

**Good Shabbos Everyone.** We are now in the final approach to Judgment Day, AKA Rosh HaShanah which starts Sunday evening.

"On Rosh Hashanah it is written; on Yom Kippur it is sealed. Who shall live and who shall die... etc." The gravity of the moment is tremendous.

In order to prepare for Rosh Hashanah, it is appropriate and fitting that each and every Jew do an accounting of his deeds from the past year. And if, heaven forbid, after doing this accounting, a Jew discovers that he has violated the Torah in any way whatsoever, he must do the following: confess to Hashem his wrongdoings, feel shame and regret for the misdeeds, and accept on himself never to repeat those misdeeds.

A Jew who follows such a formula, is assured that Hashem will forgive him for all but the most serious of violations. As far as violations in our relationships with others, we must seek out those whom we have wronged and ask for their forgiveness. Let us now tell an inspirational true story which recently took place, which will inspire us all to mend our ways before the Big Day.

If only the abbot could see Justo Jorge Calderon now. With curling peyos dangling below his chin and the long black cloak of his small hassidic sect hanging off his broad shoulders, Calderon sure doesn't look like a Benedictine monk anymore. Besides, he goes by Aharon now, and he is the proud father of three little Jewish children. Calderon's story is one of those stranger-than-fiction tales that grows more intriguing the longer it goes on. Fortunately, it's also one he doesn't mind sharing....

It begins in a small town outside Buenos Aires, Argentina, where Justo Jorge was born into a family of Roman Catholics. "Today I am a very kosher Jew," the 36-year-old says with a smile, "but once I was a very kosher goy."

When Calderon was 12, he says, his parents sent him to a private religious school to get a better education than the public schools provided. Before long he was spending extra time studying with the monks. At 14, he joined the pre-mission seminar. "I was young and idealistic," he explains with a shrug. After high school, with his religious zeal increasing, Calderon went looking for the "ancient, original teachings" of Catholicism.

The local Benedictine monastery offered the oldest, "purest" form of Catholicism life around. Based on a 1,400-year-old order and centered around a largely self-sustaining "holy village," it meant spending most of the day in silence, reflecting on what they thought was the "divine."

Although Calderon's parents weren't happy about his commitment to the monastic life - he's their only son, and they hoped for grandchildren - the young man felt at home in the Benedictine monastery. At home, that is, until he experienced what he calls "my two surprises." The first came in the monastery's library. One of the largest around, it helped make the monastery famous, Calderon says. Of the thousands of volumes it held, though, one particular book would change his life.

"One day," he says, "I chanced upon a Haggada, in Spanish and Hebrew. I was drawn to it, and read it from beginning to end, in amazement." At the end of the Seder service, Calderon read the prayer looking forward to celebrating the Pesach holiday "next year in Jerusalem - Jerusalem rebuilt" and stared at a drawing of the Third Temple.

Calderon sat in silence - not his usual contemplative silence, but a stunned silence. Justo Jorge Calderon. "Catholicism," he explains, "looks at Judaism as something of an archeological concept, not as something that is still alive, relevant and flourishing... Looking at this prayer at the end of the Haggada, I was shocked that modern Jews still nurtured hopes for the future of their religion."

The discovery rocked Calderon, but he was still unsure what to make of it. Shortly thereafter, though, he experienced his second "surprise," which sent his spiritual quest in an entirely unforeseen direction. It came on one of his weekly visits to the abbot of the monastery.

Upon entering the abbot's study, Calderon found him poring over a Hebrew Bible. (The abbot, Calderon learned, had once studied in Jerusalem, and was comparing ancient texts.) "I was fascinated by the language," he recalls. "I wanted to know, what secrets are in those letters?" By that point Calderon had spent several years in the monastery and, although he was well on his way to a permanent stay there, he returned to his home for a planned one- or two-year break.

Once at home he began attending classes at the Catholic-run university in town and working as a nurse for the Red Cross. But, with his "surprises" spurring him on, Calderon also sought out Jews who would be willing to teach him Hebrew. At the time, conversion was not on his mind. "I just wanted to know how JC prayed," he says.

On Friday nights, Calderon attended services at a local synagogue where the rabbi agreed to let him join the weekly Hebrew class. He also discovered a Messianic Jewish congregation, and prayed there as well. Thus began a period when, Calderon recalls, he would pray to JC while in synagogue on Friday night, and wear a kippa to church on Sunday morning. To Calderon, these interreligious prayer sessions didn't seem like a contradiction.

"It sounds strange," he admits, "but at the time, it made sense to me. Judaism was not 'outside' Catholicism, but part of it... like an ancestor." Soon, however, something in the Shabbos prayers struck Calderon, and shook the foundations of his faith.

It was part of the Shabbos morning kiddush, specifically, the passage from Exodus that says: "And the Children of Israel observed the Sabbath, to make the Sabbath for their generations an eternal covenant. Between Me and the Children of Israel it is a sign forever..."

"This expression stuck in my mind," Calderon says, repeating the words. "'It is a sign forever.'" "That meant," he says, "that there is an eternal bond, established by Hashem. And since Hashem does not change, then that bond" - the sign observed by Jews, marking Saturday as the Sabbath - "must still be in effect!"

Why, Calderon asked himself, would the Church move the Sabbath day to Sunday, if it wasn't really a day sanctified by Hashem? The question was more than a little troubling to Calderon. After all, if Sunday was not really the holy Sabbath, and if Hashem's covenant with the Jews had not been abrogated and superseded by Catholicism, then maybe other tenets of the Catholic religion were also not true.

Calderon stopped going to church. "Everything I believed," he says, "just fell apart." He started a conversion class at the local Reform synagogue. When the synagogue closed down due to financial difficulties, Calderon sought out more Jews and discovered the local Chabad rabbi.

Rather than eagerly welcome a new convert, the rabbi at first tried to dissuade Calderon. "He would say, 'Why would you want to be Jewish? We have so many commandments, while non-Jews need only to observe the Noahide laws. Besides, you are already a good person

in Hashem's eyes!"

This, however, only made Calderon's desire to convert even greater. "Until then, I had thought that Judaism was a religion of strictness and law, whereas Catholicism was a religion of love. But suddenly I realized that it was really the opposite." "You see," he explains, "in Catholicism, if you don't believe in JC you can't go to heaven. But in Judaism, there is a place in heaven for everyone; you don't have to be Jewish. So really, Catholicism is the religion of strictness, and Judaism is the religion of love!"

After a period of "trying it out," Calderon knew that he wanted to convert, and that he wanted to move to Israel to do so. There was just one problem: finances. "A ticket to Israel cost \$1,200. As a nurse, I was only making \$200 a month. How could I ever afford to go to Israel?" he says. The situation was bleak. But then something miraculous happened. There was a raffle in Calderon's town, with a grand prize of a new ambulance; he entered.

Just before Rosh Hashana, Calderon was informed that he had won the grand prize. He sold the ambulance and, suddenly able to afford the airfare, flew to Israel.

At first, Calderon, in his new identity as Aharon, studied at a yeshiva for potential converts. But within a few months the yeshiva had closed. In early 1999, Calderon met Rabbi Eliahu Birnbaum and joined the Spanish speakers' ulpan Rabbi Birnbaum's wife had just started.

Around Rosh Hashana that year, Calderon underwent a bris mila. Before Succos, he entered a mikva and completed his conversion. Back home in Argentina, there was little celebrating going on. Although Calderon's mother was happy that he would, having given up the monastic life, provide her with grandchildren, several family members told Calderon, "If you're Jewish, don't come back here."

"A few years earlier, I had realized that love, hate and jealousy were separated only by a fine line," Calderon says. "I made a choice to love the Jewish people. Later, I began to see the hatred that some people in my town had for Jews." Calderon currently serves as a gabbai in the Stropkover shul in Jerusalem.

If a non-Jew who was saturated with impurity can turn his life around and purify himself and change his ways so drastically, then surely we too can change in the coming year. **Good Shabbos and L'Shana Tovah Everyone.**

