

SPARK IGNITED

THE DIFFICULT JOURNEY TO
ORTHODOX JUDAISM

The Process & the Perils

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HONG KONG • JERUSALEM • LAS VEGAS

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A Typical Scenario

PICTURE THIS: You are a gentile, living in a gentile world. You happen to be a Fundamentalist Christian, which basically means that you are a Christian that believes in the Bible(not all Christians do, by the way).

You believe that G-d is real and that He has created ex nihilo(from nothing) the Universe and all that it contains. You believe that G-d is omnipotent and omnipresent. You believe that He has a plan for your life, so each day you seek His will for that day in prayer. You listen and watch for signs of His leading in your life. You devote yourself to prayer and memorizing G-d's Word, as you know it. You trust G-d implicitly and love Him with all your heart. You take very seriously the challenges He lays before you, such as dealing with your fellow man, becoming a better person, and applying the attributes of G-d to your life. You study the Bible each day. You study and you study, and you study. You listen to Christian teachings on the radio each day, and there are thousands of them available. You attend your local church and weekly seminars/retreats to have fellowship with others that believe as you do. You love Jesus, or Yeshua as some call him, and you want the entire world to be saved so that they will go to heaven, as you believe you will. This is a glimpse into the life and the world of a true Fundamentalist Christian. It can be an all-consuming lifestyle.

So you are going along in life like everyone else around you, trying your best to live your life mindful of 'WWJD'(what would Jesus do), when one day an Unseen Hand reaches down from heaven and begins to lift up a veil in your mind. Something stirs deep within you, and 'a still, small voice' begins to ask ques-

tions: Who is Jesus...really? Why are there contradictions in the Gospels? If the Bible is the infallible Word of G-d, how can there be contradictions?

A few of these contradictions include the following:

1. The account of Jesus' resurrection. Depending on which author of the Gospels you read there was either one person or up to four people who came to his tomb, either before or after he was raised from the dead. How many people were there and when?
2. This person, or these persons, met one or more men, or angels, either inside or outside of the cave. What were they? How many were there? Where did they actually meet them?
3. The follower(s) of Jesus who came to the tomb either saw or were told that he was resurrected. Which was it? Was it hearsay only?

These examples are just the tip of a proverbial iceberg.

Why does the book of Romans, another book in the Christian 'New' Testament, go back and forth on the question of Jews keeping 'The Law' (G-d's commandments) when Jesus came to "fulfill the Law"? What does that really mean, to fulfill the Law?

What about sin, and how the New Testament simply sweeps under the carpet, if you will, personal accountability for one's actions and misdeeds? Jesus paid the price for my sin, so I don't have to, because I can't anyway? Since I am not G-d, and only G-d can forgive and judge sin, then by simply believing in Jesus, the price for my sin is paid? I don't have to do anything but believe in him? How convenient!

1 The first four books of the Christian new testament, supposedly compiled from the accounts of four of his earliest followers. Each Gospel purports to tell a historical story of Jesus, yet each one differs from the others.

Did the compilers of the New Testament really expect people not to ask why there are so many contradictions and unanswered questions? Is that why the first Christian Bible available to the public was not even printed until the 1700's? Is that why the Church discouraged ordinary people from reading the Christian Bible until only a half a century ago?

These questions creep into a Fundamentalist Christian's mind slowly, but for people who really think, once they do enter, they take on the force of a steel hammer pounding over and over again at the same spot in the brain. THINK! THINK! THINK! Sounds like the obvious thing to do, but questioning is generally frowned upon within the Christian context, and when diligent thought leads to questions asked, problems usually follow.

Fellow congregants and Bible teachers are no longer happy to see you when you come to the weekly Bible classes. In fact, they wish you would find another class to attend because when the questions start pouring out of you, the teachers have no real answers, except to tell you to have faith and to 'cast out the devil' who is causing you to doubt. Before long, you start seeing these leaders as robots with robotic answers that make no real sense.

Believe it or not, the much-touted virtue of 'simple faith' actually means SIMPLISTIC faith!

Then comes the day you realize you are in real trouble. The world that you felt so snug and secure in doesn't feel right anymore, nor does it warm up to you like it used to. It has become like an insect bite that itches constantly without relief. You have come to the place where you need answers, and you need them now! The next stage of your journey has arrived: The 'seek and you shall find' syndrome.

You start searching for answers and realize that you have already exhausted your easily accessible resources. Creativity is called for, so where might you find answers to your many questions about G-d? A light goes on; a spark ignites. What about Judaism?

You remember all the stories you've been taught about the poor Jews and their heavy burden of keeping 613 laws. How dry and spiritless! What a burden to carry and with no forgiveness in sight, because they don't have Jesus to pay the price for their sins. BUT...G-d did come to them first; hey, Jesus was Jewish, right?

You take your first step, and to your surprise and delight, you find that you have entered into a world full of mystery, beauty, and enchantment. You really don't understand anything, least of all how to find answers to your questions! It's as if you've dropped into an alternate universe. You reach back for those once familiar survival tools, only to discover they are no longer there. There you stand before your Creator, naked and emotionally exposed. You cry out to this new/old G-d for help and He responds, not a moment too soon. Actually, you later realize G-d has answered your prayer at exactly the right moment.

On a side note, the above process is not dissimilar to the return journey of a ba'al teshuva, but one needs to understand that we are speaking about diehard Fundamentalist Christians. These are people who have studied their Bibles for years and memorized many, many scripture verses in order that they might treasure G-d's word in their heart that they should not sin against Him...advice taken directly from *Tehillim/Psalm 119:11*.

These people understand well that there is power in believing in the reality of G-d's existence. They have faith in His plan for their lives, so they are determined to find answers. Some will seek out the local synagogue where they live, but Reform or

Conservative congregations are more likely to welcome them than are Orthodox synagogues. It will not take Fundamentalist Christians long to find out, to their dismay, that Reform and Conservative Jews don't really believe everything in the Bible is true. Even those 'Old Time Bible Stories' that Fundamentalist Christians cherish, such as Ruth, Esther, the splitting of the Red(Reed) Sea, and Creation, are either held suspect or relegated to fanciful teaching tales, Jewish 'Aesop's Fables'. Fundamentalist Christians tend to be aghast and disillusioned, but the final straw comes when they realize that many Reform and Conservative Jews seemingly have no personal relationship with G-d Himself, never mind the Messiah issue.

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Your initial segue into the world of Judaism has left you with more questions than when you entered, so you find the nearest exit and leave. Now where are you going to look for answers?

Listen, Don't Talk

IT IS WISE NOT to talk much; rather, you should learn to listen intently. There is a story about Rabbi Akiva, whose parents were converts. Rabbi Akiva lived between 40–137 CE, during the Second Temple period. He did not come to Judaism until he was forty years old. He didn't speak for the first twelve years of his learning, and he learned the Hebrew language with kindergarten children. He was so quiet that the Rabbis thought something might be wrong with him. He took those first twelve years to acquire the tools to start asking proper questions and to get a feel for the environment that he was entering. Rabbi Akiva later became one of the greatest Sages in the history of the Jewish people.

A convert does not have to disregard everything; it is vital that a convert holds onto their vibrant faith in HaShem. Your understanding of HaShem will change and keep changing, evolving over the years the more you learn Torah, but people coming from the Christian world do have something to bring with them into the Jewish world. We have developed a very strong emunah, but now we need to redirect it towards the Torah concept of HaShem.

We understand the concept of 'walking with our Creator' each moment of the day. We have learned through experience that G-d leads in certain ways, so now with this new path we are on, we must learn to understand that concept within the Jewish framework, but this is where it ends! New converts are very weak in knowing how to live as Jews and how to apply Halacha to our lives. Realizing this reality about ourselves is essential.

Only if we take this to heart can we begin to leave Egypt behind, in order to cross through the Reed Sea into the purifying ‘desert experience’ that the Children of Israel took forty years to complete. Spiritual journeying is part of the very essence of the Jewish people!

Your own ‘desert journey’ will take you however long HaShem decrees. It is different for everyone. Even the simple Bible stories need to be relearned to understand their true depth and meaning.

G-d gave the Bible to the Jewish people, and they are the key players in its many stories and accounts. The divinely inspired authors of the Books of the Major and Minor Prophets (*Neviim*), Psalms (*Tehillim*), Proverbs (*Mishle*), and Ecclesiastes (*Kohelet*) were all Jews. In Christian vernacular, these Books of the Bible are called “the Wisdom Books”, and the wisdom they contain must be revisited from a Jewish perspective in order to be accurately understood and applied to one’s life. Jewish men recorded the historical accounts in the Tanach, books such as 1st and 2nd Kings (*Melachim I and II*), 1st and 2nd Chronicles (*Divrei haYamim I and II*), Ruth (*Rut*), Esther, and Lamentations (*Eichah*). The Jewish people, with G-d’s help, understand the Bible best of all.

Hebrew, the original language of the Tanach, has many subtleties and nuances, and the differences between ancient Hebrew and contemporary Hebrew are numerous. This makes translations from Hebrew into other languages very susceptible to error, unless the translator is a well-trained Hebrew language scholar. The many translations of the Tanach presented as the ‘Old’ Testament of Christian Bibles around the world are filled with translation errors; some unintentional and others expressly mistranslated to promote specific ideologies.

In other words, you have so much to learn. There are so many layers to the Torah, so many perspectives to take into account,

from that of the Noahides and what they can learn and understand, all the way through to the Sages that have given us centuries of commentary.

Don't be wise in your own eyes. Remember that a fool reveals himself by speaking idle words. I am very quick to tell people from the Christian world that they "know nothing" to get them to shut up. Some may go on and on in a group, expounding on what they feel is valuable information that is just rubbish or babble from a Jewish point of view. The person who is converting into the Orthodox Jewish world has the responsibility of learning that world and gaining the knowledge of that world, not the other way around.

Relearning Torah

CONVERTS WHO HAVE come to Judaism from the Christian world (especially Fundamentalist Christianity) need to realize that they must begin learning Torah from a very unusual place. This is vital for healthy spiritual and emotional development in their new lives as Jews. It is also of tremendous benefit to understand this while preparing and studying for conversion.

It is not really starting over as though you never had belief in HaShem, but it is more a process of laying aside many of the teachings that permeated your being throughout your previous pre-conversion life. Some of these teachings may have seemed universal to you, but Christian doctrine is deeply distorted and devious. Its roots can permeate your very core, popping up uninvited when least expected. You may continue to feel their influence even after you have become Jewish. The best thing you can do is be vigilant in your decision to create a new foundation of Torah to define your relationship with HaShem, and how you live, and look at life. The most effective way to accomplish this is to choose to be still and listen.

ACKNOWLEDGING YOUR IGNORANCE

Perhaps it would be more polite to call this “realizing you don’t know everything”, but the attitude of arrogance is one that permeates much of Christianity so subtly and pervasively that most Christians would be appalled if they really understood how they appear to those that don’t share their belief system. It

takes time to disentangle and distance oneself from ‘knowing what you know’, but it is absolutely essential for a convert.

In the Christian world, there is no authoritative way of understanding the Bible. Pastors give sermons, developing their Biblical commentaries as best they can, until they hit a wall at a certain point. There are books of sermon ideas, even sermon templates, available to inspire them, but each individual is on their own, supposing that they are guided by the holy spirit, and often developing theses that are completely contradictory to what Torah presents as truth. The fact that the Christian New Testament itself distorts and denies the truth of Torah does not improve their chances at accurately interpreting the Word of G-d.

In Judaism, on the other hand, there are threads of the Torah that lead from one principle to another. The connection from one thread to another is brought to light by *Torah Shel Ba'al Peh* (the Oral Torah).

Individual words in the Torah connect to other words of equal numerical value in the Torah to illustrate deeper concepts and meanings. Hebrew is an amazing, multi-faceted language. Translations into other languages cannot do it justice. There are thousands of writings by Jewish Sages, dating back thousands of years, explaining the simple and deeper meanings of Torah texts. When a rabbi or a Torah teacher goes to prepare a sermon (*drashah*) or a lesson, the authoritative sources available to him are endless. In addition, Orthodox rabbis must know *Lashon haKodesh* (the Holy Tongue). They learn Torah and discuss Torah in its original language; translation errors and insufficiencies do not play the role they inevitably do when Christian pastors learn the Bible.

Realizing that one's knowledge is limited is a huge step forward. Converts need to ‘wipe the slate clean’ and relearn even the

basic foundations of their Biblical knowledge. In other words, you may think you understand a subject in Torah, you may even think you understand it from the Jewish perspective, but in reality, you are looking through very warped, dulled lenses. The Torah leaders, who have immersed themselves in the study of Torah for decades, teach from a place of so much authority and authenticity, that the difference is like night and day.

The change to a religious perspective based on Torah brings new responsibilities towards learning for converts. As a result, their mind and spirit gradually open to a more expansive understanding and knowledge than ever before. By way of analogy, parents look at their child's world and see 'the big picture', whereas the child sees the micro picture of his or her world.

It is essential that converts enter into the Jewish world of learning with humility. Their Biblical knowledge is going to be torn down and rebuilt. Many things will have to be discarded. The whole process can be quite unsettling, even painful at times, so it is also important that converts cling tenaciously to their strong bond with the Creator, that personal rope of survival that connects them to G-d.

A passage in Yeshayahu (Isaiah) helps to illustrate the process that converts experience as they work their way towards Torah and Judaism:

"I will lead the blind by a road they did not know, and I will make them walk by paths they never knew. I will turn darkness before them into light, rough places into level ground. These are the promises; I will keep them without fail."

YESHAYAHU 42:16

The Prophet is telling us that we are walking in a maze, along crooked paths. As we go along, HaShem will make the crooked way straight.

Eventually, we will find our way out of the maze and approach HaShem's true courtyards. We still must 'enter the gates' so to speak, and that requires faith and courage. When we do step forward, HaShem pulverizes the gates so that they exist no more and we enter the palace courtyard. Here we are given treasures of light and the hidden riches of secret places. Why such great reward? In order that we may know that HaShem, Who called us from the ends of the earth, is the G-d of Israel (Yeshayahu/Isaiah 45:1-3).

BUILDING ON THE RUINS

As the Torah tells us, there is rebuilding that must be done in one's life, if we are to draw near to HaShem and live according to His laws. This rebuilding is upon an eternal foundation for the Jewish people, and it is the foundation upon which converts must rebuild their lives.

There are times when converts might feel they are way ahead of the Jews around them, at least in terms of internalizing what it is to have a vibrant, personal relationship with G-d because their former Christianity focused more on a personal relationship with G-d that it did on actually learning proper fear of Heaven. Remember humility. The Jewish world stretches back to antiquity. Converts find themselves running as fast as they can to catch up, but it is an amazing adventure. Ideas seemingly ingrained in your psyche for life suddenly or eventually drop away to be replaced by a Jewish essence previously unimaginable. Each convert will literally become a new person, but it takes time.

The days we are now living in make it so easy to imagine that the Mashiach could come any day! In the early 90's, when I was going through this process myself, things were happening at a slower pace, including the path of the convert. Today, it seems

that everything has speeded up with no intention of slowing down. Every convert's process is different, but it is important that to go with the flow and embrace the changes as they come. This will help preserve your peace of mind. King David wrote, "With His wing He will cover you, and beneath His wings you will be protected; His shield and armor are His truth" (Tehillim 91:4). There is no better place to be.

Having an emotional support system is vital. Being a part of a community is vital. Find a REAL community that is 100% committed to Halacha, Torah learning and *chesed* (reaching out to others in acts of kindness). You need a plan with goals to carry you through the difficult times, and there will be plenty of those! Be sure that you are connected to others who understand what you are going through. This can be other converts who have been Jewish for years and are able to empathize with your experiences. It can be a rabbi or friend, learned in Torah, who understands you are not a Ba'al Teshuvah, because a convert faces challenges very different from the Jew returning to Torah.

GLEANNING LIFE SKILLS FROM THE TORAH

It is crucial for one to learn the life skills within Torah. Torah psychology is based on the spiritual, mental, and emotional composition of a Jew, according to the spark or essence of a Jew. Along with the Torah responsibilities we carry, Klal Israel (the entire Jewish nation) also has the benefit of the Torah's system for handling one's emotions and responses to the ups and downs of life. Learning these life skills is so very much a part of Torah learning. Secular psychology can help or hurt. The Torah guidelines are unique and uniquely effective. Rabbi Zelig Pliskin and Rabbi Avraham Twerski have each written many

books on this topic. You will find their books user-friendly and very helpful.

It is important to socialize and associate with Jews. Don't just 'hang' with converts. You want to learn how Jewish culture works. Learn some Yiddish so you can better understand the Jewish mind. You want to fit in to your new world. Put on Jewish garb, so to speak, and take off the garments of your *goyish*(gentile) past. It is a process, but a very important one. Some people may think you are a Ba'al Teshuvah as there are so many now in the Jewish world. This can be helpful. You won't want to stand out as obviously being different. Even if you do stand out a bit, there are people who will help you and take the time to explain nuances of Jewish culture.