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ראש הישיבה
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Our times have been blessed with the phenomenon of tens of thousands of Jews who grew up non-Torah observant but who became observant later in life. They are inaccurately called "Baalei Teshuvah" for since they were *tinokos shenishbu* from birth they have nothing for which to do teshuva.

When they marry, since many of these have no family or community traditions to follow, they are left without guidance as to how to navigate some of the challenges which might arise in their newly discovered way of life.

For those who do not have a Rav or a teacher to guide them, Rabbi Zecharya Greenwald has written an excellent guide which takes these people by the hand and leads them step by step through the pitfalls involved in establishing a Jewish home, in raising children, in finding schools and shidduchim for them, as well as many other issues.

This book is an invaluable resource and will be welcomed by what has become a significant segment of the Jewish people. Rabbi Greenwald is to be commended for devoting himself to their success.



Rabbi Aharon Feldman

David J. Lieberman, PhD

Life after Teshuvah is a masterful blend of inspiration and practical advice. The path of *baalei teshuvah* is filled with unpredictable obstacles, twists, turns, and profound struggles. Written with wit and wisdom, this book helps readers navigate their paths more soundly and confidently. Equally valuable, *Life after Teshuvah* provides the rest of the world with a rare window into the lives of *baalei teshuvah*, instilling a deep sense of both empathy and awe.

I have had the *zechus* of knowing Rabbi Greenwald for almost two decades and have not only enjoyed our friendship but have also learned tremendously from him. This book beautifully represents his unique blend of wisdom and good old-fashioned common sense. I've gleaned many insights and valuable applications that can be instantly applied. This book is not a theoretical exploration of educational principles—it's a treasure trove of actionable strategies that are real-world ready.

I wish Rabbi Greenwald much success with this book, which will no doubt enjoy a wide and eager readership.

Dr. Lieberman's thirteen books, which have been translated into twenty-eight languages and include two New York Times Best Sellers, have sold millions of copies worldwide.

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Chapter 1

The Turning Point

We are currently in the midst of a major transformation in Jewish history. In 1974, my *rebbe*, Rav Shlomo Wolbe, may his righteous memory be a blessing, wrote a book called *Bein Sheshes L'Asor* in response to the events that had transpired between 1967 and 1973.¹ With newfound national pride in the victory of the Six Day War, many people began to take a serious look at their Jewish legacy. The shift toward religious observance began with individuals who opened their minds to new concepts and took great strides toward self-discovery and growing interest in their heritage.

These changes, initiated by isolated individuals, soon carried over to entire groups. Jewish institutions flourished everywhere. Yeshivos sprung up to deal with the large influx of Jewish students visiting Israel who wanted a deeper understanding of their birthright. These yeshivos grew, expanded, and eventually began to recruit students.

Rabbi Wolbe's book was a guide to *teshuvah* (literally, "to return"), a compilation of his essays and talks that helped these seekers understand the intelligence of their decision to explore the beauty of their unique history and the ineffable destiny of their nation. Today, as we

1 The title of his book is a play on the words of Chazal, our Sages, "*bein kesser l'asor*," the period of time each year between *kesser* (the crown of Hakadosh Baruch Hu), representing Rosh Hashanah, and *asor*—*asarah la'chodesh* (the tenth of the month of Tishrei), representing Yom Kippur. Rav Wolbe felt that the Jewish victory in the Six Day War (*six=sheshes*) was a turning point in the great wave of reawakening, a new recognition and feeling of pride among Jews in regard to their affiliation with Judaism. This reawakening continued through the Yom Kippur War (*asor*) of 1973.

see, there are many community services and trained rabbis catering to this new population.

We have reached a point where, thankfully, it can be said that there is another overwhelming awakening taking place. Like a sleeping giant who begins to move first his hands and his feet, then shakes his head and finally opens his eyes, entire segments of the Jewish people in different parts of the world are currently returning to a life of Torah.

New Challenges Today

Today's *baalei teshuvah*, returnees, face a constantly changing set of circumstances on a personal level while simultaneously raising their children in environments and value systems that differ radically from those in which they were raised. Although usually integrated into their communities, these intelligent and capable people may confront countless situations for which they are not prepared. They often do not have the fine-tuned perception or experience to know what is acceptable in this new environment and what is not.

Many questions plague them on a daily basis: How do we know what is right? How should we guide our children? May we get our son a pet dog? Can I allow my children to watch some kinds of movies on our computer? What am I supposed to do with perplexing thoughts and feelings about my own development and changes? Where can I turn when things get rough? What do I do when I fundamentally disagree with values that the Torah society seems to completely accept?

Will anyone take me seriously if I am just a BT (*baal teshuvah*)?

I often refer to Moshe Rabbeinu's father-in-law, Yisro, in the Torah. As a new set of eyes, he was able to help his son-in-law become cognizant of the incongruence of his attempt to guide the Jewish people in an unlimited way.

Yisro was very convinced of the correctness of his criticism, yet he qualified his statement with these words: "If you will do as I say *and Hashem will so command you.*"²

2 *Shemos* 18:23.

Twenty years ago, I had the honor of meeting Avi S., a young man raised in the Orient who returned to a life of Torah and mitzvos in his early twenties. He dedicated a large amount of money to making a difference in his newly discovered world. This young man had a vision: he felt that the yeshiva community could reach out to our brothers and sisters in a whole new way. He brought his idea to Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv, one of the generation's greatest leaders. The response was cool at best. He was not against the initiative, but dubious as to its chances of success. Avi persevered. Upon seeing the success of the program, the Rav acknowledged the project, which was adopted by the Lev L'Achim organization. The program encourages kollel fellows to knock on doors of homes in nonreligious communities, offering to learn Torah with their occupants once a week. The project continued for over twenty years, bringing the light of Torah to hundreds of Jewish families. A young baal teshuvah with enormous dedication brought about a change in perspective of one of the greatest living rabbis of our times.³

It is not the least bit surprising that people who have made life-changing decisions find themselves confused and in need of guidance at various times down the road. They may even question the motivation or reasoning that brought about their initial changes.

Rav Wolbe spoke to me about this phenomenon on many occasions. He made it clear that it is almost impossible *not* to go through this process. Anyone who thinks that it is not normal will just be uselessly browbeating themselves, forgoing the freedom that comes as a result of understanding and acceptance of what they have gone through. Those who make major changes in their lives, no matter the original motivation or how well they have been integrated, must understand that there are going to be times and situations that will arouse questions and doubt. This book was written for those who identify with these struggles.

3 This anecdote illustrates the greatness of our leaders, who have the humility to see a new perspective and change their mind accordingly.

We Are Not Alone

We live in a society that encourages us to feel independent. In the final analysis, individuals, couples, and families have to fend for themselves. Nevertheless, when troublesome feelings come to the fore, it is an indication that the time has come to open up and deal with questions and doubts in an honest attempt to find a balanced and healthy position from which to tackle them.

For every thousand people, there are as many situations and challenges. The *teshuvah* process of change was different for every individual. Some came through it easily, while others found it very difficult. The reasons that brought about these changes are myriad, and so are the peripheral factors that helped each person reach the point where they now find themselves. Obviously, a book is not going to be able to take the place of a *rav* and mentor, nor can a book deal specifically with every individual's challenges, yet we will try to address the most common problems facing today's *baalei teshuvah*. It is our hope that the readers, alongside the relationships they have or will develop with teachers and mentors, will be able to use some of the suggested guidelines for their particular circumstances.

Those who can identify with a yeshiva and a *rosh yeshiva*, or a particular group of people who rely on the wisdom of a particular *rebbe* or *rav*, will have the advantage of finding a clearly defined road before them. Although they will have someone to answer their soul-searching questions, hopefully this book will still be a worthwhile read, as it can be a catalyst for further thought and introspection.

While teaching in Yeshivas Ohr Somayach, Rabbi Ephraim Greenbaum,⁴ a close friend of mine, went to see the Gerrer Rebbe.

"*Vu bist du?* [Where are you?]" the Rebbe asked.

"I'm in Ohr Somayach...but I'm not a *baal teshuvah*," he answered.

4 A *mashgiach* in a very prestigious yeshiva called Be'er HaTorah in Yerushalayim. His grandfather was Rabbi Menachem Kasher, who authored a monumental work on Chumash, *Torah Sheleimah*. At one point, Rav Ephraim headed a *kollel* that continued his grandfather's work and produced a number of subsequent volumes.

The Gerrer Rebbe looked at him. “Why not?” he asked.

My friend’s qualifying statement did not please the Rebbe, who clearly felt that *everyone* should be a *baal teshuvah*! Although you might indeed be an accomplished *talmid chacham*, scholar, and successful in the Torah world, there is still something to be learned from those who seem to know so much less than you. We all have to regularly reconsider our actions and position in life, and reconnect to Hashem and His ways in a better way than before.

Today, when we use the designation “*baal teshuvah*,” the connotation is clear: people who have come from a nonreligious background and now include themselves in a dedicated religious community, living a more enhanced Torah life. The spectrum, however, is broad.

We will be focusing on the change itself, the transformation from a totally secular life to one of Torah and mitzvos, and that is a matter of quantum change. We will first explore the factors that introduced this quantum change into people’s lives, the motivations that inspired or affected them, and then see how they can effectively deal with some of the very normal challenges that they are now confronting five, ten, and twenty years later.

As the principal of a seminary in Yerushalayim that has a student body of wonderful Bais Yaakov girls, mostly from the United States, I can tell you that we often have to deal with a student who represents three diverse generations of change. There are often great disparities between the generations of her grandparents, parents, and that of the girl herself. The changes that have taken place over the years in the Jewish community, as well as in the broader society, represent three different worlds.

My students’ parents are raising their children in an America that is vastly different from that of their childhoods. Some were brought up in European-style families or by parents born in America who did not have the opportunity to study in a yeshiva or Bais Yaakov, and others are the first generation to have a yeshiva background. In the latter case, the grandparents may have been totally lost to Judaism, while their children, who found their way back, are now sending the third generation to

yeshivos and day schools. Some of the third generation whose parents and grandparents *were* observant, however, are nonetheless being brought up in an environment that is very different from that of the America of forty and fifty years ago.

Fifty years ago, there were five religious girls' high schools in the entire United States, with a total of 100 to 150 graduates per year. Girls growing up today attend over 120 religious high schools with over 8,000 graduates. The religious educational framework has expanded exponentially, giving rise to an enormous number of changes in the religious world alone.

Defining Quantum Change

This book will not be dealing with minor lifestyle changes, with the challenges created when children decide to be more "religious" or careful in observance than their parents, for in such cases the core values instilled by the home remain the same. Even the fact that our parents may have had from one to four children, while we may be raising upward of seven, does not constitute a drastic change. Other superficial differences, such as clothing and wedding styles that have evolved even in the *frum* world, are also not quantum differences.

A quantum change is one that has occurred in the perceived goals in life, in the way family life is organized, the way our children's schools are run, and even the attitude with which they go to school. As what is expected of people in our community changes somewhat from one generation to the next, it is understandable that trying to distinguish right from wrong can be confusing. One who has made quantum changes often does not have the frame of reference with which to make this distinction. It is difficult to live in a new community when you don't always know what is acceptable, borderline, or completely beyond the pale.

You cannot just assume that you will be able to figure out all the answers by observing what others in your circle are doing. When you are a few years into your growth and building a family, you cannot be satisfied merely with imitating your neighbors. In the beginning, perhaps, you watched what page they were on so you knew where you were

supposed to be in the siddur. As you develop and reach a more sophisticated level of observance, however, an internal feeling of connection with Hashem and the mitzvos cannot just be imitated. In doing that, you will neither learn how to make life decisions nor understand how to raise your children. At this point, what everybody else is doing should not matter. *There is no such thing as everybody else!* We need the tools and skills to decide what is right for us.

Each of you is dealing with a unique situation, with unique experiences. Your children are different from everyone else's. It would be a grave error to just look at someone else, no matter whom, and think, *Well, they are doing this, so it must be OK. I'll do it, too.*

How can we be sure that *they* are doing the right thing? Even if they are intelligent and well informed, perhaps their decisions are based on specific situations that differ from yours. Maybe, they are being hijacked by the *yetzer hara*, evil inclination? Even good people make mistakes. Their decisions have to do with what they understand or feel about their family and their values, and the choices they have to make as a result.

When one of my daughters was in seventh grade, she came home to tell me about the "funtabulous" pajama party that "all" of her friends were planning to attend.

"All the best girls are going."

Aware of the excitement that this kind of activity can generate, I asked which of her friends were participating. She enumerated girls from some of the very fine families in our neighborhood with whom we were friendly. Surprised at some of the names, I decided to call one family to ask if they were indeed comfortable with the plan.

The mother answered the phone and candidly told me that they had actually been opposed to the idea, but when they heard that my daughter was going, they had decided to rethink the matter and give permission. It took three minutes to clarify that almost everyone on the list was depending on everyone

else to make the decision. In the end, the party was canceled. I am not making a blanket statement about pajama parties, but suffice it to say that, in these times, we should be very careful about where and with whom our children are spending their nights.

In the next chapter, we will consider the factors that motivated *baalei teshuvah* to make these major changes in their lives. We hope to provide tools to better equip our readers to meet the many challenges that inevitably crop up even years after they accepted a life of Torah and mitzvos.

Chapter 2

Positive Motivation for Change

What were people looking for when they began to search for something more and better? Many were looking for spirituality and truth. Others felt the need to identify within an ideology that had a history, a lasting track record. And some were attracted to the healthy family relationships they witnessed, the emphasis on spending meaningful time together, home-cooked meals, and wholesome values. That search was often coupled with feeling alienated by the lack of meaning and depth in people around them.

A Search for Spirituality

Many *baalei teshuvah* were looking for more spirituality, more meaning and purpose in their lives. Whether they were somewhat immature eighteen-year-olds or mature thirty-year-olds, the age at which they chose to begin their search is immaterial. It was propelled by the feeling that something was missing, that their lives seemed to have no sensible purpose.

Now, when the search seems a thing of the past, it will be helpful to focus on what was happening when it all began.

Think back to what was going through your mind then.

While initially, life and living took on different meanings amid the awareness of a new sense of spirituality, you were simultaneously meeting groups of people in a new community, which brought fresh challenges.

As you took great strides toward finding meaning and purpose, you soon needed jobs to meet financial and educational responsibilities,

possibly together with the exhausting physical challenges of rearing a family.

It suddenly felt as if your world was turned upside down...again. You had found an alternative to the emptiness. It looked beautiful and attractive, yet with it all, you seemed to be on your own, grappling with the challenges of a greater truth. A few years down the road, however, you found yourself in such a different place emotionally that it made your original initiative seem almost irrelevant.

Years later, it is possible for doubts to smolder. *Was I really missing so much before I changed?* you may wonder. *What was so bad about my life then?*

Looking Back

For those who are currently in this very situation, it might be helpful to go back to the beginning. I think that you will see that *nothing has changed in your need for meaning in life*. If you could go back to where you were then, you would undoubtedly make the same decision all over again. If you were suddenly deprived of everything you have now, everything you have gained, even the parts of life that challenge you, you would again feel bereft and empty. This time, however, you would feel the additional lack of meaning and purpose in life because what you now value and take for granted would be missing.

Let us analyze what takes place when people are faced with new challenges.

When life changes in major ways, it is often felt necessary to look back and figure out where we went wrong. Having to face and deal with new realities does not mean that something went wrong. It is important to differentiate between fact and fantasy.

New questions cannot be answered by looking back with regret. You may tend to blame your current stumbling blocks on the changes you have made. Asking, "What did I do wrong, and why is Hashem doing this to me?" while valid, is not productive. Although these questions will be discussed, the answers are not going to resolve the practical problems with which you are now struggling.