

June 5, 2019 // Parashas Naso/Shavuos VOL. XXII NO. 1063 ב' סיון תשע"ט // פרשת נשא/שבועות HAMODIA WE From Awake in Anticipation FFBT—The Second Generation... "Today, this boy is a masmid, "... thousands of baalei teshuvah made the and he happily admits that it's because he learned how same choice, the right choice, again and again, choosing to include themselves in the to set attainable goals and congregation of Hashem, strengthening the whole of our nation, alloying us like steel." meet them."

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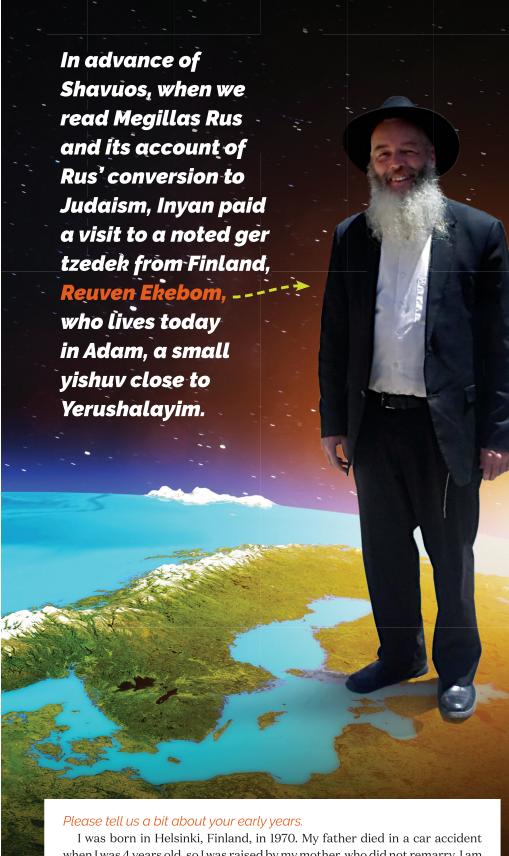
by RACHMIEL DAYKIN

HOME



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I was born in Helsinki, Finland, in 1970. My father died in a car accident when I was 4 years old, so I was raised by my mother, who did not remarry. I am an only child. Other than that, I had a fairly standard upbringing in Finland, which is a Christian country, but people's attitudes are generally secular.

Was there something that set you apart from your peers, some sort of indication as to your future turn to Judaism?

Well... perhaps. Even in grade school I was interested in the martial arts and also mysticism, particularly Eastern mysticism. I think this is true about a lot of people in Finland. They believe in G-d, but the main trend is toward materialism, with apathy toward Christianity, and yet at the same time there is a thirst for spirituality.

That thirst initially led me to search for spirituality in Eastern mysticism. I read a great deal about this, and this comes together with the Eastern approach to martial arts.

At some point in my search, I came across some books about *Kabbalah*. From a Jewish perspective, these were books of a questionable nature, but nevertheless they made a powerful impression on me. In fact, the impression they made was so intense that I couldn't take it anymore. I concluded that I would have nothing to do with these books, and years went by before I began studying the more accepted works of Torah.

Did you travel to the Far East as part of your search for spirituality and in your study of martial arts?

No. There was a Japanese master whom I studied with when he came to Europe, and at one point I was thinking about going to Japan, but one of those so-called "coincidences" happened, and by *hashgachah* I came to Israel instead.

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Instead of Japan, you went to Eretz Yisrael?

Yes, it sounds funny, but when I was considering traveling to Japan, I learned that in Israel there was another leading expert in the field of martial arts that I was studying. Israel is closer to Finland than Japan is, and it cost much less to go to Israel. I also heard that the Japanese masters are not always willing to teach others, so for what I thought at the time were simply practical reasons, I chose to go to Israel.

And were you were introduced to authentic Judaism?

Not really. I was in Tel Aviv, and I was busy with what I was studying. But when I went back to Finland, at some point one of my friends in Israel sent me two books — *Mesillas Yesharim* and *Michtav MeEliyahu*, with the English translations. I began reading these books and was very interested in them. Still, it was all on the level of philosophy. Wonderful ideas, but nothing changed in my day-to-day life.

When did the change come about?

Well, I got married, also "by coincidence" to a Jewish woman who had been raised nonreligious. The two of us, for different reasons, began trying to learn about *kashrus*. My wife's sister became religious, and this influenced her somewhat. She began to show interest in *kashrus*, which in Finland basically means going against the whole current of life. Milk and meat are typically mixed together there, and pork is common. For my wife, her interest in *kashrus* went together with an interest in eating healthfully, and I began what I call "playing" with *mitzvos*, because I was not Jewish at the time. Despite this, as the Rebbe of Lubavitch would cite from the *mishnah*, "*Ha'ikar hu hamaaseh* — The main thing is the doing."

These actions, this "playing with *mitzvos*," affected me very much. The moment I began doing actions — not philosophy but action — I felt inside that this is the truth, this is the direction I will take.

This was what led you to Judaism?

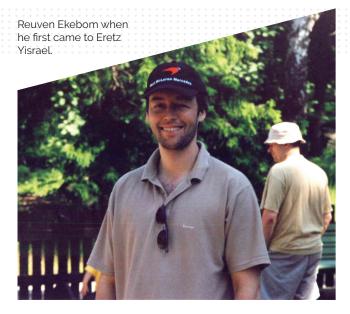
Basically, yes, but there were some strange incidents along the way, strange occurrences of *hashgachah* that helped give me that extra bit of resolve, to know that I was making the right decision by converting.

For example?

Reb Reuven pauses, lost in thought for a moment, until a slight smile appears on his lips.

It came to a point where I had basically decided. I wanted to convert, yet still I was looking for some sort of sign from Heaven that this is what I should do. One day, this sign came.

I was traveling somewhere within Finland, and I was waiting on line to buy a ticket. When my turn came, the



ticket seller gave me my seat assignment, and for some inexplicable reason, I began arguing with him. I was adamant that I did not want the seat he had intended to give me. No, I insisted on a different seat.

Now, anyone who knows me would have been taken aback by my behavior. This sort of thing never bothers me. As I was talking, I myself could not understand what I was doing. Why was I behaving this way? The people at the office there also did not know how to respond, because in Finland this sort of reaction is very rare. And yet I argued in a way that was not me at all, and when I came to the seat I had demanded, whom did I see? One of the Rabbanim of Helsinki — an Orthodox Rav.

When I saw him, it was clear to me that this was a sign from Hashem, telling me: Yes, you are cordially invited to join My people. It was like an embrace from Above.

To this day, this is how I feel, that Hashem gave me this gift, to join His people. In retrospect, I feel it wasn't really a choice that I decided, but rather that He was guiding me to this all along, to accept this gift. Until today I don't know why I deserved it.

Did you develop a connection with this Rav?

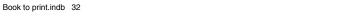
At the time, no. I saw him and felt that this was a sign from Heaven, but we did not speak. Later, this was the Rav who began my conversion process, only he gave me the excellent advice that since my wife and I were planning on going to Israel, we should complete the conversion process there.

What was your destination in Israel?

We came to Teveria, where my wife has family. I completed my conversion with the *Rabbanut* there. I had made up my mind to become Jewish, but I had not yet found a specific *nusach*. I used to *daven* in a Moroccan shul, using my Ashkenazic *siddur* with its English translation. Because my Hebrew wasn't very good, it didn't seem strange to me at first that it was hard to follow the prayer service.

After a while, though, I realized it wasn't just my Hebrew

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You reached a high level of expertise in the eastern martial arts before converting. Does this expertise contribute to your daily life as a Jew today?

First of all, surrounding the eastern martial arts are elements that are forbidden even for non-Jews, but much of what I learned and today teach is straightforward. As for what this may add to my daily life, the *Tanya* gives a *mashal* of the *yetzer hara* and the *yetzer tov* as two wrestlers, and the *yetzer tov* is the stronger one, but if it is lazy, the *yetzer hara* can overcome. This *mashal* rings true for me, because in the martial arts, without remaining focused, one can be thrown off balance even by a weaker opponent. In my day-to-day Jewish life, though, I live this *mashal* particularly during *davening*. For me, *davening* with *kavanah* is a war, and I approach this war with some of the tools gained from the martial arts. For example, there is a concept of overcoming the enemy while not injuring yourself or him either. This means that one avoids using brute force, and instead tries to tap into the opponent's energy and use it against him. It means being on guard on a much higher level than just to avoid being thrown off balance.

It may sound funny, but this is the way I struggle to *daven* with *kavanah*, which as I said is for me a war; it's a struggle between the *neshamah* and the *nefesh habehamis*, and I try to tap into its energy, know where it is coming from, and attempt to convince the *nefesh habehamis* that it's in its interest as well that I *daven* with *kavanah* — it will help him, too. It may sound strange, but for me, I feel that this is a way of rectifying this spark of holiness, of transmitting to the *nefesh habehamis* this concept of struggle that I learned from the martial arts.

that was keeping me from following the prayers — I was using a different prayerbook too! I called a book store and asked for a Sephardic *siddur* with an English translation, and I received a *nusach Sephard siddur*, which was a bit closer to the Moroccan *nusach* but still didn't help much.

More and more during this period, I felt that I needed a Rabbi who speaks English. Another "coincidence" happened when I saw a notice in English for a *farbrengen* of Chabad. I had heard about the Lubavitcher Rebbe, and once got a visit from a *shaliach* in Helsinki, but now things clicked. I went to the *farbrengen* and then joined an English *Tanya shiur*. A few *shiurim* in *Tanya* was enough. I stopped shaving, and became a Lubavitcher Chassid.

You make it sound as though everything fell into place with ease.

I suppose I've left out the many struggles that we had to go through. It was hard for people to accept our different lifestyle. We had to wage a real fight, but Hashem gave us the strength to overcome the obstacles.

It's ironic that you use the word fight. That's your expertise — self-defense.

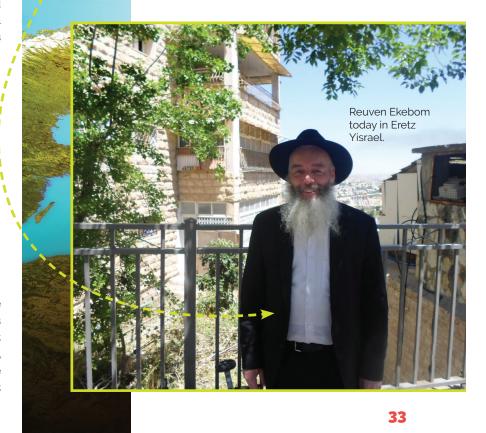
(*Reuven chuckles*) There's a big difference between a physical enemy and the struggles we faced, but you're right, there is a concept in Torah, and it exists in martial arts as well, of making the intellect rule over emotion. The more a person can control himself in the midst

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of a struggle, the better he will perform. This is true whether the enemy is physical or spiritual.

I recall saying this to Rav Dov Kook, the *mekubal* in Teveria, before we moved to Jerusalem. I came to him for a *brachah*, and he asked me to tell him my story. After I told him, he said that instead, he wanted *me* to give *him* a *brachah*!

Reuven's chuckle becomes a laugh, and our interview comes to a close. ■



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