

Addressing Some of Your Concerns

When a kid from a secular background ends up in Yeshivah, often alarm bells go off back home. "He's going to be brainwashed and turn into one of those judgmental black hatted people who behave badly on the plane." "He'll reject me, judge me, not eat in my house and I won't have a relationship with my grandkids." "He'll drop out of college, become a bum relying on charity and not be able to support a family." "It's not a healthy lifestyle. He'll be repressed, a fanatic who throws stones at cars driving on Shabbat and not be happy." "He'll lose himself and stop playing music/doing art/ walking in nature / having a sense of humour." These are all totally understandable and somewhat valid concerns for well meaning Jewish parents. I say 'somewhat' valid seeing as it's a big mistake to start worrying about your kids because you are comparing them to an ultra-orthodox Chassid with 8 kids, who has never left Meah Shearim. Any issue you may have with that community and those people will certainly not apply to your child who grew up in an open, secular environment. The two people can hardly have had a more different upbringing or grown up in more different environments. So there is no reason to believe that your child will end up like them. That being said, let's start breaking them down one by one.

Brainwashing

Brainwashing is defined as "Manipulating people to radically change their beliefs through certain psychological methods." Education on the other hand involves presenting information which is backed up with logical, rational, scientific evidence and giving the student the chance to engage in discussion, refute, cross check, google everything, talk to their parents, teachers and friends, leave whenever they like and come to a personal decision as an independent thinker. At yeshivah, intelligent, normal, kind, relatable people, many of whom grew up in secular homes, openly present ideas and beliefs, demonstrate why we believe these things and strongly encourage debate and discussion. Parents are welcome to reach out to speak to the Rabbis by phone or email and are strongly encouraged to come and visit to see for themselves.¹

Becoming judgemental

It is true that a child may become judgmental or badly behaved when they become religious, and if they do so that will seriously damage the relationship with his family and friends. Yet this is very rarely the case. A good kid from a good home is very unlikely to change his personality so drastically to become horrible and judgmental, especially when he is learning messages from the Torah such as "Judge everyone favourably," "Love your fellow as yourself" "Pursue righteousness," "Don't bear a grudge" "Respect your mother and father" and "Behaving well is more fundamental than Torah learning."² In fact, when I first arrived in Yeshivah a Rabbi said to me "If you become religious and then start judging other Jews, Reform, Liberal etc especially your family, you didn't become religious you became self-righteous. The closer you are to G-d and Torah values, the more loving, accepting, non-judgmental and kind you become." Believe me, every kid who walks into my Yeshivah is hearing that same message from day one. In fact, most parents, after getting over the original concerns, notice that their child is happier, kinder and much more of a mensch than they used to be. They see huge positive changes.

¹ For compelling rational, logical evidence for Jewish beliefs see www.areyouright.org

² If they already had emotional issues or a strained relationship with their parents then this journey could certainly make things worse. If this is the case the child, whether they become religious or not, would need to invest in some personal and family therapy.

Changing too drastically

The greatest compliment I ever got was from my 80 year old auntie in LA who famously has a big problem with "those black hatters." She said to me after I'd been religious for 10 years "You haven't changed at all, you're just Bradley with a beard!" Yes, I now have a beard and I wear a kippah and tzitzit. I keep Shabbat and Kosher. However, I still play football (soccer) and the jazz keyboard. I still hike mountains and swim in the sea. I still can't stop hugging my Mummy when we're together and call her every day. I'm still silly and playful. I make a good living and my family lacks nothing. My wife is a yoga teacher, energy healer and artist. She wears modest colourful beautiful clothes. We have (only) 3 kids. My kids all do sport and music. We go traveling together (my kids have been to England, Thailand, Italy, South Africa and all over Israel), we watch (appropriate) movies and programs, go to the beach, Lego Land, eat in restaurants. We live in a mixed area, religious not religious, Jew non-Jew. So, yes, I have made some drastic changes in my belief system, I pray three times a day (Is that SUCH a bad thing?), I don't use my phone on Shabbat..., but I'm still just 'Bradley with a beard.'

Discarding the values he grew up with.

I, like most secular Jewish kids, grew up with the values of being good and doing good. My father said to me "Just always do the right thing." Be polite. Care for others. Be kind and loving. Share your things. Think things out before you make decisions. Educate yourself. Be open-minded. Nothing has changed. These are still my values. I got them from my parents and I am finding a full expression of them through the Torah which teaches exactly these things. (You know, there is no verse in the Torah that says "Thou shalt wear a black hat and behave badly on the plane." Anyone doing that is not living in line with Torah values).

He won't eat my house / I won't be able to relate to my grandkids.

This one is really up to you. When I became kosher, my Mum could have said "How dare you not eat off my plates! I breast fed you, stayed up in the middle of the night when you were teething, gave up everything for you! Who do you think you are?!" She could have said that. But my Mum, because she loves me and values the relationship, said "Do you need new plates and pots? Cool. Let's go and buy some. I can make your favourite dish you used to love - we'll just get kosher ingredients" When I offered to pay she said "Don't be silly. Keep your money for what you need." Ahh. Now that's a real Mummy!³ It's also for this reason that my kids ADORE my parents. They speak everyday on WhatsApp, they can't wait to see them when we go to England or they come here. It's one of the most beautiful things to watch my parents and kids spending time together. (Also you may end up with a bonus of more grandchildren that you would have had). Many people share that they are closer to their religious grandkids than their secular ones. If the parents and kids get along, the grandkids will certainly yearn for and cherish the relationship.

³ You may be asking - Why should we be the ones to compromise? It's a fair question.

Firstly, compromise actually goes both ways. Religious kids often give up majorly important values for their family. For example: they give up spending Shabbat in a more holy environment to be with their family, they give up praying in a minyan, they put up with simple food (tuna and carrots!) to go travelling together, they give up spending festivals in Israel to spend them with their family. So it definitely goes both ways. On the parents side though consider this: :

- a) There are some things a religious person can not compromise on. Just like a celiac can not compromise in order to eat his mother's whole wheat apple cake, so too a religious Jew who has seen rational evidence that not kosher food is as spiritually damaging to a Jew as gluten is to a celiac, can not compromise on that.
- b) You've been compromising for your kids from day one. You compromised your sleep to get up in the middle of the night, you gave them the food off your plate, you paid for their education, you waited up for them at night. That's what grown up parents do to be there for their kids.
- c) When we break it down, what exactly is the huge compromise? A new set of plates? Buying kosher chicken instead of not kosher chicken? Recording the football match to watch after Shabbat instead of on Shabbat? Going to a kosher restaurant instead of a non-kosher one? Are these really too extreme things to have to do to invest in the relationship?