

10 STEPS

To Being a (Normal) Baal Teshuvah

SHAYNA CHARTER

When I look back on my husband and myself at the beginning of our journey to a frum lifestyle, I am sure at times we were needy, obsessive, and over-the-top. Today, more than 50 years later, when we feel much more composed and balanced, my goal in writing this article is to show my fellow BTs that they are not alone, and to encourage the rest of the community with ideas on how to embrace us and integrate all newcomers.*



The day before our wedding, December 15, 1963. My mother said if we waited until I turned 18 she would make us a wedding. If not, it would be in the rabbi's study. We didn't care! I was 16 and my husband was 20. A Reform rabbi married us in his study. This is the only picture and it was taken the day before.

Whenever two *baalei teshuvah* meet, no matter whether they have been religious for years or are just beginning their path, they always ask each other two questions:

“How did you become observant?”

“How did your family react?”

People become *frum* for many reasons: they are drawn to spirituality; they seek order and meaning in their lives; they want their children to carry on their heritage. Family reactions are usually similar: Shock, dismay, and confusion: “Why for heaven’s sake would you want to live like *that*?” I hope this article will help new or confused BTs to keep focused, to be happy, and to achieve their goals without going overboard.

* For the sake of simplicity I will use the abbreviations BT for *baal teshuvah* and FFB for *frum* from birth.



Isser Chaim Charter
with the Rebbe, 1988.

1. A Jew Is a Jew

YOU MIGHT HAVE HEARD the phrase practicing or non-practicing Jew, religious or non-religious. But actually a Jew is a Jew. It is an identity, not a role. We have a connection to Hashem just because we are Jews. Torah and *mitzvos* are tools to bring us closer to Hashem.

Before, your relationship with Hashem was concealed and now it's being revealed, bringing it center-stage in your life. Whatever you take on should be out of love, to become closer to Hashem and reveal more G-dliness in the world. Not out of fear, pressure, or a desire to fit in.

The first time I kept Shabbos, I was a complete wreck. It was a complete puzzle to me how to serve two fresh hot meals without cooking for 25 hours.

THE FIRST STEP IS TO find guidance from someone you trust, whose ideals and personality are similar to yours. I am not a particularly spiritual person. I believe in Hashem and that He controls all things but my nature is very practical. I like knowing what to do and what not to do. Observant women who had their act together were my greatest influence. I tend to gravitate toward couples who are either BTs themselves or have a lot of exposure to them. It is hard for anyone brought up in a totally religious community to imagine what our life was like before and how difficult it is to change completely. The first time I kept Shabbos, I was a complete wreck. It was a complete puzzle to me how to serve two fresh hot meals without cooking for 25 hours. This was before crockpots became popular and I was sure I would burn the house down. With the help of a Rebbetzin, I figured out how to use a *blech*, another new word in my growing vocabulary. I barely got any sleep, checking on the *cholent* without stirring or moving it. Of course, it completely dried out by Shabbos morning, so I took it off the fire and wrapped the pot in blankets to keep it hot, which I now know may be forbidden on Shabbos. A Shabbos to remember!

2. Aseh Lecha Rav—Find a Mentor

3. A Plan

BECOMING RELIGIOUS IS DAUNTING at first and you have no idea where to start. There isn't a timeline that you should follow, but I do find that those who take on too much too fast either give up or begin to slip backwards at some point. Every person has something that is a sticking point. At first, Shabbos, keeping kosher, and being *tzniusdik* were beyond me, although the laws of family purity were appealing. Who wouldn't want to be a new bride every month? It is fine to go step by step according to your personality. Nobody is judging you or timing you. Hashem is infinitely

patient and even if you take baby steps or your progress slows down at some point, Hashem is happy. Go at a pace that's comfortable for you.

Once you have an overall plan, get to work and prioritize. A woman that I am currently learning with started with *shatnez*, making sure that her clothing did not have a combination of wool and linen. This particular *mitzvah* is a *chok*, a *mitzvah* that we do because Hashem said so, even though there is no rational reason that we know of. Most women I know are not so particular about checking their clothing for *shatnez*, especially here in California where we rarely, if ever, wear wool. While this *mitzvah* might have been a good first step for her, I steered her to also work on *kashrus* and Shabbos, which are considered the mainstays of a Jewish home.

Practical matters and spiritual matters are separate goals. You might need a different advisor for each. The woman who helped me with keeping Shabbos and kosher was not the same as my friend who taught me the laws of family purity and helped me design a program for learning.



Isser Chaim Charter with a daughter at a melaveh malkah at New England Hebrew Academy, Boston, 1974.



Isser Chaim and Shayna (then known as Stuart and Jeanie) Charter in 1969, when they began keeping Shabbos.

4. Read and Learn

THERE ARE MANY BOOKS, websites, blogs, and articles to guide those who are new to the practice of Torah and *mitzvos*. I recommend *To Live as a Jew* by Samuel Rosenbaum and *Toward a Meaningful Life* by Simon Jacobson. *Kabbalah* and *Zohar* are popular at the moment but true understanding is way beyond a beginner's grasp. They will not help on a practical level if you are striving to be more observant. What I love about Chabad is that wherever you are coming from, the Rebbe speaks to you. If you crave spirituality, Chabad is for you. If you want practical life lessons, Chabad is also for you. Find classes that are at your level and meet other women whom you can relate to. Some people enjoy deep *sichos* and *maamarim*; other people enjoy baking challah or doing other hands-on activities.

Learn to read Hebrew. I know people who have been observant for years and still *daven* in English. There is nothing inherently wrong with *davening* in English but your pride and sense of accomplishment are worth the struggle. Not to mention being able to do what your children and grandchildren do.

5. Keep it Calm and Simple

LIVING A TORAH-TRUE LIFE should be enjoyable and not annoying or stressful. My husband, Isser Chaim, made it clear that he did not want an exhausted wife every Erev Shabbos. He is not a big eater or a fussy eater and didn't care what I served for Shabbos as long as the family was peaceful when Shabbos came in. My friend helped me map out my week so I didn't have to go crazy at the last minute. I shopped on Wednesday and cleaned and baked on Thursday. On Thursday, I cooked anything that would stay nicely until Shabbos, but made the chicken, meat, and *cholent* on Friday. Becoming kosher is complicated and you must have expert advice in setting up a kosher kitchen. Do not be shy and ask questions.

No question is too small or too trivial. If your mentor runs out of patience, make a list of other people you can call or switch mentors.

Do not worry if you make mistakes. It is natural, especially in the beginning. Ask, ask, ask. Copying what others do without knowing why doesn't make sense. At my Shabbos table, one of my girls threw salt over her shoulder; I have no idea why. Immediately three of my guests were throwing salt. How many women think putting their rings in their mouths is part of washing for *Hamotzi*? I thought *cholent* wasn't *cholent* without lima and kidney beans, both of which I dislike. In time you will discover and create your own traditions that will become your family's history. If I do not make miniature potato kugels on Sukkos, everyone is disappointed.

MOST PEOPLE WHO WERE not brought up religious harbor dozens of stereotypes. My concept of religious women was that they were horrible housekeepers and couldn't care less how they looked. I pictured a slovenly woman with a kerchief down her forehead schlepping along in slippers. When I met Chabad women, who were beautiful, well dressed, and with households that ran like successful businesses, I changed my opinion overnight. I resented that I could not sit next to my husband in the synagogue during my son's bar mitzvah. I didn't even have a son until we were married 27 years, but I complained anyway. My biggest misconception was believing that the center of Judaism was the synagogue. I have since learned that observance begins in the home where the woman sets the stage. She is responsible for raising children, for family purity, and for the *kashrus* in the home.

A huge stereotype that is very commonly believed is that all FFBs have perfect families. Guess what, kids are kids and their children misbehave like any others. Also, while many FFBs have saintly and heroic ancestors, BTs need to value and appreciate the good qualities of their own grandparents.

My mother was not observant but her *middos* and character were of the highest caliber. I remind myself that my *yichus* is in front of me and not behind me. We are not responsible for where we come from but we do set the path for our descendants.

This security guard (a.k.a. Isser Chaim Charter) is protecting the security of not only the immediate premises, but of Klal Yisroel.



6. Losing the Stereotypes

HANDS DOWN, THIS IS THE HARDEST ISSUE. When we became religious, both our families completely flipped out. To them it was going back to the Dark Ages. My mother was afraid that if she needed me, she couldn't call on Shabbos. Sending the children to a yeshiva instead of the huge new public school on the block was inconceivable to her. The cry we heard the most was, "If public school was good enough for you, why not for your children?" When we sold our brand new house in suburbia to buy a 100-year-old house in the city, that was the last straw.

Both my husband's sibling and my sibling married non-Jews and no one made much of a fuss. Slowly I realized that marrying a gentile was the norm and becoming a Chassidic Jew was not. My mother did not keep kosher and had no desire to change, so my children had to bring snacks when they visited. My in-laws were kosher, sort of. They had separate dishes for milk and meat and purchased kosher meat, but weren't necessarily careful with the *hechsher* of every product. We didn't want to hurt them so we had to consult a Rav. *Kibud av v'eim* is important no matter what your differences are. When we took on *chalav Yisroel*, my poor father-in-law was confused. "You want OU, I buy OU, and you still won't eat it." I don't think he ever grasped the concept of *chalav Yisroel* to the day he died. He thought it was a way for Jews to make money. Sometimes you have to just accept it.

The holiday season was a nightmare. My mother wanted us to visit my sister (and her non-Jewish husband) and family at Xmas. I just couldn't bring my children into a house with a tree and all the decorations. She was upset, and I explained as well as I could. *Baruch Hashem*, our parents lived long enough to see the fruit of our labor. Their friends either didn't have grandchildren or, if they did, the kids were not a part of their lives. When my mother could show off her grandchildren at her senior residence, she was bursting with pride. When she became a great-grandmother, she would stop people in a store to talk about it. Our aunts and uncles insisted that our children would rebel and leave this lifestyle. No one did and there are now four new generations of observant Jews, *ka"h*.

7. Dealing With Family and Friends

I once spoke to a group of *kollel* wives and asked them, **"How many of you bought a *sheitel* that cost over \$4000?" Almost every hand went up. I told them, keep your hand up if you still like it. Hands down.**

THE FIFTH SHULCHAN ARUCH

GITTEL BASTHEIM

I'VE BEEN A BT FOR FOUR DECADES and counting, *baruch Hashem*, but I don't speak for all BTs. No BT speaks for all of us.

To me, one of the most distressing remarks in the world is, "Use your Fifth *Shulchan Aruch*." The "Fifth *Shulchan Aruch*" refers to one's common sense to make a snap decision, based on the knowledge and experience we have, relying on our instincts and intuition.

You're asking me, a BT, to use my instinct and intuition in a situation where there might be a right and wrong way? Forget about it.

If I had based my life on instinct and intuition, without Torah, I might be married to a man practicing who-knows-which religion, living in a pretty house on the lake, spending my days painting my nails some ferocious, nasty color and eating bonbons. I'd have 1.3 children, which is all I could ever really handle anyway if you size up my nature and personality. (Thanks to Torah and the Rebbe, I have many more, *ka"h*.) I am exaggerating but only a little. I really don't feel I can rely enough on my very limited Torah education, begun in adulthood, to take an educated guess in a pinch. It takes a lot of education or experience to correctly make an educated guess.

FFBs have a tremendous treasure: *frum* and *chassidische* grandparents, great-grandparents, aunts, uncles... and all the good influence that comes from them. They also have an amazing *chinuch* deeply embedded in them from the earliest age (from before birth, actually, via *taharas*

hamishpachah). And FFBs have the Fifth *Shulchan Aruch*.

BTs have holy ancestors as well, whether we knew them and their stories or not. We had the childhood and education that Hashem decreed we should have. We can and do build on those, but we can't erase our childhoods, or rely on our memories to guide our current behavior. A Bais Rivkah girl knows to share her snack in school if possible, and to call the girl who is home with the flu, and to send *shalach manos* to the girl who is socially awkward and doesn't have many friends. In the public school I attended, nobody *ever* shared a treat except with their best friend. There was no concept of reaching out to a child who was sick at home. On a certain *goyishe* holiday, students personally handed out greeting cards only to children they liked in school, and the ones without many friends were embarrassed not to receive them. In short, I (like numerous other BTs) had to push myself beyond my comfort zone to do a whole plethora of *mitzvos*, both between man and man and between man and G-d. And, instead of relying on my mother's and Bubby's, I also had to create my own Shavuot menu.

Many times, FFBs envy BTs for their unceasing drive to get it right in their *avodas Hashem*. For me, that unceasing drive is based of course on wanting to be close to Hashem. But underneath, it's also

coupled with a wistful dream that I will somehow one day develop a Fifth *Shulchan Aruch*.

Twelve years after I became *frum* – after becoming fluent in Hebrew, spending a year in Israel in a Mayanot-style institute, and studying a considerable amount of Torah for a BT – I was at my parents' home out of town, alone with my ailing father. Suddenly, on Shabbos he began to behave strangely. I knew he needed immediate medical care, but how could I call an ambulance on Shabbos? *Assur*, right? Desperate, I ran to two different gentile neighbors and asked them to call 911 for me because it was my Sabbath and I couldn't call myself. They weren't familiar with Orthodox Judaism at all, and both refused. (I'm sure I frightened the daylights out of them.) In the end I guiltily called the ambulance myself, using a *shinui*, which I later found out was the correct thing to do. But again, not knowing the *halachah*, I thought I couldn't accompany him to the hospital on Shabbos (instead of knowing that's precisely what I should have done). So Dad went by himself.



My father wasn't aware enough at that point to realize I wasn't with him, and he later forgave me, but my mother (out of town at the time) was very upset. All this was the result of my not knowing the *halachah* and thus not having a Fifth *Shulchan Aruch*.

I was *zocheh* and extremely fortunate to receive several answers from the Rebbe, during the Lameds and Memes (1970s and 80s), instructing me to ask a Rav who *paskens halachah*. (At other times, in different situations, I received answers from the Rebbe instructing me to speak to knowledgeable friends.) So here I am, a *yovel* later, still learning *halachah* each day as best I can and asking plenty of *shaylos*, including maybe dumb ones, but I can't help that, and no Rav ever scolded me for asking a dumb question. Some people might think I'm "too much," but that's how I need to operate.

I wanted to have lots of kids, as many as Hashem would give me, even if I didn't know the ins and outs of a big family. I yearned to give them the best possible Jewish education so they wouldn't have to endure the trauma of not knowing how to live as a proper Jew. *B"H*, my children have more of a Fifth *Shulchan Aruch* than I do. Nevertheless, I *daven* that they don't rely on it too much. It's really there for when you're in a pinch. Otherwise, we all – BTs and FFBs alike – need to check out the trusty four volumes of *Shulchan Aruch*, and learn the *halachah*. ❧

8. Do Not Be Tough on Yourself

BECOMING A BT IS DIFFICULT.

My acquaintances who tried to become a new person were usually frustrated and unhappy. Hashem made you and He doesn't make mistakes. A *tzaddik* cannot walk in the

steps of a *baal teshuvah*. I found *tznius* difficult and covering my hair impossible. My husband dragged me to any rabbi he could find but I was not impressed with whatever they had to say. When I was lucky enough to spend a couple of weeks at Bais Chana in Minnesota, I brought my issues to Rabbi Manis Friedman. After asking me some pointed questions about myself, he pronounced that I had to find a look that suited me. Wow, no rabbi had ever said that. He knew that I was afraid that I would be swallowed up in this new life and lose myself. I arrived home and immediately bought a *sheitel*. Dear ladies, you do not know how lucky you are today. The wigs in the '70s felt like horsehair and looked worse. I had one that I couldn't tell the back from the front.

Do not feel compelled to buy a hugely expensive wig, especially at the beginning. I once spoke to a group of *kollel* wives and asked them, "How many of you bought a *sheitel* that cost over \$4000?" Almost every hand went up. I told them, keep your hand up if you still like it. Hands down. Even the synthetic wigs are nice looking, although of course they do not last as long. A little secret is that the older you get the more fun *tznius* becomes. No one's hair at 70 looks as good as any *sheitel*. My non-religious friends who wear sweatpants don't look as classy as a woman in a beautiful but modest outfit. My pants sat in my closet for a while and then I donated them to a shelter. I think a well-dressed *tzniusdik* woman makes a greater statement than a rabbi in a black hat.

Daven for your children.

Hashem listens to the prayers of parents.

IF YOU ARE IN A MARRIAGE where only one partner is firmly committed to this path, your struggles are real and can be very stressful. If the wife wants with her entire heart to be observant and bring up their children this way, trying to get her husband on board can lead to disagreements and even divorce, *chas v'shalom*. A good place to start is to introduce your husband to an observant man that he can relate to, who shares many of his interests. [We strongly recommend Sarah Karmely's book, *Words to Hear With Your Heart*, on this topic. -Ed.]

What I love about Chabad is that you can live a “normal” life and still be religious. My husband, Isser Chaim, always worked in the computer industry and keeping Shabbos never kept him from a job. I can only imagine the looks he got when he showed up at a job interview with a beard, black hat, and the whole regalia. He had to work doubly hard in the beginning to prove himself, to show that leaving earlier on Fridays would not affect his job performance. Isser Chaim skipped as many work-related social events as possible, but most companies were happy to order him kosher meals when there were events that could not be avoided.

Isser Chaim and I have counseled many couples on their path to observance and we always suggest beginning with a simple Shabbos. We tell them to think

of it as a date night. Set the table with candles and nice dishes. Buy a fancy kosher wine, cook a special dish, and buy flowers. Most important, turn off all phones, devices, and TV! A young couple we know just tried this. At first, they were absolutely horrified at the thought of one night with no TV. I didn't tell them how sad this sounded, but I talked them into trying just one Friday night. When they next checked in, they told us it was a wonderful success. They said they hadn't had such meaningful conversations since before they married. Everything must be done with joy and peace.

9. Marriage



At granddaughter's wedding, 2019.

10. Raising Children

IF ONE OR BOTH PARENTS are becoming observant and there are already children in the house, this needs careful planning. We started to become *frum* when our three oldest were babies or toddlers, so they have no recollection of the “before.” Older children are a different scenario. Do not drop the entire package on their laps and say, this is it, take it or leave it. You might see the beauty of Shabbos and a Torah way of life, but you cannot expect them to. Children do not like being different and dislike any change

in routine. My current learning partner began her path when her 20-year-old son brought home a Japanese girl and her daughter shaved her head. As an Israeli living in the U.S, she had assumed her children would marry Jews because in Israel they pretty much take it for granted. Even secular Israelis usually marry Jews (with some horrible exceptions). We began talking about how to help her children and slowly bring Judaism into the home. The most important aspect is to keep it positive and worry about the restrictions later. My learning partner is vegetarian, so koshering her kitchen went smoothly, but her son had no interest in keeping kosher. He wanted his chicken cutlets (although she had no meat items at all, only pareve) and that was that. She put a small grill outside for him, used paper plates, and didn’t make a fuss. Her 18-year-old daughter is also vegetarian and thought Shabbos was a waste of a day (*chas v’shalom*). I had just bought an air fryer and my learning partner and I started discussing recipes. She bought one on Amazon in the middle of our session. Soon she and her daughter were experimenting with air frying a Shabbos meal on Friday afternoon. This brought them closer and Shabbos became a time to enjoy being together as a family. She told her son to research kosher wine and soon keeping Shabbos was a family tradition. Turning off the phones was a hassle but she is slowly making progress. Her first *seder* had its ups and downs but still was a success.

Daven for your children. Hashem listens to the prayers of parents.

Hashem creates each one of us with unique strengths. You will be on the other side sooner than you think. I’ve been where you are! Good luck!



Our dream come true: a daughter on *shlichus*! Rabbi Yoey and Shira Muchnik, Chabad of Camarillo, CA.

A Word To Those Guiding New Baalei Teshuvah

Be respectful. This individual may be very well educated and on a high spiritual level. Do not talk down to them. Most of all, be honest. Years ago, we asked a local rabbi if it was okay to ride a bicycle to shul. We lived miles away from shul and had three small children. He said, "For you it is okay." When we found out later it was not, we were devastated. He should have told us the law without being judgmental. Teach us the right way and help us figure it out. We ended up moving so we could walk to shul.

You are not a psychiatrist or a social worker. Know your limits. Set boundaries. We all have had guests who don't leave or call at all hours. It is okay to remind them that you have families and many other obligations. Be kind but firm. People on the path to Jewish observance need guidance. When they don't get the proper guidance, the results can range from funny to tragic.

As a fairly new *baal teshuvah*, my husband had an overwhelming desire to fit in although he had absolutely no idea how to do this. On a business trip to New York, he traveled to Williamsburg, walked into a hat store, and asked the clerk what hat he should buy. My husband had a mop of red curly hair and was dressed very casually. I am sure the clerk was taken aback but my husband picked out the largest hat he could find. When he walked down the main street of our rural town, I am sure he almost caused many accidents. Now we laugh at this memory as it shows how far we have come.

We have an acquaintance, an observant man in his late 50s, who became *frum* at least 20 years ago and has a long beard, black hat, and *kapota*. From the beginning, his wife did not wear a *sheitel*, but their home was strictly kosher. They have one married daughter. We found out that the wife was adopted and had been converted according to *halachah*. Unfortunately, no one told them that the daughter who was born after the mother's conversion also needed to convert. There are two non-Jewish grandchildren who everyone assumes are Jewish. The grandfather even found a rabbi who performed a so-called *bris*. The dire consequences if someone marries these children without knowing their background are frightening. Rabbis do not have an easy job but it is better

to be open and truthful than to cover up such a sad story.

If you are involved in *shidduchim*, honesty is the best policy. Helping *baalei teshuvah* with *shidduchim* is the most sensitive but important role with which you are entrusted. Do not assume that two people will be compatible just because they are both BTs, and don't try to marry people off at all costs.

If you encourage even one person to become Torah-observant and to start their own path, you are changing future generations and I cannot imagine a greater goal and gift. 🕯

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