing that would elicit a rather befuddled look on his face. Most true Southerners don’t say the word “what”; it’s more of a “whuh,” and that is exactly the response I received.

I explained to my four new “friends” that while praying in the morning, I was required to put one box of tefillin on my arm and the other around my head. Upon hearing this, they were probably more nervous to be in the elevator with me than I was to be surrounded by them. They were at an absolute loss for words about how to respond. One officer interjected and politely told his three partners that they were simply “phylacteries” that Jews used to pray with, and that he had seen them before. It was sort of amusing watching these four hefty men try to figure out their response to this tiny felt bag that contained my tefillin. It would have made a hilarious scene for a Hollywood comedy or sitcom.

Police officers led me to the holding cell and informed me it was necessary to pat me down. One officer politely asked if I

would remove my kippa so he could check it. The police were incredibly respectful. I not only appreciated their demeanor but also felt good knowing I was showing these gentiles what Judaism embodies. I was polite, humble, and respectful, embodying the ideals of a righteous person from their Old Testament—someone they surely had never seen in person. The best part about this experience was the kosher food they served me in this holding cell. Pasta in a delicious sauce was a great way to begin my jail sentence, especially when I saw that the other inmates in my cell got disgusting food that barely looked edible. An envious inmate inquired about how he could get the same food, so I humorously suggested that he promptly convert to Judaism in order to enjoy similar dining privileges.

Before we boarded the cargo van that would take us to the county jail, they lined us up against the wall to shackle our ankles and arms. I found this unnecessary because there was nothing in this town worth running away to, and I was quite content to go sit in jail for a few days and reflect on my journey. The person standing next to me in line was staring intently, which felt unsettling right before going to jail. However, I could tell he was staring more at my kippa than my green eyes. He looked bewildered and said to me, “You’re a Hebrew?” I let out a brief chuckle, considering no one had ever called me a Hebrew before. While I’d been called some interesting and even horrible names in my life because of my Judaism, I had never been called a “Hebrew”—a term straight from the Bible. I remember thinking then how strange it was that so many people in the world had never truly met a Jew before.

Before we boarded the cargo van that would take us to the county jail, they lined us up against the wall to shackle our ankles and arms. I found the shackling unnecessary; there was nothing in this town worth running away to, and I was quite content to sit in jail for a few days and reflect on my journey. The person standing next to me in line was staring intently, an unsettling experience when you're about to be jailed. However, I could tell he was staring more at my kippa than, say, my green eyes. He looked bewildered and said to me, "You're a Hebrew?" I let out a brief chuckle, as no one had ever called me a Hebrew before. I've been called some pretty interesting, even horrible, names related to my Judaism, but "Hebrew"—a term straight out of the Bible—was a new one. It struck me then how strange it is that many people in the world have honestly never met a Jew.

I told him I was indeed a Hebrew, and he proudly told me he was a preacher in his town. That was surprising, so I asked him what he was in for, and he not so proudly told me statutory rape. I laughed inwardly, knowing that if he were Jewish, thousands would seize upon his transgression as an excuse to dismiss Torah observance. When a similar scandal involves a rabbi, many of our brethren are quick to cast all observant Jews in a negative light. Perhaps this phenomenon doesn't occur to the same extent in the Christian world, as he seemed genuinely in awe of me, unsure what to make of his newfound "Hebrew" friend.

Upon arrival at the jail, the woman at the front desk began rummaging through my belongings. When she reached the tefillin bag and asked what was inside, this time I had my answer

ready. “Ma’am, it’s phylacteries, or as my people call them, tefillin.” Apparently less knowledgeable than a police officer I’d encountered earlier in the elevator, she required me to explain that they were long black straps I needed for prayer. Being in county jail, I understood the inherent concern: a long black strap could be used to strangle an inmate or for self-harm. She told me I couldn’t bring the tefillin into the jail, but I told her permission came from the warden himself. She then warned me not to hang myself. After laughing hysterically, I assured her she didn’t have to worry.

The burly warden emerged from his office to greet me, informing me they were prepared for my stay and had made every preparation to cater to my religious needs. Granted, this wasn’t the Ritz Carlton, but it felt good to know I was being so pampered. Everyone enjoys feeling a little spoiled, don’t they? He then informed me that, as a courtesy, they would place me in solitary confinement so none of the other inmates would distract me, allowing me to observe my faith in peace. Few people are told they are being put in solitary confinement as a courtesy, and even fewer grin from ear to ear upon hearing it. It was yet another random episode in the most bizarre two years of my life.

Being confined in an 8x8 cell is not ideal, but in my case, it actually turned out to be a relief. I had my bunk bed, a toilet, and a sink—truly everything I needed. After 96 hours, this long ordeal would finally be over, and things would begin to wind down. This time, the door slamming behind me didn’t make me feel helpless; I was actually looking forward to four days away from the world. To me, it was like an extended Shabbat. I could

My New 8x8 Box

have gone into the main cell next to mine to watch television with a few of the other inmates, but all I wanted to do was read. I had been given a marvelous opportunity to make the most of my time in jail, and I was determined not to waste it.

On Friday, before Shabbos, I went into the main cell to take my shower and called my father to let him know I was doing well. I got into a discussion with one of the other inmates who saw the kippa on my head. He told me he was now facing 10 years in prison for turning down a plea bargain his lawyer had encouraged him to take, claiming it would prevent him from serving in the army. This reasoning struck me as illogical. While his wish to defend his country was commendable, it was rendered useless by the 10 years of incarceration he now faced. He then told me he believed in the Bible too. Not wanting to get into a philosophical discussion with him about the blatant differences between Judaism and Christianity, I wished him luck and returned to my cell.

My Shabbos in jail was by far the most spiritual I had ever experienced. It truly showed me that a Jew can feel connected to the day no matter where they are or what state of mind they're in. I prayed Friday night service in the confines of my new cell, and then I sat down to make the blessings over the grape juice and the matzah I had brought with me. Some moments in life are inherently spiritually elevating, and this was certainly one of them. It was almost a surreal experience observing such a special Shabbos in my ugly orange jumpsuit and county-issued sandals. I devoted the entire day to reflecting on my experiences from the past few years, and I was inundated with memories that evoked a range of emotions.

Cocaine to Amen

I could have died on January 4, 2008, and as I sit here writing this section years later, I can't help but reflect on how fortunate I truly am. My stint in jail wasn't a punishment for me. It was the culmination of almost two years of intense effort that resulted in the gift of solitude and introspection. G-d is anywhere you want Him to be, and I wanted Him with me in my jail cell. I wanted to thank Him for saving me that night, and for orchestrating a web of events that, in retrospect, were all part of a miraculous transformation. We all have to do our part in this world, but there is always an element of destiny beyond our control. I wanted to tell G-d that I appreciated my ultimate fate in this ordeal — ninety-six hours of serenity in an 8x8, cozy cell.

Thirty-Six

Infusing Holiness Into Life



As I mentioned previously, I sought to learn the fundamentals of Judaism before delving into their deeper meanings. The essence of Judaism is the goal of transforming the physical world and elevating it into something holy. This mission defines every Jew on earth, manifesting itself in fascinating ways. As Jews, we believe in an afterlife, but we also recognize the intrinsic value and necessity of this life. It is a constant struggle for us, as these two aspects often seem separate, yet in reality, they complement each other. Judaism posits that both are inherently linked, asserting that one cannot exist without the other.

If we merely lived in this world, and upon death, it was all finished, then this life would be utterly pointless. So much toil and hardship, only to gain nothing at life's conclusion. If this were so, why would anyone sacrifice to observe the mitzvot of the Torah? Conversely, if everything in life depended on

the next world, then why is it necessary to endure the pain and suffering of this world? Judaism stresses that our conduct in this world dictates our eternal station in the next, a logically sound concept. In virtually every area of life, we see a connection between action and reward, the most obvious example being the proverbial “climbing of the corporate ladder.” People invest endless time and effort into things because they are rewarded either emotionally or financially.

Judaism, in its simplest form, is like a toolbox G-d gave us to build something special and everlasting. We are all imbued with unique character traits and qualities to make this life holy and prepare the soul for the next world. You may or may not believe that as you read this, but after much contemplation, I realized that any alternative not only makes no sense but also renders life a complete waste. This world matters; it’s not a trivial game to be squandered through a frivolous attitude that leads nowhere. If you look at the world today, it becomes quite apparent how many people are squandering their existence. When the highlight of one’s week is “Dancing with the Stars” or the latest Netflix series, it is a guarantee that they are not living life correctly.

The common misconception about observant Jews is that they predominantly focus on eternal life and live like monks in this world. Indeed, a fundamental principle of Judaism is the belief in an afterlife; however, this reward is only achievable through our deeds in this life. Jews are tasked with making the mundane holy, a reality easily witnessed during Shabbat. To experience the lighting of the candles, the recitation of Kiddush over wine, the washing of hands before the meal, and the blessing over

Infusing Holiness Into Life

challah — these are all elements that elevate the ordinary to holiness.

We take basic physical things and use them in ways that bring us closer to G-d. When we make a blessing over wine, it ceases to be mere wine; it becomes a holy instrument in our service of G-d, imbued with special significance. We take the male organ and circumcise it, thereby becoming partners with G-d in a child's creation — a task He left for us to complete. Every commandment in the Torah guides Jews in elevating seemingly trivial things to holiness.

I remember sitting in a holding area at the county jail before being escorted to my solitary confinement cell in 2009 to serve out my sentence. The police officers brought us our meals. Before eating, I made a blessing that the other inmates apparently overheard. They asked why I was whispering to myself, probably thinking I was a tad insane. I told them I was thanking G-d for my food through this blessing. They said that sometimes they did the same thing by saying “grace,” but when I asked if they bothered to thank G-d after the meal, that question was met with stunned silence. This was one particularly striking aspect of Judaism during my period of growth: it makes so much sense, yet is so often ignored.

I remember growing up always receiving lectures from my mother after we went out for dinner. My brother and I used to thank our father for the meal after it was over and we were leaving the restaurant. Our rationale was that the money spent on the meal was his, as it came from his salary. My mother always felt slighted by this. Sometimes we would remember to

thank her, but usually we forgot. She reasoned that her endless dedication to raising us while my dad was working also merited a thank you for the meal, since she was the keeper of the home. If my mother felt slighted, I wonder how G-d feels when people don't thank Him after a meal either. Our blessing after meals is not only entirely logical but also a true sign of respect and gratitude.

Money is another thing that doesn't seem inherently holy, but when used correctly, it can bring the very essence of holiness to the world. Donating to less fortunate Jews, paying for a new Torah scroll to be finished, or building a new section of a shul are all perfect examples. Money, like many other things, can also be a vehicle to perpetrate great evil. There isn't anything inherently bad about money, but the decisions of misguided individuals make it seem that way. Judaism emphasizes the significance of financial resources and their proper utilization in the service of God, transforming a simple piece of currency into a lasting source of spiritual reward.

All Jews perform many of the same daily actions, but observant Jews are rewarded for them when performed with specific intent and according to Jewish Law. Most Jews tie their shoes, but only when done according to Jewish Law does it become a mitzvah. We all put on our clothes in the morning, but dressing in the specific manner Judaism commands brings reward. Showering is a standard practice, but when performed as instructed, even basic hygiene is elevated. It takes so little time throughout the day to turn some of these commonplace actions into something more meaningful and holy. The more you learn about Judaism, the less you'll notice the restrictions

Infusing Holiness Into Life

and the more you'll discover the nearly infinite opportunities to get closer to G-d.

There is abundant purpose we can infuse into the mundane world, and our goal is to spend our lives imbuing them with as much holiness as possible. I no longer see any of these laws or decrees as foolish or unnecessary; in fact, they are pure gifts from G-d. If we can earn a reward by simply tying our shoes a certain way, then surely there is even more to gain from treating a fellow Jew with respect and dignity. It's hard to drift through life aimlessly with the awareness that every second is an opportunity to strengthen one's relationship with G-d and earn reward. An in-depth examination of the ideal life as outlined by the Torah reveals endless opportunities to elevate even the simplest aspects of our days into something meaningful and everlasting.

Thirty-Seven

Still the Same Baby Boy



I always chuckle when people ask how my parents are reacting to my new religious lifestyle. My response is simple: Before this all happened, I was in jail for a high-speed car chase on cocaine. I would say they're a shtickle more proud now. Unfortunately, when a Jew becomes more observant, there is often a harsh backlash from family and friends. Ironically, despite the severity of what I did, the very circumstances that led to my life transformation were, in a sense, a help. I had so severely damaged my life and familial relationships that any improvement was regarded as a positive advancement. My family, however, has been supportive of me my entire life, and even more so after my decision to adopt a Torah lifestyle.

Sadly, many parents and friends view the decision to become observant as an affront to the values they themselves stand for. This is especially true for parents, who theoretically are the

Still the Same Baby Boy

ones who impart core values to their children. When they see a child adopting a different lifestyle, many view it not just as a challenge to their beliefs, but also to their role as parents. Everyone wants their children to follow in their footsteps in some regard, and the transition from non-observance to full commitment involves many radical changes in dress and behavior that may seem strange to them. Worse, some parents have bought into the ridiculous slander that Orthodox Judaism is a cult, disastrous to their son's or daughter's mental health and well-being.

Most Jewish parents possess core Jewish ideals and morals, though these qualities don't always manifest as Torah observance. I learned so many basic and beautiful principles of morality from my parents; while learning with my rabbi, I could trace those lessons to their roots in the Torah. Delving into Judaism helped me channel all the essential morals I had learned from my family (but rarely practiced) and actualize them in a genuinely Torah manner. My parents are about to celebrate their 54th wedding anniversary, an absolute marvel in modern times. One doesn't have to be observant to value and cherish the sanctity of marriage—a principle rooted in common sense, yet often neglected. Before I had ever opened a book about Judaism, my parents had already taught me the importance and value of commitment, one of life's most critical aspects.

I also learned two very important qualities from my siblings. My brother is a rock of consistency; dependability and reliability are hallmarks of what a Jew should be. Given how erratic I was growing up, having an older brother like him taught me the importance of being someone reliable. I also

have a younger sister who exemplifies perseverance through challenging obstacles and an unflappable spirit in the face of difficulty. Facing challenges with a smile and no complaints is rare in modern times. Siblings don't always get along, and of course, we've had our fair share of bickering. However, these two qualities I learned from my brother and sister have become critical in adapting to the new world I've chosen.

I drew on all the positive lessons gleaned from my family and never tried to push my new views on them. I enjoy sharing interesting things I've learned in the Torah with my parents, or relating a beautiful story I read in shul. The hardest thing for me now is knowing that so many beautiful aspects of Judaism remain unknown to those closest to me. The Torah, which has been the pivotal influence in my life, guiding me towards the path my family and friends always believed I could follow, remains unfamiliar to them. It's like having a treasure map and telling those I love to follow me, only to have them sometimes travel in a different direction on their own search. It weighs on me daily, and I daven (pray) about it frequently. My biggest desire is that, maybe one day, those I care about most will open their hearts and minds to their heritage. Whether they ever become observant is not in my power; what I desire most is simply for the endless beauty of the Torah to be exposed to them.

Every Jew is special and an integral part of the greater whole that makes up the Jewish nation. There are so many divisions among our brethren, making it impossible to unite as the Torah states we must. My family and I are leading two outwardly opposite lives right now, but it isn't driving us apart; it's actually

Still the Same Baby Boy

uniting us. I was the family's black sheep, who for years had drained its unity and joy. Only by changing myself was I able to make amends to those I had hurt the most. What my parents appreciate is that I'm essentially the same person I was years before, just with a completely different moral compass and a much stronger commitment to living a righteous life.

One of my biggest joys now is knowing how proud my family is of me and the efforts I've made to improve every facet of my life. It's been a long and arduous journey from cokehead to religious Jew, and they marvel at the change in me all the time. What's even more rewarding is that they know my new life isn't an indictment of how they raised me, nor a slight on how they are living theirs. Every Jew is on a personal journey; we're all at different points, battling distinct challenges. I hope more than anything that my family members will see that the very path that turned my life around could also benefit them. One doesn't have to become Torah-observant to get value out of learning about Judaism. My father always taught me growing up that life isn't all or nothing, and that's especially true in this case. Each aspect of Judaism learned can lead to a better appreciation for what makes us Jewish and a deeper understanding of our roles in life.

I still talk with my dad about Alabama football and joke around with my mom about funny moments from childhood. I still have the same hilarious conversations with my siblings that we've had for years. Becoming Torah observant didn't mean I became a completely different person; thankfully, it meant becoming a better one. I'm the only observant person on my dad's side of the family, and while it's a lot of weight on my

shoulders, it's also something I take pride in. It's important to set a good example for my relatives and show them that becoming observant doesn't mean I've joined a cult.

The true thanks go to my immediate family, and most importantly, to my parents. They were the ones who raised me, put up with me, rescued me, and are now finally rejoicing over me. The life skills I learned from them are as invaluable as those I've learned from my rabbi. All of these skills come from the Torah, even if my parents might not have recognized it until recently. Most Jews don't realize how many beliefs and drives in their lives are rooted in Judaism, and I've seen this firsthand when reflecting on my relationships with my family.

Gratitude is an aspect of life that is so hard to show others; most see it as a sign of weakness, when in reality, it is one of the truest signs of strength. No one in my life deserves more gratitude than my parents and siblings, and I try to repay them not only in words but also in actions. There is nothing more important in this world than family, and thankfully I've been able to make amends to the family I almost destroyed.

Thirty-Eight

Think of life in Reverse



The last time I saw my grandmother was a powerful moment in my life. She was succumbing to Dementia and by then, she was a mere shell of the strong woman I once knew. Visiting her at the nursing home, I couldn't help but reflect on life itself. Here was a woman nearing 90, living out her final days, barely coherent and hardly functioning. It was heartbreaking to see her in such a state, yet being with her taught me an important life lesson I hope I'll never forget. I was leaving for Israel in a few weeks, and I knew this would likely be the last time I would ever see her alive.

We live in this world, and then we depart from it as we arrived: alone. Witnessing someone at life's end inevitably prompts reflection on one's own mortality. People often assume they will live to a ripe old age, but this is not always the reality, as we Jews know more than any other group. Our existence is

fragile, and we don't know when the opportunities granted to us by G-d will be rescinded. We are meant to make the most of each day, each moment, yet we all know how difficult that is. We have dreams and desires, but most are never fulfilled in this world, as King Solomon poignantly describes in Ecclesiastes. On the drive back home from the nursing home, I reflected on the meaning of life and how crucial it is not to waste a second of it.

Growing up, I never realized the true essence of life, and even if I had, I don't think I would have been inclined to embrace it. I thought it was about earning money, achieving gratification, and being a nice person. A more thorough exploration of Judaism revealed that my perspective was often in direct opposition to G-d's expectations of me. The Torah crystallizes what our focus in life should be, clearly outlining G-d's commands for Jews. For much of the world, life has become a frenetic pursuit of material possessions, which often leave them more miserable, even if attained. It's as if people spend their whole lives like hamsters on a wheel, working tirelessly to grasp at something illusory.

Judaism teaches us what truly matters in life; the Torah and its laws are a detailed guidebook for maximizing our existence. Most people view it as mere fairy tales and restrictions, missing out on the one thing in life that can truly help them. It's a manual for morality, time allocation, and interpersonal relationships; it is the foundation of life itself. The only things we take from this world to the next are our mitzvot, our good deeds as laid out by the Torah. People spend decades working tirelessly to drive the BMW they always dreamed of; yet where is the room for

Think of life in Reverse

this treasured possession in the grave? The home your friend slaved half his life for is also left behind after death. It would almost be amusing if it weren't so tragic. So few people can truly say they lived life for the right reasons, or even knew its purpose to begin with.

Seeing my grandmother in her frail state highlighted how brief life truly is. We blink, and years have simply passed us by. In the 27 years of my life before I became observant, there weren't many things I could say I was truly proud of. I had a nice car, which cemented my status among those who knew me, but a shiny blue BMW couldn't mask the broken-down junkyard wreck my life was. Hiding behind our possessions or our diplomas doesn't bring satisfaction and contentment; it's a brief illusion that masks our deepest lack.

Jews have an obvious purpose that makes us unique among the nations of the world. G-d has selected us to serve as a guiding light of morality, illuminating the world with righteousness. I saw my fragile grandmother sitting before me that day, but I was really looking at myself. I don't want to leave this world having let life pass me by, having chased all the wrong things, having failed to live up to my potential as a person, and most importantly, as a Jew.

Judaism emphasizes living in the moment. The Torah guides every aspect of our lives, down to the smallest detail. Some people find it restrictive, but I find it liberating. It's like driving to a place you know exactly how to get to, as opposed to having to check your map every 30 seconds. The course for us as Jews is already established; it is ultimately our decision to pursue it

or not. Each of us has unique skills and character traits, given by G-d to be used ultimately for the same purpose: to get closer to G-d by observing His Torah.

By doing that, we don't just learn how to relate to Him, but we learn how to relate to others, and more importantly, ourselves. No one is saying there aren't bumps along the way, and if anyone says otherwise, that's naive and unrealistic. Life doesn't just magically become easy once you know your purpose; it actually becomes more intense because now you realize how special your potential is. When one sees the enormous power of every thought, every word, and every action, it has a transformative impact.

If we all just live and then vanish after death, then what's the point of this world to begin with? It's sad how little people care about the gift of life from G-d, and even sadder that they don't even care about their own apathy. I know this feeling well because this was my exact mindset for years. An endless sea of reality shows, trips to the mall, and nightclubs on the weekends is how many people drift through life. I used to live in this tangled web of emptiness, and it's the emptiest feeling on Earth. For those who believe in G-d, how can they not believe their life has purpose and a goal? Everything in life is a means to an end, but are we to believe that life itself doesn't follow this rule?

Part of the reason the world is in such dire straits now is that most people are completely clueless about the meaning of life. Every cult and religion delves into this topic; however, as a Jew, one has access to unique texts that offer a comprehensive

Think of life in Reverse

understanding of it. I observed my grandmother seated in that chair, frail and weakened, and the significance of life struck a powerful chord. Judaism actually teaches that it's better to go to a house of mourning than a house of simcha (celebration) for this very reason.

The inevitability of death provides us with insight into what is truly significant in our lives. I am determined not to let my life pass without pursuing the fundamental questions of our purpose. Life is an endless search for truth and wisdom, and death is simply the gateway to what comes next. Every facet of life—work, education, relationships—has criteria for assessing success or failure. Life itself is no exception; it is unfortunate that the majority depart from this world without ever comprehending their true purpose.

Thirty-Nine

The Holy Land



It seemed everyone knew I was going to immigrate (make Aliyah) to Israel—everyone, that is, except for me. My friends at yeshiva told me I would travel to Israel and never return, a prospect I never considered at the time. One reason I never thought about it was the restrictions placed on me after my release from jail following a car chase. I needed special permission just to leave the state of Georgia, and requesting permission to leave the country was not an option. After completing my jail sentence in October 2009, thoughts of the Holy Land began to fill my mind, and I dreamed of visiting the home of Judaism. This dream became a reality when my lawyer informed me that the State of Georgia had approved my request to serve my probationary requirements in Israel.

My mother told me a few years ago that as she and my dad dropped me off at the airport for my flight to Israel, they knew

The Holy Land

my life in America was ending. I have strong convictions, and she knew that being in the homeland of the Jewish people would have such a profound impact that I would soon call it home. The strange part is that I had never planned on living in Israel; even on the plane ride there, Aliyah never crossed my mind. I just saw this trip as an extended visit to experience something I had been longing for in the two years since I started studying with my rabbi. I can't describe the excitement I felt in the days before my journey because Israel, even for the least observant Jews, still conjures up such powerful emotions.

I had no idea what to expect from this visit, nor what I hoped to gain. I bought a one-way ticket for that very reason, as I didn't want to be confined to a timeframe. What I was seeking in my life at this point wasn't clear, but I knew the search would be most fruitful in our ancestral homeland. As Jews, we pray three times a day for the rebuilding of Jerusalem and for the ingathering of the exiles back to the Holy Land. Sure, we have a country again, but it remains incomplete. Without the Temple standing in Jerusalem, we lack the very foundation and focal point of Jewish life. Yet, for many Jews, the very thought of Israel—a land from which we were exiled for 2,000 years and to which we have only recently returned—still captures the imagination. By traveling to Israel, I was fulfilling the dream of so many ancestors who never could have set foot in the Holy Land, and that was profoundly meaningful to me.

Landing in Israel is one of the most special moments a Jew can experience. You see the land from the plane, knowing that within minutes, your soul will truly be home. When I finally walked outside after retrieving my baggage, my eyes became

a little moist, and for once I didn't have to pretend, as many men do, that "there's something in my eye." I've seen grown men cry like babies while kissing the ground in Israel and at the Western Wall, as the feeling of being in a land that means so much erases all inhibition. I felt a deep sense of belonging when I looked out over the scenery outside the airport; it's hard to describe, but anyone who has been to Israel can relate. A principle of Judaism is that every Jew has a special portion of the Holy Land, and contemplating that principle while gazing into the distance, its truth felt palpable.

While walking the streets of Israel, I truly felt home and at peace for the first time I could remember. There were synagogues in bus stations, kosher restaurants at every turn, and people wearing kippahs filling the streets. It felt like I was with millions of my closest friends, and I know many share that sentiment. A friend and I discussed how to describe the feeling of being in Israel and agreed it was impossible to truly convey. No other place on Earth can stir up the emotions that a Jew feels in their homeland, and I soon realized that I couldn't live anywhere else. I began thinking about what it might be like to actually live in Israel, far away from my family and friends. Could I possibly move away from those I love so much to a country I really didn't even know? The decision to make Aliyah came a few weeks later after spending a Shabbos in Hebron with my mother's first cousin and his family.

I had moved twice in my first month in Israel and was at a crossroads regarding my next steps. Then I arrived in Hebron—one of the most fascinating cities in the world, and the oldest city of the Jewish people. The city is ground zero in the conflict

The Holy Land

between the Jewish people and its hostile enemies, with about 850 Jewish settlers surrounded by 250,000 Arabs. When you say the word Hebron in Israel, people's eyes either light up or a look of complete disgust is visible on their faces. Many misguided Jews believe that if we just gave our land to our enemies, they would magically start to love and respect us. History in Israel has shown how misguided that sentiment is, but this isn't a book on my conservative political outlook, so I'll leave it at that. Many know Hebron for the massacre of 67 Jews in the city in 1929—a full 19 years before the founding of the State of Israel.

I was brimming with excitement on the bulletproof bus to Hebron. I had absolutely no idea what to expect, having only heard stories and others' accounts of experiences there. Upon disembarking in the small Jewish section of Hebron, where my cousin's house was located, I was shocked. The entire area of Hebron looked like an old Western movie set; it's hard to describe the scene unless one has been there. It resembled an eerie ghost town, with boarded-up buildings and shops dotting the landscape. I could not believe its appearance; it was like nothing I was expecting and certainly unlike anything I had seen before. The commitment of the Jews who could live in a place like this, surrounded by bitter enemies, was awe-inspiring. If you've been to Hebron, you know exactly what I'm talking about, and if you haven't, then I can honestly say that you have never truly been to Israel. Hebron is the lifeblood of our people; I truly believe that. Without these people's courage to live here, the onslaught from our enemies would engulf Israel.

Within five minutes of meeting my cousin's wife, she made me realize how tragic it would be for me to leave Israel. I

dedicate my life to online Jewish outreach, and she told me how hypocritical it would be to reach world Jewry while neglecting one of the greatest mitzvot of the Torah: settling the Land of Israel. This isn't a lengthy explanation of my views on Aliyah; my feelings are quite clear. G-d gave the Jews the Torah, and everything in the Torah relates to our people being in the Land of Israel. Her points made so much sense, and I could feel my heart beating faster. In fact, it was the same feeling I had when I began learning the profound aspects of Judaism with my rabbi a few years before. I told her what an impact she had on me and said that after Shabbos I would start looking into making Aliyah. She could not believe that a few honest, heartfelt words were all it took. However, this isn't shocking at all; I'm a seeker of truth, and when I find it, I must embrace it, no matter the sacrifice.

I approached my decision to come to Israel exactly as I approached my decision to become an observant Jew. I objectively examined all the information and evidence, approaching this drastic change with an open mind, and then decided it was the right thing to do. Nobody forced me to become observant, and nobody forced me to move to Israel. This was a straightforward decision because the evidence suggests it's exactly where G-d wants me and all our brethren. People always ask me how it's possible I could have given up life in America to move to a country I had only been in for a month. The fact that hundreds of thousands have done so in the past shows the answer is simple. Jews innately feel a connection to Israel that no other people on Earth have with a particular land. People have migrated over time; my family wasn't originally from the United States. Americans may have lived there for centuries, but their

The Holy Land

ancestors came from somewhere else generations before. The Jewish people have a unique and inherent connection to this specific land, a connection unparalleled in this world. Israel is the physical reality of our people, complementing the Torah, which is the spiritual reality.

I can honestly say it took me five minutes to decide to make Aliyah; I don't say that to sound cool or daring, and I'm certainly not bragging. That's how little time it should take someone to make such a life-altering decision when the truth becomes apparent. I didn't want to be in America, merely dreaming of returning to Israel; I wanted to wake up in Israel, knowing that every day was a dream come true. Our ancestors cried and prayed for the day when they could return to their ancient homeland—it was as much a part of them as breathing. My beloved great-grandparents immigrated to Israel in their eighties, fulfilling a dream that three generations of their descendants would eventually share. Just look at what we say each year after the Passover Seder: "Next year in Jerusalem!" We sing this gleefully every year, but for most, the next year is right back in New York or California. This remarkable opportunity was one I could not let slip away, an experience that I am certain many of my forebears would have sacrificed everything to attain. Life is a series of decisions, and making my home in the land of Israel was far and away the best one I have ever made.

Forty

Time is on My Side



I love the Rolling Stones classic, “Time is on My Side.” The title itself prompts deep reflection: Is time truly on our side? Every day holds 24 hours, regardless of who you are or your economic bracket. In its simplest form, life is a series of experiences defined by how we use our time. I now realize that the life I led before being exposed to Torah was not radically different from the one I currently lead. The fundamental difference lay in how I occupied my days—what I deemed worthy of my time. My wife, who recently passed away, would have given anything for more time; she felt it slipping away, and it weighed on her heavily. We often forget that time is the most precious thing on Earth, something even the richest person would trade all their money for.

In the years after college, my days off involved waking up as close to noon—often as late as 3 p.m.—and spending the day

Time is on My Side

in my pajamas watching television. Waking up late after a long night of doing cocaine certainly wasn't the best way to make the most of my life. My existence seemed to revolve around recounting the previous night at a bar or looking forward to some trivial future event. I never seemed to live in the present or enjoy my current stage of life. This apathy plagues Western society, leaving an entire generation feeling adrift, convinced life has no meaning or purpose. Society dictates that you go to high school to get into a good college, which leads to a good graduate school, ultimately securing a great job. But it doesn't end there; the goal in every occupation is to climb the ladder. The higher you climb, the more responsibility you accrue, consuming more of your time and forcing you to defer what you truly want to do.

By the time many people finally have the time and money to pursue their dreams, they are often too old, lacking the physical or mental faculties to truly enjoy them. Everyone has heard the term "rat race" used to describe life, and the sad truth is its aptness. People live for decades without ever truly analyzing the folly of a life they might be struggling with. I know this firsthand because it took me over 27 years to look inward and realize I needed a major shift in my time management. A vivid illustration of this came to me a few years ago when I was on a bus traveling into Jerusalem and witnessed two high school girls sitting in front of me.

They had out their copy of that week's Torah portion and were happily learning together. Jewish learning is a highly animated act, characterized by emotion and gesturing as people convey their points. I marveled at the sight, as it truly captured the

spirit of Judaism for me. These girls could have been texting with friends or reading a trashy Hollywood magazine; instead, they were learning more about Judaism with someone close to them. I'm not saying that any act other than learning Torah is a waste of time. However, even if you don't believe the Torah is true or that Judaism should be the foundation of your life, it's easy to admit the purity and holiness in these girls dedicating their free time to learning. Compared to what many modern teenagers do on the bus, there's no question they were using their time more productively and wholesomely.

I now feel guilty when I waste time, and guilt can be a powerful, positive motivator when internalized correctly. When I don't feel I'm using my time appropriately, it profoundly impacts me. Judaism teaches us the value of time and its proper use in our endless pursuit of growth. When I realize I've spent more time on the internet than necessary, I feel a profound sense of irretrievably lost time. Before becoming observant, I had no awareness of this fundamental principle of life. Time was just another resource I saw no use for and had no problem wasting. Now, I truly feel good when I've maximized my day—a feeling of accomplishment, knowing I haven't squandered G-d's gift of life. It's a wonderful feeling to go to sleep at night, knowing I tried to make the most of the time given to me, spurring me to repeat the effort the next day.

I am much more “in the now” than ever before, and for all the right reasons. I once thought that fulfilling desires or seeking pleasures was living “in the now,” but I've since realized how empty that can be. My main reason for using drugs was to evade responsibility in my life. It was the easiest way to hide

Time is on My Side

the pain of my existence and shield myself from fully engaging with anything. That is not living in the now; that is hiding from life. Only by wanting to create a new life based on truth and wisdom could this transformation occur for me. Seeing each day as an opportunity for growth and knowledge, rather than a mere stepping stone to the next thing, is incredibly liberating. I once felt trapped in a relentless, apathetic cycle, where days bled into one another and years went by with little to show for it.

Judaism is so rooted in time that it forces us to be aware of it every second of the day. We pray at specific times, our holidays begin at precise moments, and some mitzvahs can only be performed at certain junctures; the list is almost endless. Every day is a canvas for us to create something everlasting, yet far too often we leave it blank or sully it with a blotchy mess. We are the artists of our lives, and time is our paintbrush. Once the value of my time was properly aligned in my life, adapting my behavior became easy. I realized how important time was for achieving what I wanted for myself and for those I'm trying to reach. I don't want to wake up at 80 and realize I missed precious chances to become the person I knew I could have been, had I only exerted the effort. Time is an hourglass; it marches on, and the only thing we can do is cherish it and make the most of it, for its end is unknown.

I literally cringe when people tell me they don't have time for Judaism; these are often the same people I see playing every game imaginable on Facebook and posting their thoughts on the newest Netflix series they're obsessed with. You can download the entire Torah on an iPhone now, or listen to lectures from

thousands of rabbis from around the world in your car. There is absolutely no excuse for not setting aside even a few minutes of the day to engage with or learn something Jewish. It's a tragedy to go through life and never know why we are so special as Jews; I cannot think of anything more heartbreaking. My primary goal with my online outreach work is to help my fellow Jews take that first daunting step: opening their minds to a pure, beautiful world at their fingertips. It's a step-by-step process, not one that happens overnight. The first step can only come from the individual, and all it takes is the decision to dedicate just a little time to something eternal.

Forty-One

Empathy



As I gain a deeper understanding of the experiences endured by some of my fellow Jews in their pursuit of a more profound Jewish identity, I'm increasingly aware of the potential for growth available to everyone, regardless of their current stage. While the goal in life is to always move forward and strive for improvement, it's also important to assess how far you've come. The area of my life I've most strived to improve is my empathy towards my fellow Jews and the personal struggles they have overcome. I've realized that many might dismiss my daily battles as trivial pitfalls. However, to me, they are powerfully real, a constant struggle to overcome.

I strive to empathize with the inner hardships of others, not belittle them. I used to see things in much starker black and white terms, which was beneficial in some ways, but a significant hindrance in others. Many Jews genuinely strive for

self-improvement, yet fall short in various areas. I sometimes wondered how others could struggle with things that came so naturally or easily to me. Now, I appreciate and admire their struggles. Over the past 17 years, I've heard thousands of stories about people's daily challenges with Jewish life and Judaism. I've worked to be less judgmental towards my fellow Jews, while also learning to accept and make the best of my own checkered past. When I witness a Jew's deep willingness to grow in their observance, it fuels my desire to engage with them, offering help, solace, or wisdom.

I've met many Jews who have strayed from the observant path, and many others who have never even considered it. Each story is unique: some have lost friends or family in terror attacks, others have grieved loved ones lost to illness, been let down by a teacher or rabbi, or become victims of sexual abuse. While it frustrates me to see them abandon a life I cling to with all my strength, I try to empathize with the pain they must be feeling. I recognize the anger and hurt they've experienced, feeling that G-d has let them down. While this is not an excuse to abandon their faith, it's a profound struggle they face.

For instance, I have a friend in Israel who lost three classmates to terror attacks in the last decade, an experience that profoundly shook him. He slowly drifted away from Judaism, and his life now clearly reflects anger and confusion. Growing up observant and being taught to cling to G-d, such incidents can sow immense doubt and angst, particularly in a teenager. He told me he believes in G-d, yet his observance of the Torah has weakened considerably. His story is one of the most deeply inspiring I've heard in the last four years since I became more

observant.

My friend told me that while in America, after finishing his service in the Israeli Navy, he began keeping kosher again. Like me in my past, he had indulged in some of the world's "finer" dining establishments, like Wendy's and Taco Bell. He simply decided one day to keep kosher again and has done so ever since. I often wonder what G-d is thinking, and in this particular case, I ponder whether this single decision by a troubled Jew might have made G-d prouder than the actions of even the most respected rabbi. We know that as Jews, our actions can alter the spiritual world, and what action could be greater than this? A young man, so disenchanted with his upbringing, having experienced immense tragedy and harboring many questions and doubts about Judaism, chose to sacrifice for the importance of keeping kosher. This discussion profoundly altered my perspective on my fellow Jews; I was working on my empathy, but this experience truly deepened it. I now realize that while the end results are obviously important, there are beautiful lessons to be learned from the struggles along the way.

Another individual in Israel shares a different kind of story. She, too, grew up observant but strayed from the path for a brief period. The allure of secular life — club dancing and a carefree lifestyle — was deeply enticing. She exchanged her long skirts and long-sleeved shirts for shorts and tight jeans. For five years, she pursued a different lifestyle, believing it would bring happiness, only to find it did the opposite. Recently, she confided that wearing jeans remains her biggest temptation, which, while it might sound surprising, is quite common for observant girls. At the time, it struck me as trivial, but as I write

this, I realize that the inability to wear jeans is an enormous struggle for her, and certainly not something to be mocked. Just yesterday, I delivered a powerful online lecture about the importance of modesty for women; her struggle is not unique, but overcoming such temptations is sadly rare.

If more people appreciated the “mountains” our fellow Jews climb in life, we would not only foster greater empathy but also dramatically improve how we view ourselves. Life is a constant struggle; regardless of one’s religious observance, we all experience peaks and valleys. I still possess the same passion for Judaism and the same general disgust and angst about certain aspects of this world. However, when it comes to my fellow Jews, I strive to see their positive qualities, even when they seem almost impossible to find. I recently gave a lecture sponsored by a mother whose son is bravely battling addiction; I asked her to send me a list of his positive aspects, which I then highlighted during the lecture. Both she and her son, who listened to the lecture tailored specifically for him, were deeply appreciative. Judaism teaches that we are all parts of one Jewish soul, and it’s time we realize that every link in the chain is just as important as our own.

Forty-Two

A Slow Death



I wrote the first few drafts of this book in 2012, just to prove to myself that I could focus long enough and discipline myself properly to finish it. Fourteen years have gone by, and I am now doing the final edit. A lot has happened in my life during these past 14 years, most significantly getting married at age 37 and having a son a few years later in 2020, thank G-d. At the end of that year, my wife received a diagnosis of a very aggressive and deadly form of cancer. Sadly, she just succumbed to the illness over a year ago in February 2025. I learned so much from seeing her battle this cancer every day, as her health and strength waned with each passing month. At the time of her death, she probably weighed 50 or 60 pounds, a horrifying image considering her vibrancy and beauty just a few years earlier.

In her over four-year battle with cancer, she never once questioned G-d or found fault with the test He gave her. She never said her cancer wasn't fair or pondered why it was happening to her and not someone less righteous. A basic principle of Judaism is that everything G-d does is for the good, no matter how hard that might be to grasp in the present. Think of how many times in your life losing a job or experiencing a breakup turned out to be a huge blessing. We have a very limited view of the world, especially since this world is just a gateway to our eternal reward if we are righteous enough to merit it. I had many conversations with my wife, trying to put her suffering into perspective. She truly understood and lived by her faith and trust in G-d, and this unshakeable conviction didn't just start with the cancer.

In January 2019, I experienced the saddest day of my life when my wife came home from the doctor's office and informed me she had a miscarriage. Never before had I sat on a couch, crying my eyes out for what felt like 10 to 15 minutes. My biggest dream in life was to be a father, and the excitement I had during this pregnancy was a joy I had never experienced. My wife came and sat down next to me, put her arm around me and softly said, "Everything Hashem does is for the good; don't worry, this will all turn out okay." I immediately stopped crying; her comforting words of truth and wisdom were the only things I needed to hear. Her entire life was a deep connection to G-d and to the ideals embodied in His Torah. Watching someone wither away is heartbreaking; to witness it with a smile and a positive attitude, however, is inspiring.

It's difficult to look at my son and know that the mother who

A Slow Death

loved him with all her heart and soul is no longer with us. We were in America for Mother's Day, and it was a surreal feeling celebrating it with my mom, while his mother is in heaven. I can't imagine the suffering my wife endured as she looked at the boy she cherished so much and knew her time with him might be brief. So many people in her situation either gave up, became depressed, or turned their backs on G-d in anger. She showed her son what a genuine commitment to our Torah and our G-d truly means. It's easy to be religious in good times, but in times of struggle our commitment can truly shine through. I tell my son daily what a righteous mother he had, how much she loved him with all her heart, and how proud she was of him. I never thought I would be a father raising a son alone at age 45, but G-d has dealt us this hand, and we are making the best of it.

I often told my wife how remarkable it was that she faced such a tragic decline in her health with such profound joy and acceptance. I marveled at her smile on days she could barely walk and admired her composure when most of us would have crumbled in sadness. She personified everything the Torah teaches us about faith and trust in G-d, and it's a comfort to know her reward in the next world is immense. We are guests in this world, and none of us knows how long our stay will be. I saw someone who knew her time was probably ending, yet still made the most of each day, never wasting a second of opportunity. Some lessons in life have happy endings, and even though this one has been marked by so much hardship and pain, I am hopeful we can honor her memory by emulating the wonderful qualities she exemplified.

Forty-Three

The Here and Now



I am excited to be writing this final chapter of a book I wasn't sure I'd ever publish. I started writing this book to prove to myself that I could, but for some reason, it never felt ready enough until now. Fourteen years have passed since I sat on my couch in Shiloh, Israel, for a month, furiously typing my deepest thoughts onto the screen. A lot has changed in my life since then, but my passion to help my fellow Jews find purpose and meaning in life has remained constant.

I came to America after my wife passed away so my son could be around family and I could decompress from a stressful five-year period that began with her cancer diagnosis in December 2020. My days consist of spending a few hours shuttling my son to his school, learning Torah, and giving lectures online for my new foundation, Chai On Torah. To be honest, I have no social life, nor do I want one. Currently, my focus is solely

on my son's well-being, preparing for my Torah lectures, and building this foundation into a powerful force in the Jewish world.

G-d Willing, my plan is to go back to Israel soon, but in the meantime, I'm making the most of this period in my life where I have the time and energy to build something that has transformed from a dream into reality in just a few months. There is nothing more rewarding than getting emails and messages from viewers who tell me that my life story and my outlook on Torah are making such a big impact on their everyday lives. I spent such a large portion of my life squandering my potential and purpose with drugs; it's gratifying to redirect all of my efforts into uplifting my fellow Jews.

Throughout my life, family and friends always told me how capable I was and how much I could achieve if I only put my mind to it. I can finally say that I have found my calling in life, and it feels amazing. G-d gives everyone many positive attributes and talents; it's nice to finally use mine for the betterment of the Jewish people. The passion and dedication I put into my lectures is the greatest act of gratitude I can offer to G-d. I am so thankful for all the wonderful people and organizations that have had such a positive impact on my journey over the last 18 years, and I finally feel like I am giving back.

My sincere hope is that after reading this book, you will personally message me at the email in the Conclusion and then begin to watch the lectures that I spend hours carefully

preparing to maximize their impact. I am here to help anyone who wants to get the most out of life, and I truly hope that you will reach out so we can begin to elevate your soul. Finding meaning and purpose in life should be the ultimate goal that everyone yearns for; it's never too late to begin, and you've never reached a point so low that it's impossible.

I look back at where I was on my journey when I wrote this book originally in 2012, and I feel light-years ahead of that point spiritually. My goal is that in the years ahead, I will be light-years ahead of my current self as well. Life is a constant journey of growth and ascent; we should never be content with where we stand in life. Maybe something in this book has given you the thought that it's time to start digging deep within yourself and to desire real change that can bring genuine contentment. The desire to change is entirely up to you, and the first step is simply opening your heart and mind to the possibility. Take that step and never look back!

Forty-Four

Conclusion



This is the End...Or Maybe it's YOUR Beginning

I hope you enjoyed reading this book as much as I enjoyed writing it. Reliving my past stirred up more emotion than I anticipated. I see how each step was a miracle in itself, and it's clear that G-d guided me throughout. I don't expect people to immediately start observing Shabbos this weekend; I am a realist, aware of life's struggles and the power of resisting change. My sole purpose in writing this was to help kindle the spark deep within every Jew, hoping to inspire them to begin their quest for a more meaningful and rewarding life.

Rationally engaging with Judaism saved my life, and I know it can bring beauty and wisdom to yours as well. Wherever you fall on the religious spectrum, everyone can benefit from a deeper look inward and a yearning for spiritual transformation.

Judaism is not for the weak; it is not a crutch that props up our lives, nor is it a cult that controls our thoughts. Instead, it is the foundation of our identity as Jews, complete with a guidebook for living it. Countless misconceptions, falsehoods, and downright lies about Judaism are so ingrained in our minds that they often go unquestioned. A genuine desire, coupled with a willingness to open your mind and heart, is all that is required to deepen your connection to Judaism and discover your heritage.

I implore you, my fellow Jews, don't let this opportunity slip through your hands, as it slipped through mine during years of aimless wandering. Is asking for just five minutes a day to learn about your ancestral heritage of Torah too much? Millions of Jews over the last 50 years have discovered the profound rewards of Torah observance. Knowing your purpose and role in this world can have a positive effect on you that is currently beyond your comprehension. There is absolutely nothing stopping a Jew from learning about their roots, provided they approach it with the same open-minded and rational perspective as I did.

Our ancestors clung to Judaism against all odds and in the face of untold suffering. How can we, as modern Jews, squander their efforts in a foolish quest for ordinary assimilation? My story is not unique; it is merely one of many examples of what returning to our roots can achieve. I urge you to reflect on what I've shared in this book, to analyze the logic behind the events I relived, and to recognize their rationality. I am the last person anyone expected to become an observant Jew, and it happened because of my yearning for truth and my desire

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to align my life with it. I sincerely hope you learn from my hard-won lessons and realize that Judaism isn't a hobby; it is the crux of our existence and the means for the growth we all seek. The change it can impart to those who seek its wisdom, beauty, and power is everlasting.

Sincerely, thank you for letting me share my journey with you. I hope something in this book has resonated with you and will serve as a springboard for your own life's mission. This book proves that there is always a way back to your roots, no matter how far you fall. I am willing and eager to help anyone who desires to learn more about the beauty of Judaism, which is why I am starting the Chai On Torah Foundation (visit us at the link below). Please contact me with questions, for advice, just to talk, or to sponsor a Torah lecture. My goal in life is to be there for any Jew, just as so many others were for me. I feel this is my purpose, and I am excited about this role. I hope to hear from YOU soon – let's begin your journey together with the same excitement that propelled mine!

If anyone would like to support our work in bringing the beauty of Judaism to the masses, please click on the DONATE button below. Your generous support is truly appreciated as I navigate this new life of spreading Torah and balance a personal life that has changed so much recently. I encourage everyone to watch my lectures, which are available on the website below. They are powerful, transformative glimpses into a wide range of topics, all with one purpose: to have a positive and lasting impact on the lives of my fellow Jews!

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