

OP-ED

Jews 'coming home' to their religion from different directions

THE RABBI'S TURN RABBI ARTHUR GREEN

It was a little more than 20 years ago that I spent the holiday of Sukkot visiting at the court of the Bobover rebbe in Brooklyn, N.Y. I was staying with some friends in Crown Heights, then a neighborhood still brimming with a rich variety of Chasidic life.

At the end of his discourse one evening, the rebbe rose from his place, and several hundred Chasidim rose after him. As he was walking out of the sukkah, he suddenly stopped when he passed by me.

"*Di eltern zeynen frim?*" ("Are your parents religious?"), he asked the somewhat terrified newcomer. When I replied that they were not, he broke into a broad smile and said, "*Ah! Yiddishe kinder kimen tsurik tsu yiddishkeit!*" ("Jewish children are coming back to Judaism!")

The rebbe was right. Jewish children are coming home to their Jewish roots. The numbers are not yet huge, but they are significant. The 1970s and '80s — those same decades that saw the intermarriage rates soar so high and heard the alarm bells ring so loudly — also witnessed a quiet but steady movement of return. Some thousands of Jews, even tens of thousands, have moved from the periphery of Jewish life, where they were raised, back toward Judaism's center.

Who are these Jews, the ones who are coming home? Most of them are relatively young, at the time of life when great decisions are still being made. They are children of the '60s and '70s — people of the "thirtysomething" or the "late-twentysomething" generation.

They have been to college during those heady years and have lived through at least a superficial bout of political radicalism. They have had some exposure to non-Jewish religion, usually in one or another of its Eastern forms — yoga, Zen, transcendental meditation or something else.

This experience has allowed them to take religion seriously. Seeing the attitude of devotion in another setting helped them become open to seeking it in Judaism, as well.

Their articulated memories of synagogue or temple are largely negative. That was the place "where my parents dragged us on the holidays"; "where I had a meaningless Bar Mitzvah to please my grandparents"; or where some real or perceived act of terrible hypocrisy "turned me off to Judaism."

But probe a little deeper, and you will find that most also report some positive Jewish associations in childhood:

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kitchens run by affectionate grandmothers, family celebrations, kindly Hebrew teachers. These are most often the ones who come back. It's as though a seed planted 20 years earlier — a planting no one thought had ever taken root — had suddenly sprouted. (We shudder to think of the many more such Jews who do not return, including those without the good memories to draw them back.)

Some people turn to Judaism because they are simply tired of searching. Having bounced about from one way of life to another, and perhaps having tried out multiple paths to salvation, they can no longer handle the instability.

Life in the contemporary world is too difficult to face — too many decisions to make, too many choices every day. Many young people in our society suffer from an excess of freedom. Judaism has about it an aura of having been there forever — stable as a rock. A choice to return to Judaism is usually a choice for security and steadiness.

Others come back to the community out of a "nesting instinct." Cut off from all contact with Jewish life since they left for college, they now find themselves either about to marry or pregnant with their first child. And there they are, on the synagogue doorstep. Sign us up, they say; we have come home.

Some of these, to be sure, think they want Judaism only in a pediatric version. But the proper caring approach by rabbi or educator can often convince them to begin taking on the trappings of Jewish life as a family.

Then there are Jews who return to their Judaism as a result of some adult experience: a lecture they heard; a book they read; a rabbi they met. Some went to a marriage encounter weekend; others have been through a 12-step program and discovered their faith in that way.

All of them, taken together, seem like a mighty stream, even a historical movement. I think of them when we read of Moses telling Pharaoh: "With our young people and our elders we will go; with our wives and with our children."

Within this movement of return,

there are multiple streams. Some feel the need to rush quickly into Judaism in its most demanding and "authentic" forms: You seem to hear as much English as Yiddish these days on the streets of Jerusalem's Meah Shearim or in Brooklyn's Williamsburg.

Such Jews view themselves as refugees from modernity, fortunate, or blessed, to have escaped even with their lives. Who can blame them? Seeing the victims of drug addiction, mental illness and life on the streets all around us, it becomes easy to understand Jews who have opted, instead, for the warm and supportive community — even for the arranged marriages — of ultra-Orthodoxy.

Jewish parents frequently bemoan to me their difficulties in living with the piety of their children that seems so unfathomable and excessive to them. I generally urge them to consider the alternative.

But there are others coming home who are not willing to leave their baggage outside as they re-enter the house of Judaism. They come with questions, even with doubts and hesitations. Attracted by the great power of tradition and its symbols, they are still not sure they can make it their own.

They also have values learned in the outside world that they dearly want to hold onto while returning. Foremost among these is the spirit of free inquiry, the right to question and challenge. They come also with commitments to democracy and egalitarianism, values they see inadequately represented by those most loyal to tradition.

Within this latter group are the 30 or more applicants to rabbinical school I will meet in interviews during the next few months. They are bright and exciting men and women, filled with enthusiasm for Jewish life.

Almost none of them comes from