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NO SHABBOS HIP-HOP

BY LARRY GORDON

Every now and then you get to meet someone that not only makes an indelible impression on you, but also moves and inspires you in such a way that you know that his story will stay with you forever. Jeff Neckonoff is one of those people. Born and raised in a non-observant Jewish household in Canarsie, Brooklyn, Jeff says that he always silently felt that he had a "spiritual soul" but grew up going to public schools and, like so many thousands, escaping all knowledge of anything Jewish, especially that of an observant or religious nature.

On this day, a Thursday afternoon,

he sits across the table from me at lunchtime on Central Avenue and says with combined exuberance and passion that, "I just want to be a Torah Jew." Jeff's profession is that of a mobile DJ and MC. He has made a comfortable living at the top of the New York party industry by being the life of the parties he plays. He's very much in demand, and weekends are his busiest times. "Usually I could do five jobs



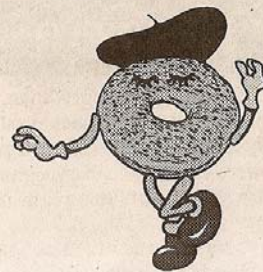
Jeff Neckonoff

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Heard In The Bagel Store No More, Part #158

BY LARRY GORDON

NO SHABBOS HIP-HOP



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 over a weekend," he says. His regular schedule would have him playing a party on Friday night, two on Saturday and two on Sunday. If you'd like, you could do the math but Jeff is so much in demand that he gets anywhere from \$1,500 to \$3,000 per job.

"A few months ago I decided I can't do this any more on Friday night or on Shabbos," says Jeff. "I'd be there injecting the kids on the dance floor with hip hop energy, and everyone was having a great time. But I kept thinking to myself that this is Shabbos and what am I doing?" Now he's trying to

break into the world of Shomer Shabbos events that need DJ type entertainment while playing the finest Simcha, Israeli, American and Chassidic music.

Jeff's journey to be an observant, or at least a more religious, Jew actually started about 10 years ago when

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he was just 28 years old. He was already married, and like so many disenfranchised seekers, he was surfing the internet in an attempt to find out who he really is and what it means to be a Jew.

“The people identifying themselves online as Orthodox were telling me that I should immediately become 100% observant and Shommer Shabbos,” he says. “They gave me a sense that it was extremely legalistic and burdensome, more than anything else. Why would anyone undergo such a transformation without first doing some kind of intense soul searching?” On the other hand, Jeff says, he also heard from many others identifying themselves as Jews about how much G-d loves him and about the deep warmth and caring that came with that closeness to G-d. “Upon closer examination, it turned out that those reaching out to me were more frequently than not messianic Jews or people who purport to be Jewish and observe a great deal of Jewish ritual and may be born Jews, but who believe in Christian dogma,” says Jeff.

Jeff was drawn to this movement and moved up in the hierarchy of one such Long Island temple that he says today is indistinguishable from the everyday, usual shul one might go to. “There are talesim, Torahs, siddurim and so on,” he says. “For me this was the Jewish religion. I had no way of knowing better and I now realize that there are tens of thousands of Jews just like me out there that can’t tell the two

apart.” So taken was he by the experience that he decided that he wanted to enter messianic Judaism “Rabbinical” school so that he could become a “rabbi” in the movement. He spent time at two such congregations, one in Rego Park, Queens and the other one located in East Rockaway, not too far from the Five Towns.

“I look back and I’m amazed at how little I knew about being a Jew, a Torah-knowing, Hashem-loving, *mitzvot*-keeping Jew,” says Jeff. “My entire Jewish experience was limited to occasionally eating gefilte fish and having my mother bring matzoh into our home on Passover, matzoh that we ate with non-kosher food.”

Still online, searching for more about the ingredients required to find his path to spiritual fulfillment, Jeff came across a book by David Klinghoffer, *My Journey To Orthodox Jewry—The Lord Will Gather Me In*. The book depicts a not dissimilar experience to what Jeff endured—complete and absolute ignorance about anything relating to the religion he was born into. “And that’s not something that just used to be,” Jeff adds. “I see it all the time, playing bar and bat mitzvas for young Jews on a Friday night or Saturday afternoon. Sure, to us it looks like they’re flagrantly violating Shabbos, but believe me, they have absolutely no idea. And I don’t blame those who party on Shabbos. For that, the blame lies within certain movements that supported (and still do) and taught the previous generations that that lifestyle was just another

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No Shabbos Hip-Hop

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way to observe Judaism.”

The Klinghoffer book led him to other books that clued him in about the effort to missionize amongst young ignorant Jews and draw them into a brand of counterfeit Judaism that preaches a combination of Jewish ritual and Christian beliefs. From his books on Judaism, and now objectively investigating the claims of so-called “messianic Judaism”, he was led to Tovia Singer, famous for assisting young and not-so-young Jews to extricate themselves from the complicated spiritual and emotional web of missionary organizations and groups. Just before he got to this stage, however, Jeff was smitten. He believed that he had found eternal truth, that he was home and he desired to become a spiritual leader in the messianic movement.

“But these books got me thinking and seeing things differently,” he says. His next step was in the direction of the Jewish Heritage Center and Rabbi Yossi Korngold as well as Isralight, Chabad, the Jewish Enrichment Center, the Manhattan Jewish Experience and a series of Gateways seminars.

Jeff has made immense and giant steps on the way to his goal and desire to live a life observing Torah and *mitzvos*. But, he adds, while it’s extremely rewarding, it’s far from easy. There’s not only the very strenuous matter of putting the brakes on one kind of lifestyle and then starting up a brand new one. There’s the issue of family, a wife and small children and, of course, sacrificing a good part of your livelihood because something in your heart, mind and soul has changed. Everyone around you, that you know and love, thinks something weird has happened, that you’ve gone a little nuts but none of that dissuades you.

Jeff’s kids started yeshiva this year and he says it’s going well. His wife respects him, accompanies him to some of his classes and is coming along slowly, he says. His parents and siblings, he says, look at him a little

askance but also admire his fortitude and determination. Jeff says that when he visits his parents now he has to tell them what kind of food to buy and where and asks that they bring in plastic or paper plates as well as utensils. He says that his mother once commented to him that it was a lot easier when he was in the messianic Jewish movement, meaning that the kashruth, Yom Tov and Shabbos laws from that direction weren’t so extreme.

Despite the obstacles, the changes and the difficulties, Jeff Neckonoff is on a high—and you can see it in the look in his eyes and the expression on his face. He says, though, he has worked loud parties, motivating people to dance through the night to the latest musical craze for most of his professional life. Now that he has given up the Friday night and Saturday events, he’s moving in the direction of doing observant events and now studies Torah weekly with one of his rabbis, as well as attending numerous classes and seminars every month—he feels more alive than ever before. His conversation is sprinkled with what could be his mantra—“I just want to live like a Torah Jew,”— which he repeats throughout with emphasis and sincerity.

Jeff faces many challenges in the months and years ahead. Amongst the greatest is the impact his new commitment will have on his ability to earn a living. As a DJ and an impresario at parties he is unparalleled. He brings life and fun to the parties, bar and bat mitzvas as well as weddings he plays, and he’s now looking forward to working increasing numbers of observant events and being able to support and raise his family accordingly.

In a world that is like a sea with a tide that is flowing forcefully in the opposite direction, Jeff Neckonoff is swimming upstream, against the popular current and against the tide. He’s going to make it along with his family because that is what he is made of—emotional strength and determination.

In a sense, he is a hero and a shining example of a young Jew who navigates his way through the spiritual darkness of these modern times. All Jeff needs is people like us to help provide some light and encouragement along the way. ❖