

[A recent article in Reform Judaism](#) described a Yale undergraduate's "frum week", in which she tried out kashrut, traditional tefillah betzibbur, distinctively Orthodox tzeniut, and the like so as to make sure that her choices not to observe were authentic and thoughtful. She was on the whole very appreciative of what she tried, and we the intransigent Orthodox have much to learn from her appreciation of birkot hanehenin, davening, and the need for kiddush Hashem when one is publicly identifiable as Jewish.

But I had two immediate concerns. First, wasn't she trivializing halakhic experience by engaging in it with no permanent commitment, as a spiritual tourist (transient Orthodox)? Can one understand marriage by living together with someone for a week? Second, was her presentation and experience of Orthodoxy as an almost entirely ritual phenomenon reductive, or worse, accurate? Is ritual observance purposeful if it does not make one a significantly "better person"?

Then I realized that I could ask the same question in a traditional learning contest. Shulkhan Arukh YD 112 teaches that while pat nakhri (bread baked by Gentiles) is forbidden lekhatchilah, it is permitted to buy commercial bread when no other is available, and the RAMO cites an opinion that permits commercial bread under all circumstances. SHAKH declares that this is the standard practice. But SHAKH then endorses a custom of being particularly concerned about this during the 10 Days of Repentance.

SHAKH's custom has a long history, but one antecedent that particularly interested me is the Minhagim of Rabbi Yitzchak Isaac Tirana, who lived in Austria from the late 14th to mid-15th centuries.

ספר המנהגים (טירנא) הגהות המנהגים עשרת ימי תשובה אות (קלו) אבל

בכל י' ימי תשובה אין אוכלין פת של גוים (קלו) אלא מכשירין תנורים בקיסם

(קלו) אבל מצוה מן המובחר לאכול פת שאפו היהודים ולא שהוכשר ע"י קיסם . . .

Throughout the 10 Days of Repentance we do not eat bread of Gentiles, rather we kasher ovens with a twig.

(Note 136) But it is a mitzvah min hamuvchar to eat bread that Jews baked, rather than bread kashered via a twig.

The Bar Ilan Responsa Project's biography tool says that the notes are not by Rabbi Tirana. In other words, what we have here is

- a) An acknowledgement that halakhically it is permitted to eat any commercial bread
- b) A statement that for the 10 Days one should nonetheless only eat commercial bread which a Jew has played a minimal role in baking (adding a twig to the flame of the oven)
- c) An note acknowledging that adding the twig suffices to fulfill the custom, but claiming nonetheless that an even higher level requires bread that was fully baked by Jews.

Now the key point here is that unlike teshuvah, which requires regret for the past and commitment for the future, this practice consciously and explicitly justifies the past, and is not intended to continue past Yom Kippur. What is the point of temporarily adopting an extrahalakhic ritual stringency? Why does this practice not trivialize the year-round effort of fulfilling the details of Halakhah?

My suggestion is the following: One of the great barriers to positive change is the reasonable desire not to confound our friends', colleagues', even families' expectations of us. We are justly leery of destabilizing critical and comfortable relationships. It is in a sense a violation of tzeniut to call attention to ourselves by suddenly changing our practices, even for the better, and sometimes a direct violation of meichazei keyuhara, appearing to be spiritually arrogant. 'Who is s/he to walk away from a lashon hor a conversation – s/he was never better than us before, and I remember just last week that s/he . . . '

The 10 Days of Repentance offer us a space where positive change *is* the expectation, where improved action *is* not arrogance but conformity. To ensure this, we standardize certain minor changes, and perhaps tolerate or even encourage a certain amount of competition and one upmanship. This provides a cover, or at least a halakhic fig leaf, for more substantive changes which might otherwise seem threatening to one's social and emotional circles.

I hope that "frum week" eventually generates a lifetime. But even if it doesn't, I hope it opened a space for positive change, a context enabling peers and family to see and support this young woman not only as she is but as she might be. Similarly, I hope that the coming 10 Days will provide us as individuals and as communities with the opportunity to live up to our best selves, and that we will seize those opportunities.

Shanah Tovah - May we all be inscribed in the Books of Life, Joy, and Meaning.

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