Confessions of a Flaming Baal Teshuvah –life as an Orthodox Jewish woman on an unorthodox journey

By Mindy Rubenstein

This is a story about the peaks and valleys of my life as an Orthodox Jewish woman – or more specifically, as a “baal teshuvah,” one who returns. Rarely has there been plateaus, but rather a multitude of searching and finding, reaching and falling, and searching some more.

After experimenting with various other religions, I traded in my secular Jewish life for one of strict Torah observance, turning away from the path of my family and blazing my own trail of mitzvos – biblical commandments from God. But this process has been a messy one.

Over the course of nine years, I moved seven times, gave birth to five children, buried a newborn baby, declared bankruptcy, and ended a marriage.

These are in the periphery of my religious life. Within its boundaries, I completely gave up non-kosher food in and out of my home, I took on Sabbath observance, family purity laws, and many other rituals and laws that are part of the Orthodox Jewish experience, things I knew nothing about growing up.

When I first starting becoming Orthodox, I was immersed in a small community that provided a very clear set of guidelines on what to do, what not to do. You were either Orthdox, or you were completely secular. But I have since discovered that there are hundreds of Hassidic and non Hassidic, Modern Orthodox, and many ways to live a religious Jewish life. At the core is Torah, but much of the daily living is based on culture and the community.

I have struggled to find and identify myself in religious observance. I have struggled to find and identify myself as a wife and mother. And finally, and most importantly, to find and identify myself as a human being.

There are healthier ways to take on the baal teshuvah process – which can be beautiful and meaningful – but there is one very important thing I have learned , and this is what I hope to give over.

Regardless of what external religious practices one takes on, it is essential to do it from a place of peace and emotional health. I have written about my journey and been published extensively, but much of my writing was dishonest. It has not all been rosy, even if my intentions were good.

In the course of this painful and prolific process, I have made one major heartfelt discovery: I needed religion because I was in pain and I wanted to be rescued. No religion can play that role. Religious observance is about building a relationship with God and being kind to ourselves and others. The rest is just commentary.