

MELECH YACOV, EX-JEW, USA (PART 1 OF 2)

Rating: 4.7

Description: Melech gives insight to Jewish life and religion, and his slow move away from Chasidic Judaism.

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When I was born I was given the Hebrew name Melech Yacov. Today I still live in the area in New York where I was born. We were a semi-religious family; we belonged to a Chasidic congregation to which we went every Saturday, but we did not keep all the strict observances required in Chasidic Judaism. For those who don't know, Chasidism is known in the mainstream as "Ultra Orthodox" Judaism. They are called so because of their strict observances of *Halacha* (Jewish Law) and their following of Jewish mysticism (*cabala*). They are the strange people that you see walking down the street wearing black suits and hats and letting their beards and sideburns grow long.

We were not like that though. My family cooked and used electricity on the Sabbath, and I didn't wear a yarmulke on my head. Moreover I grew up in a secular environment surrounded by non-Jewish schoolmates and friends. For many years, I still felt guilty about driving on Saturdays and eating non-kosher food.

Although I did not observe all of the rules, I nevertheless felt a strong sense that this was the way that God wanted me to live, and every time I omitted a rule, I was committing sin in the eyes of God. From the earliest days, my mother would read to me the stories of the great Rabbis like Eliezar, the Baal Shem Tov, and the legends from the *Haggada* (part of the Talmud other than the *Halacha*) and Torah.

All of these stories had the same ethical message which helped me to identify with the Jewish community, and later Israel. The stories showed how Jews were oppressed throughout history, but God always stood by His people until the end. The stories that we Jews were brought up on showed us that miracles always saved the Jews whenever they were in their greatest time of need. The survival of the Jews throughout history, despite all odds, is seen as a miracle in itself.

If a person wants to take an objective view on why most Jews have the irrational Zionist stance regarding Israel, then they must understand the way by which we were indoctrinated with these stories as children. That is why the Zionists pretend that they are doing nothing wrong at all. All of the *goyim* (gentiles) are seen as enemies waiting to attack, and thus they cannot be trusted. The Jewish people have a very strong bond

with one another and see each other as the “chosen people” of God. For many years I believed this myself.

Although I had a strong sense of identity as a Jew, I could not stand going to Saturday services (*shul*). I still remember myself as a little boy being forced to go to *shul* with my father. I remember how dreadfully boring it was for me and how strange everyone looked with their black hats and beards praying in a foreign language. It was like being thrown into a different world away from my friends and the people I knew. This was what I thought I was supposed to be, but I (and my parents) never adopted the Chasidic life like the rest of my family.

When I turned 13, I was *bar-mitzvah*'ed like every other Jewish boy who becomes a man. I also began putting *tefilin* (Hebrew amulets) on every morning. I was told that it is dangerous to skip putting it on because it was like an omen and bad things might happen to you. The first day I skipped putting on *tefilin* my mom's car got stolen! That event encouraged me to wear it for a long time.

It was only a little while after my *bar-mitzvah* that my family stopped going to synagogue altogether. They could not stand the three-and-a-half hours of prayer and felt that getting me *bar-mitzvah*ed was the most important thing. Later on, my father got into a silly quarrel with some congregation members, and we ended up not going at all to services anymore. Then something strange happened: my father was convinced by a friend to accept Jesus into his heart. God willing my mother did not divorce my father for his conversion to Christianity, but she has kept a silent hatred of it ever since.

This was also a period in my early-teen years when I sought to find something to identify with. My father's conversion helped me question my own beliefs. I began asking questions like: What exactly is a Jew anyway? Is Judaism a culture, a nation, or a religion? If it is a nation, then how could Jews be citizens of two nations? If Judaism is a religion, then why are the prayers recited in Hebrew, prayers for Eretz Israel, and observance of “Oriental” rituals? If Judaism was just a culture, then would not a person cease to be a Jew if he stopped speaking Hebrew and practicing Jewish customs?

If a Jew was one who observes the commandments of the Torah, then why is Abraham called the first Jew when he lived before the Torah came down to Moses? Incidentally, the Torah doesn't even say he was a Jew; the word Jew comes from the name of one of Jacob's 12 sons, Judah. Jews were not called Jews until the Kingdom of Judah was established after the time of Solomon. Tradition holds that a Jew is someone whose mother was Jewish. So you can still be a Jew if you practice Christianity or atheism. More and more I began to move away from Judaism. There were so many laws and *mitzvahs* (good deeds) to observe. What is the point of all these different rituals, I began to question. To me they were all man-made.

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