

Emes Ve-Emunah

A Forum for Orthodox Jewish thought on Halacha, Hashkafa, and the social issues of our time.

Monday, July 04, 2016

Why OTD - Response to Rabbi Dov Fischer

by **Mark Trencher - Guest Contributor**



Nishma President, **Mark Trencher**

Last Wednesday, I **responded** to the thoughts of Rabbi Dov Fischer as expressed on **Cross-Currents**. Rabbi Fischer was responding to a **survey** done by a research organization called Nishma. It was a survey about the reasons many Jews leave Orthodox Judaism (go OTD).

Rabbi Fischer had used his own experiences and observations to contradict the conclusions drawn by that survey. He claimed that the responses in that survey could not have been accurate... and that he saw on campus back in the 70s was more likely to be the case.

What he saw was a campus life so attractive to the base instincts of man that very few people - even those that were raised with religious values - would be able to overcome them. And since acting on those instincts

were contrary to their religious values the only way they could give in to them and still have a modicum of conscience left over is to drop their observance and find 'excuses' in the form of rational arguments against Judaism.

Those nationalizations were the answers they gave to those conducting the survey since telling the bare naked truth would show them to be extremely shallow. According to Rabbi Fischer, the respondents in the survey lied both to themselves and to others to avoid feeling that way about themselves and projecting such a negative image to others. Which of course produced false results and conclusions.

In my response to him, I agreed that an unguided and unguarded campus life - free of any religious influences - does often cause people to go OTD. Human nature being what it is, good people, can easily get sucked into a self gratifying lifestyle via an enticing environment. I know people like that. But I also thought he did not give enough credence to the factors cited in the survey. Which brings me to Mark Trencher.

Mark Trencher is the president and lead researcher of Nishma. He is an Orthodox Jew and has no agenda to discredit Orthodoxy. He is a professional that uses classic methods of research that factor in biases of the type Rabbi Fischer talked about. Having noted the conversation on my blog, Mark graciously took the time to respond to some of the comments on that post.

However his most recent comment is worthy of a post of its own. It is directed at Rabbi Fischer but deserves to be read by anyone with an interest in dealing with this problem. Which should be all Orthodox Jews. Instead of letting it languish in a massive thread of over 200 comments to a post written last week - I have decided to post this as a guest post. I thank Mark for taking the time to respond. It follows in its entirety.

To Rabbi Dov Fischer:

The purpose of the survey was to hear what they have to say. They took the opportunity and

were open and revealing. How sad it is that you refuse to listen, and say they are creating an anecdotal false narrative. Listen to their voices (There are just a handful , verbatim and unedited, out of 800+). Listen! Open your heart, Rabbi Dov.

I have indicated that the comments will be made available, because hearing these voices is our goal. Here are just a handful:

"Curiosity led to me educating myself about topics that were considered taboo and were not taught in school, such as evolution, natural selection, other theories of the creation of the universe. Access to the internet allowed me to gain an unbiased view of these topics. I slowly started to realize that there were a large part of the world that did not view these theories as ridiculous unproven hypotheses, people with advanced degrees that had spent many years studying the sciences that had just been entirely dismissed by peers and teachers when I was growing up. I spent time reading up on many of these subjects and started to realize that there was no reason to outright reject it. I'm still learning new things all the time but my belief quickly changed as I took in this new information."

"As I grew up it became very clear to me that despite teachings, men and women were certainly not considered or treated equally. Once I began questioning that, I questioned everything else I had been told. It also began to bother me that the written and oral Torah, as well as the general atmosphere of the community, preached racism, xenophobia, homophobia, etc., which contradicted that the Torah and the Jews were supposed to be the most moral in the world."

"The tales of corruption and discrimination in the community are not myths, they are happening here ... Believe their stories, their feelings are legitimate. People who leave are not ignorant of some things by choice for the most part, so they need to be, and usually want to be, educated. Explain if they don't understand something, don't shame."

"Please be kind and generous to people who are leaving, understand that we are leaving, our family, our friends, our social network, our belief system and our understanding of the way life works. Please make us feel welcome even if you don't understand us, especially in the Jewish communities that are different than ours. Our community is nothing like you make it out to be. Please listen to our stories, ask us questions, but don't pry."

"We are normal. We are not crazy. The problem is not in us, the problem is in the orthodox community. Yes many people are happy and stay in the community. So why did we leave? That is precisely the issue. Orthodox Judaism allows a very narrow set of variety in their system. If you happen to fall within the confines then your life can be nearly perfect. However if you fall outside of those limitations life is pure hell and the only logical thing to do is to leave in order to find a community where being who you are is okay. I love Judaism and appreciate many aspects of Orthodoxy; if they would accept for who I am (gay) I would come back in an instant. It's their loss, really."

"We're not all abused or mentally ill, and we're not all looking to live a life of hefkerus. A lot of us feel fulfilled without Judaism. I feel much more fulfilled in life now more than ever. In terms of the mental illness and abuse thing: there are, yet, many abuse victims and people with mental illness in the OTD community. One thing is for sure: if the Jewish community was a safehaven for people with those issues, they would not have left. It's on the Jewish community to change that."

Posted by [Harry Maryles](#) at 10:04 AM

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