

## **Part I: The Formative Years**

This summer will mark the 20th anniversary of what I have come to see as my personal "Lech Lecha - Go Forth" moment; the time when, like Abraham, I felt called to leave France, my native land, my father's house, and to go forth to the land of Israel. I arrived at Ben Gurion airport, near Tel Aviv, in the middle of the night that summer of 1989. I was barely 18 years old.

I wonder, at times, who that young Jewish French man was back then. I know that I was a fierce Zionist, moved by the idealistic energies of youth, ready to change the world. I had been raised amidst a Mizrahi Sephardic family. My father was the last of many generations of BenHaim to be born on the northern African soil of what was then French Algeria, and, at home, we followed the customs of his Jewish heritage. My mother was the daughter of an unlikely Jewish couple-my grandfather, a French man with Turkish roots, and my grandmother, a Polish woman from Warsaw-who survived the Shoah hiding in the middle of France, and for whom Judaism had come to mean fear, persecution, darkness and death.

Growing up Jewish in France meant practicing modern orthodox Judaism, the only denomination available then. But my family was more what my father had coined "culinary Jews" than religiously practicing Jews. We enjoyed the holidays as long as they meant getting the family all together around the table and eating the outstanding oriental cuisine of my paternal grandmother. Orthodoxy was just too much for my father. And so, as a good rebellious teenage son, I became a practicing modern orthodox Jew from my early teens and through my initial years in Israel.

During my first year at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, I joined an afternoon program at a French Yeshiva where my knowledge of text and my love for Judaism deepened. But once my student years were over, I started to put my energies toward settling down in Jerusalem, and with "life" taking over, my religious practice slowly gave way. I was working for the Laromme Hotel in Jerusalem when I met Amy, the woman who would become my wife a few years later. Eventually, the Israeli army called me up. I served in the IDF for about 2 years in the Golani Brigade, an elite fighters' unit.

## **Part II: Meeting Rabbi Ted**

After my military service ended, I left Israel for the US. Amy and I settled down in Seattle, and I began climbing the American corporate ladder. During those years, my spiritual practice had turned towards Buddhism. I started meditating, practicing Yoga and Tai Chi and discovering the wonderful work of Ken Wilber, one of my main influences.

It was during that time that Amy came upon a flyer advertising a series of Jewish-Buddhist dialogues between a Buddhist nun and a local rabbi. It was to take place at the Museum of History & Industry, and revolve around the showing of Roger Kamenetz's documentary "The Jew in the

Lotus." Being on a Buddhist path myself and having had no contact with the American Jewish community up until this point, I was unaware of the multi-denominational character of American Judaism. And so, for me, the only kind of rabbis that existed were the orthodox kind that I had known both in France and in Israel, and whom, as far as I was concerned, knew no meditative practice nor promoted any path toward enlightenment. I was resolute to attend one of these dialogues to watch the Buddhist nun teach a lesson in spirituality to the poor rabbi.

That "poor rabbi" was Rabbi Ted Falcon who, that night, rekindled for me the quasi-extinguished flame of my Jewish spiritual path and changed my life forever. Amy and I joined Bet Alef Meditative Synagogue soon after. I switched my Sanskrit meditation mantra to a Hebrew one, delved into Jewish mysticism and rediscovered Torah as a healing spiritual path of awakening.

It took another few years in the corporate world, and for my own process to unfold, before it became clear to me that my path would lie in joining the millennia old rabbinic lineage. By that time, Rabbi Ted had already begun the search for his eventual successor, wanting to ensure Bet Alef's continued future. The timing was just perfect. By the end of 2005 I left my corporate career behind and began my internship training with Bet Alef.

### **Part III: My Internship**

My internship included many facets of the rabbinic life. I learned first-hand the ins and outs of running a synagogue by acting as the Administrative Manager from day one. I learned from Rabbi Ted and practiced "hands-on" how to lead Shabbat and holiday services, wedding and Bar Mitzvah ceremonies, as well as funerals and memorial services. At the same time, Rabbi Ted allowed me to create and lead a new evolution of Bet Alef's "L'Dor VaDor" family programming, including its two-year Bnai Mitzvah program. The academic part of my studies took place in my pursuing a Master's Degree in Jewish Studies through the remarkable Hebrew College Online program based in Newton, Massachusetts. In the last phase of my internship, Rabbi Ted insisted that I also complete a 20 weeks extended unit of Clinical Pastoral Education at Swedish Medical Center in Seattle, for which I am immensely grateful.

When I take the time today to pause and reflect upon the set up of this rabbinic training process and the way it has unfolded in the past few years, the image that comes to mind is that of a reenactment of an age-old process of apprenticeship. My dictionary defines apprenticeship as: "To bind to or place with an employer, master craftsman, or the like, for instruction in a trade." Before the great modern institutions of rabbinic schools, I imagine the Jewish communities of old setting up apprenticeships for the younger generation of learned men to succeed the retiring rabbinic leaders. Like them, I have had the privilege to follow in the steps of a "master craftsman," my rabbi, for the last four years, learning

from him the essential components of the rabbinic trade. This has been my blessed path; the path of an ancient tradition of apprenticeship recreated with the support and commitment of our Bet Alef community.

#### **Part IV: My Vision for the Future**

As we draw near to ordination day, I also feel compelled to look forward and imagine our community's future. My intention, which has been the same since Rabbi Ted and I spoke about the possibility of this internship four years ago, is first and foremost to ensure the continuity of what makes Bet Alef a unique spiritual community. Our worship services and Torah classes, our workshops and Holiday celebrations are precious spiritual gifts, hallowed containers, which need preserving and nurturing. If anything, what I foresee changing in the future is that most of what we share at Bet Alef will be shared with a French accent. By that I mean that I won't be able to help but to bring who I am to each moment, just as all of us do. Rabbi Ted shared just a few weeks ago that not only will I have to find my own voice in this process, but also my "own words" to express the spiritual teachings that he has shared, in his own way, for so many years. I suspect that this evolution will take several years, and I welcome and look forward to your participation in raising me as your rabbi, and supporting me in finding my way, my rabbinic identity.

While preserving what already exists is certainly my main focus, many ideas are floating through my mind about what could be added that would enhance our experience, and supplement our spiritual offering menu. Once I find my pace in the rhythm of rabbinic life, I suspect that you might see extra workshops or classes being added to our community calendar. Some of these workshops might actually be led by members of our community, or spiritual teachers in the greater community, provided that they are aligned with Bet Alef's core values of inclusiveness and supportive of a Universal Spirit. My vision follows Rabbi Ted's teaching that all of us come to this community "on purpose." Supporting the journey of discovering what that purpose might be for each of us within Bet Alef, is a role I would like to play.

What is of paramount importance to me as Bet Alef's Associate Rabbi about to be, is that, like our forefather Abraham before me, I am able to make my service to our community a blessing.

Ken Yehi Ratzon...May it be Thy Will.

Olivier BenHaim

June, 2009

