

# How a Yarmulke Changed My Life

By Mitchell Bard

During the past year I have made a conscious effort — as we say here in California “to get in touch” with my Jewish identity. I have tried to become more knowledgeable about Judaism and, in the process, have become more observant. I was in Israel last summer and I spent time in a *yeshivah* in Jerusalem (it sounds like a penalty — “Yeah man, I did thirty days in a *yeshivah*, it was really rough”). There I was introduced to the logical exposition of Orthodox theology. The reasons for observing commandments which seem to have no rational basis, such as *kashrut*, suddenly made some sense. A friend of mine who had recently “converted” to Orthodoxy, used “God said so” to rationalize everything. While ultimately this may have been the reason, I found the arguments of the rabbis more persuasive.

One night I was lying in bed (actually on the floor) and could not sleep. I sat up and told myself I wanted to take on more *mitz-*

*vot*. “Tomorrow I am going to buy *tzitzit* and a *yarmulke* and start wearing them everyday.” This is probably the closest I will ever come to a revelation; I know my decision would have some implications, but I didn’t envision those which have followed.

In Israel, wearing a *yarmulke* is as natural as wearing sandals, although there are less people wearing *yarmulkes* than “Fame” t-shirts. A high percentage of men cover their heads in this way and no one looks at you twice. It wasn’t until I arrived at Heathrow Airport in London on the way home that I noticed I was the only one in sight wearing a *yarmulke*. I felt slightly uneasy, but my mind was on getting home and I soon forgot about it.

When I arrived home my parents were bewildered, as I had expected. After interrogation, my mother decided it was good to see me return to my roots. I had, after all, gone to *yeshivah* my first two years of school and had worn a *yarmulke* and *tzi-*

*zit*. Soon after returning home, I had my first encounter directly attributable to my new attire. I was eating in my favorite pizza place when a woman came up, introduced herself, and asked me if I was Jewish and new to the community. I told her that I knew she was the Sisterhood president and her husband the synagogue president. I was embarrassed to tell her that I had lived there for 16 years. What was more significant about this encounter was the fact that someone had identified me as Jewish and noticed that I was eating *trefah*, or “eating out.”

The problem for me was the inconsistency of wearing a *yarmulke* and eating non-kosher food. For me, the reason for wearing a *yarmulke* had little to do with *kashrut*. Wearing a *yarmulke* is not an obligation, it is a custom. To wear one is to remind oneself that there is something higher than oneself and to show reverence for God. When I thought about it, I was afflicted by cognitive dissonance (a form of guilt not unique to Jews). If one is conscious of a Superior Being, how can one ignore that Being’s commands? I still was not prepared to give up eating out, even though I kept a kosher home. I decided not to wear my *yarmulke* when I “eat out.”

Of course, if you forget you are wearing a *yarmulke* it defeats the whole purpose. It can also be embarrassing, especially when you suddenly remember in the shower. I’m not sure, but drowning your *yarmulke* is probably prohibited by *halachah*. Conversely, I don’t think it’s a good idea to think *too much* about it, like the men who have a different *yarmulke* for every day of the month or insist on wearing only designer *yarmulkes*. I dislike all *yarmulkes* with names written on them. There’s just something I find disturbing about a *yarmulke* with the name “Bob” on it. It reminds of a Jewish gas station attendant.

The interesting thing about all of this, probably more than the personal struggle, was the realization that a *yarmulke* is a symbol in America. Rightly, or in my opinion, wrongly, it signifies observance. The Chabad rabbi in Berkeley remarked how good it was to see a *yarmulke* on campus, although I learned from a story he told me that my *yarmulke* is not “regulation size.” Mine falls in the category of bottle cap type *yarmulkes*. The only reason people don’t think I’m a religious fanatic is that I keep my *tzitzit* tucked in my pants.

Maybe the inconsistencies of my beliefs will force me to become more observant. I may even get a regulation size Lubovitch-issue *yarmulke*. On the other hand, I could get one that matches the color of my hair and would then be camouflaged or I may simply take off the *yarmulke* in an effort to relieve external pressure. Regardless of my external appearance, the internal debate will continue.

## This Year in Berkeley

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to students involved in the community, the table is also the main place where the J.S.B. projects its image to the outside world. Is the J.S.B. projecting the wrong image? Are outsiders seeing us differently from how we see ourselves?

“I thought joining J.S.B. was something like becoming a member of a synagogue,” said one member of Zeta Beta Tau, a nominally Jewish fraternity. A common mistaken impression is that the campus Jewish community is primarily religious in nature. Another widely held view is that the Jewish Student Board is politically reactionary. This false impression stems from the misrepresentation of Zionism by some leftists as a right-wing, militaristic, nationalist movement. Of course, this view is wrong. I would venture that most active Jewish students tend to hold liberal political views.

The Jewish community must correct this mistaken image in order to get more students involved. Naturally, political *hasbarah* is necessary to correct false impressions of Zionism. But more important than *hasbarah*, which can only directly involve a few students in actually carrying out the activity, are events and programs which can involve more people in the Jewish community. We need more social get-togethers, more parties, more activities designed simply for having a good time together. We also need more events emphasizing Israel awareness and personal Zionism, more programs for Jewish self-education in enjoyable frameworks, and more attempts to reach out and build connections with other ethnic minority groups. We need to overcome apathy and the prevailing “me-first” attitude, and revive our enthusiasm, energy, and commitment to Israel and Judaism.

But the most important factor in building a successful Jewish community is getting people involved. Students who are already involved need to bring in their friends, more effective publicity is needed to attract new students, and the community should project a more accurate image of itself as a social and cultural group, rather than as exclusively religious and political. Crucially, we need to be welcoming and open to new people.

We must have hope for the future. I am optimistic that the Jewish student community at U.C. Berkeley can be rebuilt, and that next year will be better than this year.

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