

PunkTorah: The First Anthology

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This book is dedicated to the PunkTorah community.

You are a blessing to my life and to the world. I am proud to call you my friends.

Thank you for making my life worth living.

This book is also dedicated to my mother and father, who always told me to follow my dreams, even when my dreams were probably their nightmare. Just remember folks, you did that to yourselves!

*Oh, Lord: open my lips so my mouth may declare your glory. - Psalm 57:17*

*“There are some people in life that screw up so much that the only direction they can go in is “up”. A friend of mine, describing successful people who don't deserve it.*

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## Introduction

This book is not much of a book, but rather a scrapbook.

This is a collection of all my writing, published and unpublished, that have turned PunkTorah, a silly YouTube channel I dreamed up at my best friend's dining room table into a community of thousands of people around the world, seeking a connection to God, Judaism and the Jewish Experience without limits.

Every dollar made from selling this book, or any speaking engagements that I get out of writing this book, will go to PunkTorah. I am not making a dime off of this. I wouldn't want to. PunkTorah isn't about me. It's about everyone else. I'm just lucky to be a part of it.

I am not qualified to write anything. My eighth grade English teacher gave me a C on just about everything I ever turned in. I don't have a Masters degree in Jewish studies; my Hebrew is crappy at best and I have a bizarre vision problem where letters tend to fly off the pages while I am reading. I also have the attention span of a doughnut.

It also doesn't help that I'm a convert, which is like being the bus boy at the banquet of Judaism. Converts are a lot like immigrants: people think we don't belong, and even if we do, people are pretty sure we got here illegally.

I write, because in the words of my Emmy award-winning friend Jean Meltzer-Masculi, "Jewish problems keep me awake at night". I write, and work in Jewish activism, because thousands of people around the world are desperate for Jewish life, but are being kept away from it. This isn't because of fundamentalist Islam, a rise of Nazi anti-Semitism, Mel Gibson, the cost of yeshiva tuition, the Reform movement, gay people, intermarriage or anything else. The reason many people cannot live Jewish lives is that elements of the Jewish community and authority figures are keeping the gates of spiritual connection as firmly shut as possible. This painful reality gave birth to PunkTorah.

People don't understand what PunkTorah is. They see "punk" and assume that we're a band. They see Torah and assume we're a secret kiruv (outreach) conspiracy concocted by either Aish HaTorah or Chabad. We have even gotten emails asking if we are a Christian group pretending to be Jewish. I love those emails: it proves that the more effective your outreach is, the less Jewish you look. Pretty sad reality for Jewish life!

We use the word "punk" in the same way that past generations used the word "hippie" or "beatnik". We're rebellious. Like the author Matthue Roth says in his poem First Person, "I learned to get to the point where the only rules I followed were the ones I cared about. And that is how I found God."

PunkTorah, for the record, is a non-profit Jewish multimedia company.

We make Jewish life for people who cannot, or will not, assimilate into the bland, corporate McJudaism that smells like cholent from last Shabbat. We're outside the box, and we love it. We're unaffiliated, because most people are. We're lay led, because holiness doesn't come with a college degree in Rabbinic studies. But above all this, we're independent: just like you are.

Our projects involve everything from YouTube how-to videos on Jewish prayer and ritual, killer recipes at NewKosher.org, an online independent minyan called OneShul, an evolving documentary called The G-d Project and of course, PunkTorah.org, the radical Jewish spiritual cultural website that we are known for.

But we are not just a non-profit, but also a family. We are loud, proud Jewish people of all flavors who come together online and in person, because we believe in pluralism and the power of independent Jewish life. We're Orthodox deejays who dig sexy Talmud, priestesses reclaiming Earth-based Jewish feminism, teenagers wondering why Judaism matters and tattooed atheists who keep kosher. We're Flexidox. We're Alterna-frum. We're Reformadox, Reconstructionist Chassidus, Conserva-newal, and everything in between. We're too cool for shul.

This series includes all my favorite writing, including some of the first pieces I ever wrote when PunkTorah was just a blog and not the worldwide community it is today. It also includes hate mail, love letters, notes written on cocktail napkins, barely legible diary entries from the drunken haze of Jewish conferences and over caffeinated rants from a man who really should be seeking professional counseling.

I doubt anyone will find God from reading this book. If you want to find God, I suggest the Torah. It worked for me and it may work for you. In the meantime, I hope you'll enjoy the ride. I sure have.

I also want to give a very special thanks to Daniela who spent tireless energy in putting this book together. Thank you for putting up with me!

## The Conversation that Started PunkTorah

Purim 2009. I am working nights and am not able to get to a megillah reading. Scanning the internet, I find one synagogue thirty miles away that does a morning Shacharit and megillah reading.

The only problem: I have never been to this kind of shul before. I am not sure what their traditions are, if any. I do not know anything about the community, or the siddur they use, or what to expect. Frankly, I wasn't all that sure where the building was!

I arrive, wandering around the empty atrium, searching for the worship space. I see a few people standing in another room, and slowly open the door. Tallit are on my right. Siddurim are on my left. OK, I think, this is going to be all right.

Like most synagogues, everyone there made sure not to acknowledge my presence. I find a seat in the back, and watch as a room full of men daven in their own heads, while the Rabbi meditates and mumbles. I'm not sure where we are in the service. Am I late? Am I early?

At some point, I hear the words to a prayer I know. I'm on track. A few of the guys are looking at me funny. Do I have something in my teeth?

With a tap on the shoulder, I am asked, "are you a kohen or a levi"? I reply, "no". This will be my only interaction with any of the congregants.

We're done with Shacharit, which means the megillah can be read. Fantastic. This is all I was here for anyway.

The Rabbi goes through, well, the whole megillah. It was nice. He asks us to move all the chairs for the Purim party later in the evening and also to give a donation. I toss a twenty in the tzedakah box and help move a few chairs.

The Rabbi spots me. The real fun begins.

*Rabbi: I have never seen you here before.*

Wow. Some way of saying hello.

*Me: Hi. Yes. Well, I work nights so I can't make it to things. Also, I don't live in the area...*

*Rabbi: (interrupting) Where do you live?*

*Me: Austell.*

The Rabbi is silent.

*Me: So I work nights, and can't make it to any local Purim events. I appreciate you having this reading this morning.*

*Rabbi: What is your name?*

*Me: Patrick.*

*Rabbi: Patrick, huh? What is your last name?*

I gave him my family name. I didn't want to deal with the whole Aleph thing. It helps if you know that my last name is French.

*Rabbi: Are you married?*

*Me: No. I'm single, no children.*

*Rabbi: Where does your family live?*

*Me: All over. Mostly in the Southeast.*

*Rabbi: But where?*

*Me: My parents live not too far from here. And my brother and sister as well. My other sister is in North Carolina and my dad's family is from eastern Washington.*

*Rabbi: What is your Hebrew name?*

*Me: Adam Ben Avraham*

Rabbi is silent again. I'm a ger. I probably didn't convert right.

*Rabbi: OK, well come to our party tonight.*

*Me: Well, I can't. Like I said, I work nights.*

The Rabbi doesn't say anything.

*Me: Is there an email list or anything that I can get on so I can learn more about your events?*

*Rabbi: Just call my secretary and she will deal with that.*

The Rabbi then walks away. You don't have to be a psychologist to see that the Rabbi was a dickhead and I have no reason to go back to this shul. Frankly, these types of interrogations...I mean conversations...happen all the time.

I went home bummed out. Is this where we are at with religious Judaism?

The conversation I would have preferred would have happened this way:

*Rabbi: Hi, welcome. My name is David. What's yours?*

*Me: Patrick.*

*Rabbi: Nice to meet you Patrick. How did you hear about us?*

*Me: Oh, well I saw on your website that you had a megillah reading. I work nights and can't go to other events...so I came here.*

*Rabbi: I'm so glad! And I hope you will come to more daytime events. Matter of fact, let me write down your contact info. We have an email list with all of our events. What kind of work do you do, if you don't mind me asking?*

*Me: I work at a nightclub.*

*Rabbi: Wow sounds exciting! Well, Shacharit is every day at nine AM. Is that too early for you?*

*Me: Well, honestly, I don't live in the area, so I might not be able to make that.*

*Rabbi: That's OK! Where do you live?*

*Me: Austell.*

*Rabbi: Oh, well if you get a chance, check out Congregation Blah Blah Blah. My colleague Rabbi Yaddah Yaddah has a great community there. Would you like me to send you his website and contact info?*

*Me: Wow, that would be great!*

*Rabbi: No sweat. I may not be able to get to it tonight with Purim, but I promise to email you as soon as possible. Do you have Shabbat morning off?*

*Me: Sure do!*

*Rabbi: Well, that starts a little later, so you would have time to sleep in as much as you need and still get here on time. We have a service then a nice kosher lunch. Would love to chat with you and have something to eat.*

*Me: You got it. And hey, here's a tzedakah contribution for your Purim drive.*

*Rabbi: Thank you. I will make sure it goes to someone needy. Well, I have to run*

*and get this done, but I hope you have a great day and I look forward to seeing you on Shabbat. Chag Sameach!*

Why is this conversation impossible to have? The Rabbi would have won me over. I would be davening every day. I'd volunteer as much as I could and I would, gasp, become a dues paying member.

At any rate, after my lame experience with this Rabbi made me wonder why we bow and scrape to Rabbis and all their amazing knowledge, when at the end of the day, they are just sales people for God? I'm a salesman. I promote music. It's the same gig: trying to find ways to come to your place and give you money to further whatever it is that you are doing.

So I sat at my dining table, reflecting on what I wanted out of a Jewish community. I realized that I could care less. The synagogue system is boring. I am tired of being either too frum, not frum enough, too punk, too whatever.

It was then that I realized something important: there was no way that I was alone. The internet must be filled with people like me who just don't fit in.

I did what any logical person would: I went on YouTube and did a dvar for Parshat Tetzaveh.

One year later, I would be the executive director of PunkTorah.

And as for the Rabbi, well, I went back to that synagogue when a friend's brother in law was in town. And his shul was packed. And he was on fire: his dvar was on not judging others based on how they look, and how special and unique every person is.

I am grateful that he treated me like crap. Because had he not, PunkTorah would not exist.

## **The Origin of Patrick Aleph**

Patrick Aleph does not exist. You won't find a social security card or drivers license with that name on it. I was not born with a Hebrew letter as my last name. The Patrick part came from my family, but Aleph is an assumed name.

It is not entirely contrived. For most of my adult life, people have known me as Patrick A. Patrick A. is the name I used in my daily life: my stage name, my writing name, the name I used at my job before PunkTorah, the name my friends call me...everything. No one outside my family knows my family name. And they'll never know.

The Jewish Name Game is an amazing sport. At shul, a networking event, or any situation where nametags are involved, Jews go into Jewish Geography overdrive. "Your name is Grossman? Is your family from Monsey? Did they own the glatt deli down the street from Temple Beth Blah-Blah-Blah? Oh, my God! We went to summer camp together!"

This can be fun, and I've played this game before. But it has a dark side to it.

Jews have banded together through history because of persecution. So a Jewish last name was a "screw you" to the establishment. And when two Jews met, they had an instant connection, a feeling of safety and comfort in each other's presence. A name was an easy way of saying, "don't worry, we're in this together".

I worry, however, that the Jewish name game has become a commercial nightmare: a transactional tool that is exploitive and frankly, demeans the Jewish people.

Today, Jewish Networking Events are about doing business because being Jewish gives you an "edge", not because we aren't invited to participate in the Chamber of Commerce. Jewish fraternities and sororities are bonus points on a resume, not a fragile family that takes care of its own in spite of hostility from the goyim. Jewishness is an identity that is just as flexible as your iTunes playlist.

And what happens if your name is Joe Smith or Susanna Rodriguez? In my experience, you can be wearing a kippah and a Manishevitz t-shirt, but if that damn nametag doesn't say "David Klein" or "Sarah Bromowitz", you are out of luck. At a recent event, I heard a speaker talk about the greatness of the Jewish community, since we reach out to Hispanics, blacks, and Asian. The hidden bias: you can't be a black, Hispanic or Asian Jew.

The Jewish Name Game also demeans Jews-By-Choice. I know many Jews who speak perfect Hebrew, can lead services and are involved in Jewish activism, who grew up Christians. Their leadership creates a fresh perspective on the Jewish tradition. Their “biologically Jewish” counterparts are off scoring blow and eating ham sandwiches.

We need to take the commercial, transactional, capitalistic urge out of Jewish relationships. Jews are a family. We are Israel. We should love each other and help each other because helping and loving people is the right thing to do, for us, and for the world. What’s in a name? Absolutely nothing worth saving.

Malcolm X, after converting to Islam, encouraged people to drop their “slave name.” This meant a lot to me, but I never thought to do it until one day I found myself at a Jewish convention having lunch with a woman who was rather peeved that my convention ID read “Patrick A”.

The dialogue went something like this:

*Her: Your name is Patrick A?*

*Me: Yes.*

*Her: What does the A stand for?*

*Me: Nothing. My name is Patrick A?*

*Her: Come on, what is your family name?*

*Me: I go by Patrick A. I always have. And in fact, did you know that according to the Gemarah, calling someone by a name that they wish to not be called will take you out of Olam Haba (the world to come)?*

*Her: Silence*

*Me: My last name is Aleph. Like the letter. The Hebrew letter.*

And that is how Patrick A. became Patrick Aleph.

It hasn't been easy being Patrick Aleph. Registering for conferences and flights can be tricky. I have had to double and triple show my state issued ID at hotels. When asked, “how come your name is different on your registration” I usually say, “oh, Aleph is my Hebrew name”. If the person isn't Jewish, then it works.

I would encourage all of us to drop our last names, regardless of what it is, Roth or Rivera alike, so we do not become slaves to our own pathetic urge: to take the glory of the Jewish people, and reduce it to a business opportunity, or alienate those Jews who we feel, of no fault of their own, aren't “Jewish enough”. I know this won't happen, but it's fun to think about.

## **Diary of An Angry Convert**

I was recently interviewed for a magazine about The G-d Project. And while I am grateful for the interview, I was miffed about a series of questions from the reporter about my "religious background".

I answered honestly, "I grew up without religion." It's that simple. My parents aren't atheists. But we never went to church (or anything else, for that matter), we didn't celebrate holidays religiously, and I never went to any kinds of events that promoted religion, with the exception of seeing the Dalai Lama speak on world peace. But this was not enough for the reporter.

"Oh, so you converted?" She asked.

This is a sticky situation. I'm open about the fact that I converted to Judaism more than I should be. People who know me, or know PunkTorah, or stumble upon one of our videos, know that Patrick Aleph is a big ol' ger. Loud and proud.

But does that give anyone a right to ask me about it?

Technically, no. Judaism discourages "outing" converts. Abraham was a convert. All the matriarchs of the Torah were converts. And Ruth, the most famous convert in Torah history, has a holiday surrounding her (Shavuot). No one can trace their heritage back to Mt. Sinai, so in a way, we're all Jews By Choice.

I have been asked by Rabbis of every mainstream movement of Judaism, across the spectrum, if I am a convert. This is a violation of Jewish law, and no one can play the "they don't know any better" card. Maybe a layperson walking down the street doesn't know, but a Rabbi does.

In other words, being a convert isn't easy.

I believe that Judaism is what you make of it. Whoever you are, whatever you are truly about, is how you are going to understand the Divine. So the question is this: when you look at the sacred texts of Judaism, which would you rather do...love, or despise thy neighbor?

To illustrate my point, here are a few texts that can be manipulated to promote a pro or anti-conversion agenda:

*No converts to Judaism will be accepted in the era of the Messiah. Babylonian Talmud, tractate Yebamot, page 24B,*

*The Holy Blessed One does not favor any one person over another, but receives all; the gates are always open, and anyone who wishes to enter may do so. Sh'mot Rabbah 19:4*

*No converts to Judaism were accepted in the era of King David and King Solomon. Babylonian Talmud, tractate Yebamot, page 24B, (21st line on page)*

*Moreover concerning the stranger that is not of Thy people Israel...when he shall come and pray toward this house; hear Thou in heaven Thy dwelling-place, and do according to all that the stranger calleth to Thee for; that all the peoples of the earth may know Thy name (1 Kings 8:41-43)*

*Evil after evil will come upon those who accept converts. Babylonian Talmud, tractate Yebamot, page 109B (10th line on page)*

*God says to us, "As I welcomed Jethro the Midianite in the wilderness of Sinai, so must you welcome anyone who comes to you to join your people." Yalkot Shim'oni, Yitro, No. 268*

*Our Rabbis taught: Converts...delay the arrival of the messiah. Babylonian Talmud, tractate Niddah, page 13B (14th line on page)*

Kudos to Rabbi Gershon Winkler for this list, taken from his book, *The Way of the Boundary Crosser*. There are way more than this, but you get the drift.

I have been thinking for a long time about writing a book about conversion. Perhaps this essay will be the seed for such a thing. But in the meantime, there are several things I wish someone had told me before my conversion. Here it goes:

There is no such thing as "converting to Judaism". You come to Judaism through your own desire to be a part of the peoplehood. Yitro did that when Moses taught him how G-d brought the Hebrews out of Egypt (Exodus 18). Ruth did that when she chose to follow her mother-in-law Naomi instead of returning to her own land (Ruth 1). And don't forget about Abraham, who had an Obiwan Kenobi and Luke Skywalker on Hoth experience and became the first patriarch. This isn't some far out hippie idea. Chabad believes it, and so do the Humanistic Jews.

So what does this mean in practical terms? Well, it means that the rules of conversion are...well...kinda contrived. OK, before you start throwing Gemara at me, I do recognize that there are some things that remain common: mikvah, circumcision, a sincere heart, etc. But taking one year, five years, ten years to study Torah, going to JCC classes, joining the "right" synagogue are all rules made up by man in hopes of serving HaShem correctly. For some, that means Satmar Orthodoxy in NYC. For others, that means suburban Reform temples

outside Reno, Nevada. Pick your team, and just go for it.

After converting, you'll be "more Jewish" than a lot of people born into the Jewish people. My wife jokes that I am the Jewiest person she knows. I take that as a compliment. I had to work for it — I didn't grow up in a Jewish family like some of my friends. And often, I get asked questions about Judaism by my Jewish friends, because I had to study. They didn't. They came into this world as Jews. Study, for them, was not part of the equation. So don't be surprised if you find yourself the Torah advisor to people who you think should know better.

You're still not Jewish to some people. The sad fact is that some people (a small minority, Baruch HaShem) have their own idea about what a real Jewish person is. Whether that's converting through their system of Halachka (Jewish law), or going to their shul or being born into the right kind of Jewish family, this prejudice does exist. Just remember: this is a minority opinion. And just like in the Talmud, the majority wins, even if we do have to listen to the minority opinion.

There are lots of different kinds of Jewish. Alternative Jewish Spirituality is a lot larger than the oligarchy of Jewish movements wants you to think. Earth based Judaism, Renewal, Independent Minyanim, Reconstructionism, Conservadoxo and Karaism are just a few. And whether anyone wants to admit it or not, these small movements are actually what's driving Judaism as we know it. So don't get stuck on The Big Three.

You're not done yet. Being Jewish is not an end game. Once you take the mikvah dunk, you're not finished. It's a lifetime thing. When you first convert, you'll be "all about Judaism." But when the honeymoon is over, synagogue won't always be as fun as it used to. Your beliefs about G-d and life will evolve. Suddenly latkes and yarmulkes just aren't that interesting. And you know what? That's OK. Because just like any other relationship, it changes over time. Why shouldn't your relationship with a five thousand year old religion also change as you grow older?

## **Walgreens and Tempeh Reubens Brought Me Closer To God**

It's amazing how two completely different events in life can make us reflect on the same, great thing. My favorite example: getting sick and eating a vegan reuben sandwich.

First, the illness story.

For almost three months, I had a sinus infection. Last February, I went to my doctor, a nice older guy that my family has seen for years, to see if he could help. I had just changed insurance companies, and did not have my insurance card yet. The doctor's staff said, "don't worry, we'll take you now and deal with the insurance paperwork later."

I was so happy: a doctor who cares about his patients and doesn't worry about seeing proof of insurance first.

Unfortunately, the medicine did not work, and I had to go back to the doctor. And this time, things were different. Really different.

The insurance company never sent my paperwork to the doctor, or so my paper file said. The receptionist at the doctor's office said that they would not treat me if I did not show my insurance card or was willing to pay out of pocket. I refused and asked them to get the insurance company on the phone and sort it out while I wait. They wouldn't. It was on me to solve this problem, even though I felt like I was going to die.

So I left. Not knowing what to do, I went to the Walgreens down the street and hoped into the Take Care Clinic, a sort of "nurse in a box" operation that does minor medical treatment.

This experience was amazing. Instead of dealing with a receptionist, I simply input my info on a touch screen. After five minutes of waiting, a nurse came out, greeted me by name, and brought me into the room. She asked what my insurance situation was, and I told her the story about my screwball doctor.

She replied, "Oh, this is no problem. I have my computer here. Let's go on the insurance company website and get all your info."

Within minutes, she was on the company's website, printing my card! No haggling, no nagging. After the exam, she put in all my info into her computer, printed my prescription, and said, "OK, your prescription will be filled in about ten minutes."

It was that simple.

A few nights later, I got a phone call from a random number. To my surprise, it was the nurse from Walgreens. “Hey Patrick, just wanted to call and see how you are feeling.” In the twenty years my family has been with my old doctor, I never once got a phone call follow up. I was impressed.

And now, another story about a sandwich I had on vacation.

I’m sitting in the Green Sage Coffee House & Cafe in Asheville, NC. Staring at me, on a plate next to some sweet potato French fries, is the future of Judaism.

I’m talking about the tempeh reuben.

Like the sandwich that came before, the tempeh reuben is two pieces of grilled rye bread, delicately holding a symphony of sauerkraut, thousand island dressing and Swiss cheese. The twist: instead of a pile of corned beef, this sandwich is filled with tempeh, an earthy, Indonesian export brought to us by the hippies. And the cheese? Well, that’s made of soy as well.

The reuben, like many Jewish icons, is not exactly Jewish. Some sources say it came from Omaha, the least Jewish place in the world, and others claim proudly that it was a New York creation. Either way, the sandwich that would become a staple in “kosher style” delis is not even kosher. Meat and milk, simple as that. Yet, to many people, the reuben is a Jewish icon.

This is the first truly kosher reuben I have ever seen. No meat/milk issues here. Just some sliced, grilled, fermented soy goodness piled high with all the trimmings. And I realize, in a moment before my bracha (prayer) over my meal, that this culinary masterpiece is an edible example of what Judaism will be for my generation.

In the same way that the medical clinic innovated patient care to help me get where I needed to be medically, the kind people at the sandwich shop innovated to help me where I needed to be in my kitchen life.

I realized, from these two moments, the importance of looking ahead. If you are a Rabbi or a Jewish non-profit, think about these Walgreens and sandwiches moments in your own life. Find how innovation helps people to get what they need, when they need and how they need it. Look toward a new model when the old ones fail. If a restaurant and a pharmacy can do it, so can we.

## **Starting Your Own Synagogue**

Want to start your own indie minyan? Are you a Jewish “minister” in the Universal Life Church, the fine retailers of ministerial credentials? You might be the right person to start your own synagogue. Here are a few tips, based on experience.

### **Start A Facebook Fan Page**

Get a Fan Page on Facebook and start hunting down like-minded people in your area. A synagogue with only one person is kinda sad (OK, really sad). So before you do anything, make sure that there are people interested in what you want. Don't be surprised if liberal Christians, Muslims and other random people fan your shul-in-progress. Some people just love friending Jewish profiles. Chalk it up to Philo-Semitism. There are also a lot of crazy people on Facebook who fan things for no real reason. I don't know why that is, and Mark Zuckerberg won't answer my calls. Aren't Jews supposed to help each other out? Oh well.

It also helps if you already have two or three friends who are as hardcore about this as you are. I am a firm believer in keeping things small and streamlined. Plus, these friends are the people who are each going to invite another friend. Random Facebook blasting really only gets you so far.

### **Build Your Core**

Invite your fan page over for coffee and dessert. Use this time to discuss issues of what they want out of a community (events, prayer times, Halachka, minhagim, etc).

Very important: you came up with the idea, which means that no matter how much delegation of authority you do, you will ultimately always be the leader. If you don't want this position, then do not go any further.

### **Make A Budget**

The great thing about an indie minyan is that it doesn't have the financial needs that shuls have. But here are a few things to think about:

Independent minyanim can always get copies of the OneShul community siddur at cost (around \$3/book), including free shipping. Just email [patrick@punktorah.org](mailto:patrick@punktorah.org) and we can make that happen.

Have a vision. Does your indie minyan need to rent a Rabbi twice a year

for High Holidays, or are you just getting together for a lay led Shabbat? Are you going to start a Hebrew school? Side note: old folks make great Hebrew teachers. Retired Jews are amazing educational assets, who are under appreciated).

Once you have these issues worked out, build a budget. Then take whatever the total is (whether it's \$200 or \$200,000) and add 10% to it. Call this line item "innovation". Every good company or organization pads their budget by 10% for development of cool projects, or bold initiatives that may or may not work out. This isn't an original Jewish statement from me. I stole it from Ariel Berry from Presentense. I figure he won't read this book, because I don't think he can stand still for more than five minutes...so I'm in the clear.

### **Find A Cool Space**

If you have a nice house, then you can always take a spare room, an attic, or some place like that and build one out. I'm a big fan of flex or mixed-zoned locations, so if you have any interest in moving, why not find a place like a loft or condo that is in a heavily commercial area. That way, you can live there, and people will have plenty of room to park. Think Chabad on this one.

Craigslist is a great real estate tool, especially if you are like me and rent from sketchy people.

### **Start Having Events**

Havdalah is a great event to have as a fundraiser and community builder. You can fundraise on Havdalah, people can bring food, play instruments, kids can play games and watch TV if they are bored. And in my experience, Havdalah is the most underrated Jewish event, which means that even if you live in a community with a thousand synagogues, you'll still be the only game in town as far as Saturday night Judaism.

Potlucks are a great thing as well. Frankly, I think all good religions appreciate potlucks. They are free, which is awesome as well...and people have fun swapping recipes.

Also, have a tzedakah box by the door for collecting donations. Don't be afraid to ask for money, if you need it.

### **Build Your Shul**

Asher Meza of BeJewish.org has a great video on how he and a Rabbi in Richmond built a Shul in the Rabbi's attic. Home Depot, eBay, and Amazon made that place happen!

### **Get Online — Even More Than Now**

OK, so maybe I'm a liberal kook, but streaming your events online is about the best thing you can do, ever. Again, OneShul can help you with that. It's not hard if you stay organized and have internet upload speeds of at least 1.5MBPS. Heck, even FrumSatire is talking about how Orthodox minyanim need to go online!

### **Grow, Grow, Grow!**

Don't allow yourself to think that ten people are enough. Maybe your indie Shul will only have ten people for the first year, or three years, or five years even. But keep growing! Keep flyers with you in your bag/purse. Put them in JCCs, bookstores, community centers, wherever Jewish folks can be found. I suggest putting them in the token kosher section of your major grocery store chain (the staff will throw them away, but why not??)

### **Be An Evangelist**

Even Apple had a Chief Evangelist, and I am going to make the radical assumption that the type of people who would read a book by PunkTorah might be Mac Heads.

In any case, you need to be a salesperson. It goes back to "grow, grow, grow". You need to have the kind of stamina of a used car salesman. If you want to connect people with HaShem, that has to be your driving motivation behind everything.

In case you burn out (and sometimes you will) I highly suggest reading *The Rebbe's Army* by Sue Fishkoff. It's a great book about how Chabad basically does everything right. Or just read the chapter I wrote about why Chabad owns Judaism. It's a low rent, Cliff Notes version of *Rebbe's Army*.

## The Struggle For Legitimacy

When you work with radical queers, the self-converted, and anyone else who's derech (path) doesn't jive with the establishment, you are bound to be attacked for your lack of legitimacy.

I can understand that. Judaism is a religion that, for the most part, centers on what I call the Priestly Curse. Far too often, we allow ourselves to believe that there is someone out there who is smarter than us, more educated than us, who knows better than us how to live Jewishly. The Priestly Curse is a cultural memory that the Jewish people have. Long ago, we had priests who offered sacrifices to God in our name. Sure, we had to bring the offering to the Temple...but after that, someone else was in charge. We've allowed that spirit to continue on. So long as there is someone older, wiser or more educated, we don't have to get our hands dirty. Just find someone legitimate, and you're fine.

Judaism is luckier than some religions: we do have pluralism engrained in our tradition. The Talmud, which is like the Facebook Wall of Jewish Law, is filled with back-and-forth arguments about everything from how to kill a goat to how to argue with your wife. This openness to disagreement has served us well.

But I would stop at saying that the Jewish people approve of dissension. We don't mind debate, as long as we can all agree that the Orthodox are better than all of us, that goish ideas are a sin and that whoever has the best education wins.

I have a hard time believing people who talk about "true Judaism". Any good research into the history of the Bible and the documentary hypothesis shows that the Torah was written by Ezra the Scribe and that the Torah was not meant to be understood as the text that we use it as today. Torah Consciousness, as I call it, has evolved to meet the needs of the world that God has allowed to develop.

Parshat Acharei (Leviticus 16:1-18:30) is a great example of the contextual evolution of scripture.

Acharei talks about the casting of lots onto goats for sacrifice to God and to Azazel. Now, we know who God is (or at least, we like to pretend we do), but who, or what, is Azazel?

Ask Chabad and they will tell you that Azazel is the cliff that the goat was pushed off. That makes sense, as Azaz means rough or strong, and El is the

root of Elohim. But Azazel can also be the name of a shadowy supernatural demon related to warfare. Perhaps it's both, or a little more of one component or the other, depending on who you are and what time in history it is.

There's no denying anymore that the religion practiced by the ancient Israelites was bordering on paganism. While I love the modern cultural midrash that the people of the past were closer to "Bible Times" and therefore closer to the true teachings of the Jewish faith, science is teaching us that truly, the ancient Hebrews weren't really better Jews than we are today. Their idols were clay statues. Our idols are TV stars and fast food restaurants. As the old joke goes, "same stuff, different day."

I don't think Judaism really exists as an ongoing practice that we need to adhere to. Judaism, like many other -isms, can be idolatrous. Really, the Torah doesn't teach us how to be religious. I think instead it teaches us, in a very long-winded way, that we are in a covenant. Strip everything away and you'll find only one sentence that remains true through all the ups and downs of the Torah: I am the Lord your G-d.

I am the Lord your G-d inspired the Temple and the sacrifice. When the Temple was gone, it inspired the Shul and the Rabbis of the Diaspora. After the Holocaust, it inspired social justice and political action. And in today's global world, it inspires those of us who are taking the message of HaShem "to the streets" (or should I say, Facebook) to shout out loud that G-d in Heaven is G-d alone and there is no other.

Of course, I'm a big flaming liberal, so it would make sense that I feel that way.

I did not realize how insane my logic was until I taught a class at a Birthright Israel Next lunch and learn. There I met a young man who tried, making himself blue in the face, to explain to me that the Torah, which constituted the oral and written texts, was perfect and came down from Mount Sinai. When I told him the overwhelming evidence that the Jews of the past were pretty pagan around the edges and that Moses probably wasn't laying tefillin, he acted as if I had uncovered some great, lost secret and obviously had a Ph.D. in Biblical Studies. I told him no, that I just read a lot and had a community college level education. He was shocked. Later, I learned that his Jewish education stopped at what his Rabbi told him, and it all made sense. Ignorance is bliss.

If you have the chance, watch a documentary called The Bible's Buried Secrets and you'll learn something interesting about the ancient Israelites: they weren't exactly the mighty warriors that the Bible talks about. In fact, they were shepherds, outcasts, nomads, serfs...people on the fringes of society.

I know a little bit about people on society's fringe. I've spent a good bit of my life there, as a nerd, a weirdo, a freak, a rocker, an artist. I think my teen years were the culmination of all of these identities.

Something we all have in common across the weirdo spectrum: we like stories that give us strength. We generally feel powerless, whether it's powerless over some popular kid at school, a loudmouth boss at work that won't leave you alone, whatever. So we come up with elaborate stories that give us a sense of belonging, a sense of unity with people in our struggle, and ultimately, stories where we win in the end. Pop culture is filled with these stories: Revenge of the Nerds, Napoleon Dynamite, American Splendor, Ghost World, SLC Punk...these are our "Parshat Ekevs" (or would that be Ekevot?)

Imagine what it must have been like to be a beaten up surfer in the Bronze Age, a social pariah of your time, totally worthless to any community you tried to belong to, and then have someone tell you that you are chosen specially by the one true G-d who believes in you and that you are actually the descendent of mighty warriors. Sounds pretty rad to me.

To that end, the Torah, in fact Judaism itself, is a method for relating to outsiders. This is how I, and many other people in the PunkTorah community, explore the Jewish experience.

A guy once told me that, at least in his opinion, Jewish life was getting worse from generation to generation. The farther away we moved from Sinai, he believed, the more we forgot about the mitzvot (commandments) and thus were farther removed from God. He cited the Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist movements as proof of that.

That same week, an Orthodox Rabbi told me that he thought things were getting better Jewishly! Chabad was getting bigger, more progressive Jews were going baal teshuva, and that Artscroll was the greatest thing ever for helping the Jewishly illiterate find the proper tools of study.

So what's the answer? Are we better Jews or worse Jews than those crappy ex-slaves at Mt. Sinai?

Moses, in Parshat Va'etchanan, seemed to think that things will get worse: Moses predicts the Hebrews will enter the promised land and turn their backs on everything holy, practicing idolatry and basically just being little bad asses (Deut. 4:23-30). It looks like the "it gets worse" philosophy wins.

Or does it?

The previous Torah portion teaches that the original generation of Hebrew ex-slaves (the ones who actually lived in Egypt) were so bad that God commanded that they not enter the promised land (Deut. 1:34)! If things get worse, and the first Hebrews were not good enough to enter the promised land, then what does that say about future generations?

Legitimacy boils down to one issue: who will accept what you believe. People can throw around Bible verses all day long, wax poetic about Halachka (Jewish law) and minhagim (traditions), but at the end of the day, an individual's

right to a Jewish life and the power of a community's ideas are measured in the number of people who are willing to call them brother/sister. Majority rules, I suppose.

I'm not bothered by the idea that the stories of the Torah are not historically accurate, or that the laws are incredibly loose, because in reality, the path to God is a complicated road. The texts are meant to express the soul of a people. The human heart is a deep place, filled with great mysteries. I have no doubt that the events in the Torah did happen in some way and that the laws of the Torah were inspired by the experience of writers under a covenant with the Divine. The Torah, like the work of gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson, is not written as it happened, but as others experienced it.

### **Everything I Needed To Know I Learned From Chabad**

Love them or hate them, Chabad is the greatest Jewish organization I have ever encountered. Although I personally have some issues with their theology, I have yet to find a group of people so on fire for Judaism.

I have learned a lot about Jewish community from Chabad Rabbis and their wives, and it can be boiled down to three things:

#### **Don't Call It Outreach, But Make Sure To Do It**

The Rebbe taught that Chabadniks should never use the term kiruv, or outreach, to promote their work in the Jewish community. Outreach implies that there are insiders who are (duh!) "reaching out" to those on the outside. The Rebbe explained that this hierarchy was wrong: that it puts one set of Jews as higher on the Great Jew Ladder over others, and that everyone was equal in the eyes of God. I like that.

#### **Don't Judge, At Least Not Openly**

In my conversations with Chabadniks, the one thing everyone says that they love about Chabad is that they do not judge. Frankly, that's a load of nonsense. Everyone judges everyone all the time! What people really mean (and what Chabad really does) is to set aside open judgment of others. The motto of Chabad can be best summed up as: we don't get in the way of you being Jewish incorrectly, but if you ever want to do it right, we're here for you.

#### **Technology Is Everything**

Chabad was the first Jewish organization to radically embrace the internet. I will be the first to admit that a major amount of my research for articles starts with Chabad's website. While PunkTorah goes further with using technology and the sacred with OneShul and The G-d Project, it must be said that Chabad laid the groundwork.

I know a lot of people who would give their life for Chabad. And for a long time, I never understood why. These people aren't orthodox. But Chabad is the greatest thing to them since sliced bread and is responsible for anything that they do in the realm of Jewish. On top of that, our boy Shmuley Boteach recently wrote that Judaism is under "Chabadization".

Why do people love Chabad so much? I think it's because Chabad

knows they're awesome and don't give a damn what you think.

Take a look at the first sentence of the Chabad FAQ page:

*"Chabad-Lubavitch is a philosophy, a movement, and an organization. It is considered to be the most dynamic force in Jewish life today."*

I like how assertive that is! Frankly, it's manly. If Chabad were a man, it would be the kind of man that other men want to be and that women want to have a one-night stand with.

Compare that to statements on the Reform website:

*"The great contribution of Reform Judaism is that it has enabled the Jewish people to introduce innovation while preserving tradition, to embrace diversity while asserting commonality, to affirm beliefs without rejecting those who doubt, and to bring faith to sacred texts without sacrificing critical scholarship."*

This statement really bothers me because it's boring. But also, its tone is very apologetic. It's like the Reform movement is sorry that it's innovating and that it promises it's still traditional Judaism. I think more people would support the Reform movement if their statement said, "look, this isn't Orthodoxy. This isn't Israeli-approved Torah derech. Deal with it. We're 40% of the population and growing."

OK, so what does the Conservative/Masorti movement have to say for itself?

*"What is Masorti Judaism? This is not an easy question to answer."*

Wow. You are part of something and you can't even explain it. Maybe that's why Conservative Judaism is in decline.

Chabad has taken over the Jewish world because it's bold. You may not like it, but it doesn't care. And people, I think, respect that. No one likes a wimp.

## How To Get The Most Out Of Jewish Conventions

August 2009 was the beginning of my endeavors into the world of Jewish conventions. I had decided that PunkTorah was my destiny and that I needed to do everything possibly to promote myself. When I learned about the Jewish convention world, I was sold.

Now, I've been to many a Con, mostly of the comic book or subculture persuasion. But if you want to see a Con in action, I highly recommend a Jewish Con.

Jewish conventions are nerdy. DragonCon is a jock fest compared to some of these J-Prof (code name for Jewish Professional) conventions. One will never see more advanced educations in one place at one time than a convention sponsored by one of the big Jewish organizations, and since the Jewish world loves meritocracy, the convention booklets are littered with MBA, Ph.D., J.D., Rabbi, Rabbi Emeritus and other credentials, some more dubious than others.

Diversity is not a big thing at a Jewish convention, unlike other nerdy cons. In terms of outward appearance, people look about the same, less the random black hat guys and your one-off Jewish Renewal fanatic in tie-dye. It's pretty Banana Republican at a J-Prof con, and I suspect it's because people are there to promote the organization they work for, and have to be on their best behavior (except for me).

Having said that, I know a lot of hooking up goes on at these things. J-Prof conventions are a meat market. It's like J-Date in real life. It's like summer camp without any adult supervision. It's glorious. And there is nothing funnier than seeing your more straight-laced peers doing the walk of shame down the hallway of a Marriott at 6AM wearing the previous night's clothes.

One great thing about J-Prof cons, if you are a speaker, is the sheer amount of free food and alcohol. For me, it's like being a kid in a candy store. J-Prof cons are very hyper conscious about kashrut (ironic, since so few of the Jews there even care) but nonetheless, it's a huge blessing to be able to eat and drink until I explode, without thinking about packaging or finding the nearest bearded Chabadnik to find out if this nosh is edible. I will admit, straight up, that despite my past as a punk rocker living in a van, the most I have ever drank in my life is at these conventions. The reason: they only have top shelf booze. I start every shmoozey mixer by having a triple Tanqueray on the rocks with a lime twist. Everyone thinks I'm having ice water. So word to Jewish organization donors: before you give, find out what kind of alcohol the organizations pour at their events and demand they switch to well booze. At least then, you know they

are serious about being economical.

So other than having a great wardrobe and watching your intake of the liquid devil, what should your gum-on-his-shoes amateur Jewish professional do in order to make the most of a Jewish convention?

First, realize that all the business of a convention is done before anyone gets there. I have yet to go to a convention and really have a major impact that leads to anything. The handshaking and backslapping happens behind closed doors, in hallways, and all the places where you generally are not. The goal should not be to go to a Jewish convention in order to find a funder, to get a job, or anything like that. You go to a convention not to find someone, but to find yourself.

Second, panels and seminars are not what these conventions are about. All the cool stuff happens in between the organized stuff. Sure, you may get to see some high-ranking Israeli speaker or a politician. You may see someone from Shemspeed doing Jewish hip-hop or watch a group of bloggers talk about social networking. But the good stuff, the stuff that makes spending a ridiculous amount of money on a shared hotel room and a plastic bag full of sponsor schwag, is the experience of finding cool people to hang out with who are like minded, staying up late, and frankly, acting as unprofessional as possible. Conventions are like MTV Spring Break for Jewish communal professionals.

If I had to do it over again, I would bring more business cards. You run out of these things faster than you would imagine. And you will have an abundance of other people's cards in your luggage when you get home. A great tip: every night, organize people's contact info. Immediately friend them on Facebook, send them emails, etc. If you don't, you'll forget. And frankly, they will forget about you.

Jewish conventions are a great way to lose your money, so do everything you can to get in for free. I know, it doesn't help the cost of conventions when so many people are being brought in at the convention's cost, but if you can speak at something or in some way get subsidized, do it. I also highly recommend sharing a room and hording food to help keep your costs down as well. If you are really entrepreneurial, you can rent room on your hotel room floor to some poor blogger or other degenerate (like me) who didn't get a free room and still can't afford to share one with only another person. This negates your ability to hook up with anyone at the con, unless you go to their room, but if you are married or don't date within the J-Prof pool, you are probably OK.

Lastly, keep your eyes peeled. Cons are a great place to get ideas (read: steal ideas), to learn about the goings-on in the Jewish world, and frankly to get your batteries recharged if you are suffering from a general lack of enthusiasm for your lot in life.

Oh, but do remember, be on your best behavior. While you can get away with being a drunken, oversexed mess tossing out business cards like Hanukkah gelt, remember that we're only fourteen million strong and that reputations do follow you home (or on Facebook photo tags).

## The Secret Language of Jewish Communal Professionals

Like any profession, those of us who are Jewish-For-A-Living have a secret language that we use with each other. To the outsider, this language is strange and unfamiliar. And since I believe in openness, here is my own personal WikiLeaks glossary of Jewish non-profit speak. And if this article inspires you to change your non-profit, then let us know, because we're here to help you.

**Jewish Communal Professional:** anyone who works for a Jewish non-profit that is specifically Jewish in nature (example: Jewish National Fund, Birthright Israel, PunkTorah). Note that this does not apply to owners of Jewish for-profit businesses, even if they give more tzedakah than the non-profits do.

*"Joshua just got a job at Hazon as Director of Youth Projects. We're so excited to have another Jewish Communal Professional in the family. Too bad he wasn't a doctor like Gerald."*

**Engagement:** getting Jews in a room to do something, no matter what it is, and taking credit for it. Ideally, this activity would have some kind of Jewyness to it, but even that is open for debate.

*"Here at the local JCC we are actively involved in engagement, which is why we host a kosher pizza party once a month in the lobby. And it only takes us three months to plan it, which is great turn around time given all the meetings we have to have."*

**Community Building:** also called Community Development, this involves getting people to know about what your organization does and getting them to become involved.

*"XYZ Jewish Organization is committed to community building, bridging the gap between the people who care about what we're doing, and the people who could care less."*

**Doing Jewish:** a term coined by college Hillel (also called Hill-Hell by people who have interned there in their youth), "doing Jewish" is similar to engagement in that it gets Jews doing something Jewish together. The difference is that engagement is more formal, while doing Jewish is more relaxed. It can also mean that you are doing something Jewish right now, and are unavailable to do something else.

*"Steven can't go to the movies tonight. He's doing Jewish over at the Hillel House on campus. Something about Israel...I don't remember. I think some Israeli guy is telling everyone about the problems at California colleges with pro-peace groups."*

**Jewish Leadership Training:** no different than any other kind of leadership training, except that there's a bunch of Jewish folks doing it. The

training is usually in the form of an institute, a weekend retreat with something called “breakout sessions” and kosher food despite the fact that no one keeps kosher.

*“Adam just got home from Jewish Leadership training in Teaneck. I think it will really help him as the new Director of Engagement.”*

**Immersion:** taking someone and making them “do Jewish” for an extended period of time or with some kind of intensity. Like engagement, but on steroids and more expensive.

*“This two year immersion program brings post-college Jews to neighborhoods in Israel to learn language, culture, and build relations between the US and Israel. It’s like Birthright, but for a really, really long time.”*

**Donor Development:** fundraising from people for no reason

**Strategic Development:** fundraising from organizations for reasons you are forced to disclose

**Long Term Financial Planning:** thinking about fundraising from people and organizations for any reason and who to hire or fire in the process

*“Whether you call it donor development, strategic development or long term financial planning, we’re still trying to get people to give us their money. The older folks are the easiest ones.”*

**Team Building:** some kind of pre-meeting activity that reminds you of summer camp or elementary school, is supposed to connect you with your spirit (see Oprah) and get people to learn more about you. Usually very childish, but we put up with it because there’s that one person who will complain if we don’t do it and make our lives really painful until the next meeting.

*“Before our meeting of the Temple Sisterhood, I’d like to do a team building activity where we each go around the room and say our name, where we are from, and the name of a fruit that describes us best.”*

**Communications Management:** the process of any large Jewish organization saying something. It usually takes several weeks and involves multiple meetings. The steps are as follows:

- 1) Something happens...anything. If it involves Jews and secular news, it’s worth talking about
- 2) Jewish organization sits around for a while and talks about it. Possibly some team building taking place
- 3) Multiple meetings of higher-ups who relay the message to the people lower-on-the-totem-pole.
- 4) PR person writes an email. It goes to the head honcho who approves it.
- 5) Email goes out. No one cares.

*"We're really glad that we have a new communications management specialist here at XYZ Organization. She has a masters degree from Brown and knows how to set up Microsoft Outlook. By the way, did anyone hear about Neil Armstrong landing on the moon? Crazy, huh? I just read about it in the Middle Market Jewish Times next to Sheila Rosenbloom's kugel recipe."*

**Young Jewish Professional:** anyone who has a worthy job in the Jewish community, ages 21-45. You're out of college (or about to be) and you work a job that requires you to wear a suit and tie. Your Blackberry (or iPhone if you're in an "edgy" career like advertising or marketing) is filled with last names that end with -stein, -berg, -man or -feld, all of whom are ready to give you a great deal on whatever it is that you want. You volunteer for at least two Jewish non-profits, which includes at least one Young Jewish Professionals Group such as Birthright Israel Next or something at the JCC or a synagogue.

*"The Young Jewish Professionals group of Congregations Beth Israel will be meeting at TGI Fridays the first Thursday of the month to discuss networking opportunities in the Jewish community."*

**Networking Events:** any excuse to eat, drink, meet people and sell something (including yourself). The domain of Young Jewish Professionals, networking events are usually sponsored by Jewish organizations, with the idea that by facilitating something, they'll attract attention to their organization (read: get you to give them money or volunteer) but also look good in the community. It's a great place to hook up, but it's a bad place to promote anything because at the end of the night you can never remember anyone fully or what it is that they wanted. You also come home with a billion business cards for organizations and services you really don't care about at all. Networking events also have a guest speaker, who is usually someone Jewish (in last name only) but has some level of financial success and gives a halfway decent Tony Robbins-style motivational speech.

*"Federation will be sponsoring a Networking Event on Tuesday. Guests are encouraged to dress their best as they sample the finest treats from Nancy's Noshes. Our guest speaker will be Adam Klein, CEO of Insert-Important-Sounding-Company to talk about 'Following Your Dreams of Success In the Age of the Internet'."*

**Marketing Director:** the person who makes lame things sound more fun. Usually a hot girl (Sephardic girls are great at this) or a guy who knows how to DJ and/or was in a Jewish frat. This person pretends that their job isn't fundraising, but it really is...plainly due to the fact that they are always trying to get you to "sponsor" something. They have more Facebook friends than Groupon and tweet every second of their lives (checking in at nightclubs, treif restaurants and the airport), and they also travel a lot for "meetings" that no one can ever explain. They also like to use the word "exposure" and the phrase "get your name out there" a lot.

*“Yo, this is Kevin, the marketing director at Insert-Hip-Sounding-Jewish-Organization. Hey dawg, I just wanted to get you in on this mad cool party we’re hosting. I’m gonna DJ some hot tracks I heard when I was in Tel Aviv last month and we’re gonna have a dope latke eating contest. You’ll really get a lot of exposure and get your name out there if you become a sponsor. It’s only two thousand dollars, which isn’t much since one hundred young, Jewish professionals will be there.”*

**Matisyahu:** G-d. Matisyahu is non-profit G-d. If you can get Matisyahu to come to your event, it’s like you have some kind of iPhone that can call HaShem directly. Also, everyone claims they’ve “done some stuff” with Matisyahu, but it’s probably a lie because he seems really shy and reserved.

*“Yeah Matisyahu is gonna be at the Young-Jewish-Professionals-Event. You know I hung out with him once for like, a whole weekend...we’ve done some stuff...a few projects. There’s a picture of us together on Facebook. OK, not really...I just saw him at Jewlicious that one time. But he did nod at me when I went ‘woohoo’ at him on Shabbos.”*

**Adult Learning:** usually involves a Rabbi that wants to pimp his/her non-profit or synagogue to some new people, but needs an avenue to do it that isn’t too obvious. It’s also a great tool for fund raising. If the teacher isn’t a Rabbi or some kind of important sounding person, it usually shocks people because, as we all know, Judaism is a meritocracy.

*“We’re doing some great Adult Learning Programs at Temple Blah-Blah-Blah including a class on making challah that’s taught by a five star chef who was on Food Network once.”*

**Kosher:** something that annoys Jewish non-profits. Most Jews don’t keep kosher, but feel this obligation to have food brought in from kosher caterers just-in-the-off-chance that someone complains. Ironically, most of the JCCs that you go to do not have kosher kitchens, which defies logic or financial sense, considering that catering costs major bucks but throwing your pots and pans in the mikvah is only about \$75 (Atlanta pricing). Also, no one has any idea what the term “glatt” means, but it sounds important so meat is always glatt.

*“All of the food at the Young Jewish Professionals Networking Event is catered by Yossi’s kosher glatt deli. The guest speaker is Rabbi Yehuda Avraham Steinberg-Feldman who will be speaking on Jewish Business Ethics and the marketing director, Kevin W. Scherr, who just got off tour with Matisyahu is going to be Djing the event all night long...or at least until everyone has to go to bed.”*

## Jewish Stagflation

According to Dictionary.com, stagflation is, “an inflationary period accompanied by rising unemployment and lack of growth in consumer demand and business activity.”

Let's put this into layman's terms. Inflation is when your currency is worth less. A dollar just isn't what a dollar used to be. That kind of thing. Stagnation is when nothing is going on. No jobs, no interest in buying things or doing anything economic. Put the two together, and you get stagflation.

Since I'm in the business of Jewish, let me put this wonky econ talk into something that makes Torah sense.

The Jewish population is slowing down. Inter-marriage is high. Jewish identity is “not what it used to be”. Or at least, according to some people.

At the same time, the institutions of Jewish life are entering the Too Big To Fail mode. A few of the big non-profits have had major budget cuts. We're screwed.

No Jews. No Jewish institutions. No interest in Jewish life. Sounds like stagflation to me!

No one is quite sure how to solve stagflation. The Jewish answer has been a combination of TARP style bailouts and a lot of innovation. PunkTorah is on the innovation end. We'll see what happens.

I understand how people feel. On one hand, PunkTorah doesn't clothe poor Russian immigrants or feed old people (yet). Makes sense that we should bail out the big guys instead of focusing on little sexy types like us. On the other hand, the little boys and girls like us have a huge one-on-one impact for very little cost.

In a macro world, is there room for the micro? I'm not sure. And I don't think anyone else does, either.

## Alterna-frum

"I have been thinking a lot about Judaism, and I'm kind of pissed at it right now."

This IM from my friend Sarah was strangely startling. She spent the morning before this conversation stoned off her ass. She had a stressful weekend, and she needed to relax. She got high, turned off all her electronics, and it was "the most spiritual thing [she had] done in a long time."

The best part came when Sarah told me she had a religious epiphany over fruit. "I ate an orange. I peeled the orange and realized that it was probably the closest to G-d a food can be, because it was so protected from the rest of the world. So I said a bracha [prayer] over it."

This girl grew up in Progressive Judaism. When Sarah "does Jewish", it is to "connect with family and community and to eat." She told me that she lacked a spiritual education and bottom line, secular, non-spiritual Jews raise other secular, non-spiritual Jews. Many of these Jews, tired of their lack of "feeling" in Judaism, move onto esoteric faiths like Buddhism, or get absorbed into the atheist fold of America.

There is one group who completely shatters this idea: baal teshuva. Formerly secular Jews who had become religious as adults, the baal teshuva defy the myth that Orthodoxy is completely self-generated. I recently spoke at the Jewlicious Festival, a three day Jewish learning and cultural event in Long Beach, California. I was surrounded by Jews, who came from non-religious backgrounds and had embraced the difficult, yet rewarding, lifestyle of Orthodox Judaism. I admired their strong connection to spirituality, family, tradition and Jewish law. Part of me wanted to join them.

Fast forward, and I am sitting in a Rabbi's office in Atlanta. This Rabbi comes from old school, Classical Reform Judaism: a movement that did away with kippot, Hebrew, kashrut and anything else that did not focus on monotheism, morality, or the prophetic vision. He is close to retiring: a road weary look in his eyes tells me that it's time to pass the torch onto the next generation.

But what kind of movement has Reform Judaism become? This Rabbi was unsure. Today's Reform Rabbis aren't as movement bound as his generation. Some Rabbis lay tefillin! In my colleague's time, this would have been looked at as somewhat strange. Reform Judaism rejected antiquities of the past. But even the Jewish Daily Forward has written about younger, liberal Jews interested in kashrut, shuckeling during prayer and the before mentioned practice of binding one's body to the Torah.

I'm not sure what my Rabbi friend thinks, but in the bigger scheme of things, I feel like the trans denominational movement is a good thing. I do think,

however, that an across the board flexidoxy is not what trans denominational Judaism is all about. What I think we are noticing is not a breakdown of movement barriers, but rather, a breakdown of spiritual barriers.

We are seeing the birth of what I call the Alterna-frum.

Frum is the Yiddish word for religious. The "alterna" comes from alternative. I did not make this up: someone once posted it as her religion on Facebook. I loved it. I changed my profile to that, too.

The Alterna-frum are something of a progressive baal teshuva: people who have undergone an intense spiritual learning process about all areas of Jewish life, from different perspectives, and landed somewhere in the "none of the above" section of a Jewish religious profile. The Alterna-frum are lesbian Orthodox Jews, tzitzit wearing Reform Jews in interfaith marriages, Jewish atheists who practice Hebrew-only Jewish prayer and keep Shabbat.

One of my favorite Alterna-frum moments came in Chicago at a nightclub called the Empty Bottle. I had just played a show with Can!!Can and Stereo Sinai. I was grabbing my stuff from off the stage, when a fellow with a beard and tzitzit came up to me and started asking about my band.

Looking down at my pants and saw my tzitzit. He said, "and you're Orthodox?"

I replied, "No."

He acted like I was offended. I wasn't.

The man replied, "oh, sorry. You're wearing tzitzit."

I replied, "I'm bringing them back in style for all Jews." I exclaimed, in a half-truth that sounded way more boisterous and self-assured than I really am.

The truth is, it's a sad day when a Jew does a mitzvah and the first reaction is to lump them into something. If I was standing outside a company protesting the way they treat their employees or degrade the environment crying, "this is a moral outrage" would I suddenly be a lefto commie secular Jew? If I wear a knit kippah and pass out literature about the state of Israel, am I suddenly a religious Zionist hell bent on killing Palestinians?

No. I'm Alterna-frum. That's just who I am. That's the way God made me. Can't help it.

*\*Named changed to protect the innocent*

## **Indie Rock Is My Shacharit Siddur**

It's pretty cool to have a day job that involves writing and editing a siddur. But to be honest, at the end of the day, I really just looked forward to blasting my stereo on the way home from the office.

I imagine that the siddur is a mix tape of lamentations to G-d. And with that in mind, I tried to craft a playlist that, for me, would be the equivalent of a morning prayer service (Shacharit). Here's my best shot:

### **Here Comes Your Man – The Pixies**

The perfect song to start off your audio davening, the chorus "here comes your man" is like a blessing before study, leading you with its pop sweetness onto the stronger stuff, like an audio gateway drug.

### **G-d Only Knows – The Beach Boys**

"G-d only knows what I'd be without you" is an amazing line that captures yearning and the essence of the morning blessings.

### **Heartbeats – The Knife**

The daily sacrifice is found in Orthodox siddurim, and a song by a band called The Knife only seems appropriate when dealing with issues of animal slaughter. Plus, I couldn't think of a good metal transition from The Beach Boys...but I'm open to suggestions.

### **Lips Like Sugar – Echo and the Bunnymen**

A dark wave song that reminds me of Psalm 30, since the psalm is about turning "mourning to dancing" and that's about as Goth as it gets (or maybe it would be more Goth if it turned dancing into mourning?)

### **Breed – Nirvana**

And speaking of mourning, Breed by Nirvana is my mourner's kaddish. You'd think this kaddish would have reference to the dead or something dark (like Echo and the Bunnymen) but remember that Mourner's Kaddish as a prayer never actually talks about the dead. Nirvana is so iconic (as is this kaddish in the Jewish prayer ritual) that I can't help but put the two together.

### **Hallelujah – Jeff Buckley**

Jeff Buckley's cover of Leonard Cohen is the musical equivalent of the Shema.

### **I Was A Desert - Girls In Trouble**

The Amidah, for me, is like a roller coaster. I start off with a slow build with the “Elohei Avraham, Sarai, Yitzak, etc. etc.” then go full steam with the chest striking. That’s what this song is like for me: layer after layer of guitars and percussion adding up to the explosion of “I was a desert until I learned to make the sky rain down on me.”

### **La Serena - DeLeon**

Kaddish is one of those things where the element of group prayer really comes together. Since I like singing this song to myself in the car, it’s close enough to congregational prayer.

### **Modern Love – David Bowie**

I think I would end my audio morning service with an Aleinu from David Bowie, especially since this song says “modern love puts my trust in G-d and Man” and Deuteronomy 4 talks about the idea of G-d being G-d alone...a similar, powerful statement.

Now for the Tehilim, the Psalms that you study after the service. For me, these are the songs that on their own don’t do it for me, but in this combo, really give me that extra boost...like a sonic cup of coffee.

**Salvation – The Cranberries**  
**Oh Lord – The Brian Jonestown Massacre**  
**All Women Are Bad – The Cramps**  
**Your Mangled Heart – The Gossip**  
**Love Will Tear Us Apart – Joy Division**  
**That Great Love Sound – The Raveonettes**  
**Samson – Regina Spektor**  
**Never Gonna Give You Up – Rick Astley**  
**Kool Thing – Sonic Youth**  
**The World’s A Mess, It’s In My Kiss – X**

## The Limits of Minhagim

Bein ha-Metzarim is the period between the 17th of Tammuz and Tisha B'Av. It's a time of mourning for the loss of the Temples and the exile of the Jews from Israel. And during this time, you're not supposed to shave, get a haircut, get married, or listen to music.

Wait...no music? No way dude. I'm not into it. This "Three Weeks" thing isn't my scene.

It's not that I'm irreligious. Hardly. I probably read the Torah and Talmud every day. It's an occupational hazard of working for PunkTorah. My problem really stems from the faulty logic that surrounds The Three Weeks.

I really hate the idea of Tradition-Becomes-Law, and clearly that's what The Three Weeks are about. Prohibitions about what kinds of prayers you can say, kinds of meat you can eat, how hot your bath water should be...these are all made up by Rabbis just to torture you. These cultural traditions get codified over time, which is odd given that the G-d explicitly says not to add or take away anything from the Torah (Deut. 4:2, 12:32). Since I'm not Ashkenazic (or Sephardic, for that matter) I have a hard time believing that I should follow the laws of a culture I do not belong to, especially if they are passed off as law when they clearly are not.

Minhagim, customs, are interesting. To some, they are just as binding as "thou shalt not kill". For some of us, the community customs are like toppings on ice cream. Fundamentally, an ice cream sundae is the same, whether you top it with bananas or chocolate syrup. End of the day, you're still eating ice cream.

And minhagim aren't an Orthodox thing. On the contrary, I would argue that Reform and Conservative synagogues have just as many, if not more, arbitrary customs than Modern Orthodoxy.

Take for example one Conservative Shul in Atlanta. These people have for minyanim than there are Jews in Atlanta. Carlebach, traditional, alternative acoustic guitar, alternative electric guitar service, lay led, Rabbi lead, Jewish meditation, children's service...I'm sure I am forgetting some. I have seen people talk on their cell phones in the community hall, people obviously drive there, headwear is encouraged but no one is going to beat you to death over the kippah, and it's a fairly interfaith friendly establishment. To top it off, they have flyers by the door you can take with you after Shabbat services on upcoming events.

But for the love of God, if they see you writing something, you will...I repeat...you will be shunned.

I have nothing against the Shabbat prohibition against writing. Frankly,

when you are a blogger, having a rule that tells you not to write once a week is a huge blessing. I love it. But when a community is basically breaking all the other traditional rules (carrying, traveling, kippot, and a loose, improvisational approach to services), then why are they so terrified about a writing utensil? If the Halachka is optional, then why bother?

Ultimately, it's minhag. It's their tradition. And damn it, they are sticking to it.

Minhagim can have their advantages. Take for example my past life as a musician.

While on tour with my former band, Can!!Can, I found myself in a Walmart in Auburn, Alabama getting hit on by hot Jewish girls.

It's not that I'm attractive, really. It's the fact that I wear kippot almost everywhere I go, including indie rock shows, treif restaurants, and all the other places you don't expect to see a dude in a yarmulke. And for whatever odd reason, women dig it. And not the frummie girls my buddy Heshy Fried writes about. No, these are totally secular Jewish girls. Their Judaism is a last name and a kugel recipe, that's it! But they see that yarmulke and it puts them into a JDate frenzy.

As I wandered around, looking for my missing drummer (last seen buying socks), a young woman comes up to me.

"Excuse me, are you a Rabbi here?"

"No, I replied. I'm a musician on tour."

She was disappointed. She had hoped that I was part of the local Jewish community. This woman had moved here from New York to go to vet school and had not found anything Jewish for miles.

I gave her my card and wished her well, telling her that if she ever came to Atlanta, she could hit me up. Too bad, because she was really cute. And I have a thing for women who make more money than me.

I must have been putting off some very strong pheromones that tour, because the same thing happened to me in Knoxville, Tennessee at an Irish bar called Murphy's. While having a beer with my band, the hostess came up to me and said, "I just want to thank you for wearing that yarmulke. It makes me happy to see that. There is nothing Jewish here."

I thanked her for the compliment and reconsidered my career as a rock and roll musician for a job as a hot shot, mobile Rabbi.

So clearly, the way to know if a minhag is legitimate is if it glorifies HaShem namely, and also if it gets you a date.

## My Week of Living Un-Biblically

I gave up on G-d for a week, thanks to A.J. Jacobs and my then girlfriend's hatred for my hat collection.

I'm one of them-head-covering-Jews. And it drove my girlfriend insane. She hated them and threatened to burn them all, with the exception of my black beanie, which she said makes me look like Link from Zelda.

Anytime one of the "Jew Rules" doesn't make logical sense, she would mockingly say that I'm "just trying to be difficult". I find this a lot when more observant people are in relationships with the unobservant. But I started to wonder if that was true. Do I keep kosher just to be a pain? Is a yarmulke more about standing out...a grown up version of blue hair and piercings...than connecting with HaShem?

Then I thought, what would it be like to go "off the derech" for one week? No davening, no kashrut, no nothing. It reminded me of a backwards-day-version of the A.J. Jacobs book *The Year of Living Biblically*. So I decided to un-Jew myself for one week...my "Week of Living Un-Biblically".

**Head Covering:** the first thing to go was the hat. It felt weird walking around with my hair sticking out, and it actually made me self-conscious in a way I hadn't felt in a long time. I was more aware of what my hair was doing and kept running my hands through it to make sure I didn't look bad. I felt naked, exposed...and weirdly normal, in a bad way.

**Kashrut:** I normally eat vegetarian food out and only eat kosher or in some cases halal meat. But the burger was there, and I ate it. Frankly, that didn't do much for me. A veggie burger would have been just as good. But then I had the opportunity to eat at Teds Montana Grill. Meatloaf, caramelized onions, grilled bread...and cheese! Oh, glorious cheese. I took one bite, and frankly, treif wasn't all it was cracked up to be. I found that I didn't enjoy mixing meat and milk, anymore than I enjoyed avoiding it.

**Davening:** having to take part in PunkTorah's Afternoon Online Prayer Services while being a heathen was tricky. Luckily Michael ran the show on that, and I could just play second in command. I always enjoyed the Q&A chat sessions after services the most, so I figured that the Un-God would forgive me if I stuck mostly to talking and less to praying. It was interesting to wake up in the morning and feel no sense of what had-to-be-done. Though, I did wrap tefillin twice because they were sitting there, looking so lonely, and I felt compelled.

Tisha B'Av was a hard one to pull off, too. We did the online service, which was awesome...though it was weird trying to be un-frum during a Jewish holiday. I didn't fast, which I actually ended up being OK with since Tisha B'Av is a Rabbinic holiday and frankly the restoration of the Temple is not on my hot-

button-issues list.

**Shabbat:** not going to Shul was strange. My girlfriend left to go to a party and I hung out at the house reading. No Shabbat candles, no wine, no challah. Then I went to bed.

The next day, we talked about my upcoming trip to Chicago. I was planning on flying up Sunday morning, but instead we decided to go together, and to drive up. So I drove on Shabbat...eleven and a half hours. Driving that long, slamming Red Bull and eating old pizza...that was my punishment from God.

So what did I learn from not being religious for a week?

**Too Much of Judaism Is Exterior:** wearing a yarmulke or tzitzits does not make you more/less Jewish. It just makes you more/less Jewish in a certain way. My obsessive fear about walking around bare headed seemed to pre-occupy my time more than if I wasn't praying. And that's a bad sign. Plus, I know Judaism focuses more on what you do instead of what you think or feel, but I have the sense that this is a really, really bad thing. Maybe it does matter more what you think than what you do.

**The Soul Finds A Way:** Whether it was the compulsive latching onto my tefillin, or the spiritual conversations I found myself having with Catholics, I realized that when I couldn't "do Jewish", I felt myself needed to "be" more Jewish. The soul winds a way to express itself, even under duress.

**Calling BS on Yourself Isn't A Bad Thing:** I've always looked at spirituality the way I look at clothing. You put on what you like, and that's it. We're all naked underneath. But at some point, you have to seriously look at the kind of clothes you are wearing and decide if that is really you. Am I really the guy who thinks that G-d will strike him dead if he walks more than four cubits without a hat on? Am I the guy that thinks that "boil the kid in the mother's milk" means "if it doesn't have a Star K on it, then it's dirty goy food"? No. Do I act like I am? Sometimes. Is that a bad thing? Sometimes. Is it a good thing? Sometimes, too.

**Yes Virginia, There Is A G-d:** On my last night of living un-Biblically, I was supposed to see the movie Troll 2, considered by critics to be the worst movie ever made. But then the theater sold out. Not saying God had anything to do with it. But have you seen Troll 2? Only God could make horrible movie sell out! So I went to synagogue. It was really nice.

For those who are wondering...I decided after this experiment that head covering was not really that important, that kashrut is really important, and that G-d rules over all of my petty social experiments.

But that could change at any time. Religiousness is like the tide: it ebbs and flows based on the power of many, many forces.

## The Shortest Article On God I Have Ever Written

I have written many articles for websites outside of PunkTorah. But one of my favorite challenges came from Patheos.com. My assignment: to describe God in one hundred words.

I did it in seventy-eight.

So what is God? Here's my best guess.

*There is a Jewish tradition to spell G-d with a space between the "G" and "D". This recognizes the holiness of G-d's name, but it also creates an empty place, where we as human beings have to "fill in" G-d's missing parts. G-d won't do everything for us. So instead, we are inspired by this "void" to create g-dliness on Earth. This desire to become better, both as individuals, a community, and a world, is what G-d is.*

## We Are All Zocher Shabbos

There's a great debate between the Shabbat observant about whether to be Shomer Shabbos (guard the Sabbath) or Zocher Shabbos (remember the Sabbath).

In a nutshell, Shomer Shabbos Jews believe in observing the law for the law's sake (or a literal interpretation). This means that the following activities would "break" Shabbat:

*"ploughing earth, sowing, reaping, binding sheaves, threshing, winnowing, selecting, grinding, sifting, kneading, baking, shearing wool, washing wool, beating wool, dyeing wool, spinning, weaving, making two loops, weaving two threads, separating two threads, tying, untying, sewing stitches, tearing, trapping, slaughtering, flaying, tanning, scraping hide, marking hides, cutting hide to shape, writing two or more letters, erasing two or more letters, building, demolishing, extinguishing a fire, kindling a fire, putting the finishing touch on an object and transporting an object between the private domain and the public domain, or for a distance of 4 cubits within the public domain" (taken from wikipedia.org).*

The Zocher Shabbos, on the other hand, believe in "remembering the Shabbat" and have a more loose interpretation, citing the metaphorical aspects of Shabbos over the literal. Example: a Zocher Shabbos person will drive to synagogue for Shabbat (since the Bible pre-dates cars) while a Shomer Shabbat person would not drive because using a car requires an internal combustion engine that "creates fire".

Recently, I have had several conversations with self-proclaimed Observant Jews on the issue on Shabbat. And I have realized that, despite what anyone says, we are all Zocher Shabbos.

There are many technologies that the Orthodox and Conservative Jewry have created to make Shabbat easier (example: timers on air conditioners and other appliances, a Shabbat elevator that opens the door and every floor so no one has to push a button, or hooks onto your belt for carrying keys so that you aren't actually "carrying" anything). In a sense, you are cheating Shabbat, by trying to find ways "around" the actual rule: not to use your creative power to alter your environment for your own sake on this sanctified day.

Shabbat is about creating a time for the sacred to be the center of attention and removing the external forces that create the mundane activities of the workweek. In this way, I personally feel that understanding Shabbat as Zocher Shabbos is to remember the "why" of Shabbat as opposed to the "how" of Shabbat.

Take it with a grain of salt, as this comes from a guy who never went to

yeshiva. However, if you do take it with a grain of salt, make sure not to travel with that grain of salt farther than four cubits between 5PM on Friday and 7PM on Saturday.

## Can Reality TV Bring You Closer To God?

Every person in the Hebrew Bible is fundamentally screwed up. Abraham had sex with his wife's slave, then he tried to sacrifice his other son Isaac. Jacob and his mother Rebecca lie to Isaac and steal Esau's birthright. Moses was a stuttering menial laborer who killed a man in Egypt. Noah was a righteous man, but only for his time. And remember, the whole world was destroyed, so clearly Noah isn't that much better. And don't forget about our friend Lot, who had incestuous sex with his daughters.

I'm shocked when I hear people talk about the "trash on TV". Jerry Springer and Maury aren't showing us anything that is any more perverse than our holy text. The Biblical narrative, read literally and without much examination, is not a very good moral guide. No one can take a person from our spiritual history and say, "wow, if only my children could be more like that guy!" Unless of course you want your kid to be the kind of person who burns his enemies bodies like Joshua or uses sex to trick someone into marrying her like Tamar or Ruth.

Everything we read in the Torah is subjective: the Torah can be used to support or oppose slavery, to promote interfaith alliance or religious warfare, to subject women and children to torture or to uplift those who are downtrodden.

But the one thing the Torah teaches that no one can deny: anyone can be holy.

While I can criticize the characters of the Hebrew Bible for their terrible behavior, I have to remember that God chose these people. God not only chose them, but God made them! God also made the guests of Jerry, Maury, Montel, Intervention, Hoarders, Celebrity Rehab and every other show that makes light of human tragedy and mistakes. The problems of those whom we are quick to judge are no worse than the problems we read about in our beautiful, sacred text: the text that is supposed to teach us how to be better people.

Human being are made in God's image. This is an atheists nightmare, because even if you refuse the idea of a Creator God, or for that matter, any kind of God, you are still forced (unless you hide away under a rock) to deal with people. If people are made in the image of the Divine Consciousness, then to know people, to know their every need and to strive for ethical, Jewish humanism, is to be a theist...like it, or not.

What an amazing idea, that something as mundane as reality TV can bring us to a place of holiness? That, to me, is the miracle of living a God centered life.

## **Robo-Goys, Kosher Phones and Other Jewish Technological Innovations**

People don't like to think very far into the future. I understand that: I can barely think about next week, let alone a decade from now.

But if the Tribe is going to survive, we need to learn to adapt. Judaism came from a pre-modern era. Now, more than ever, we need to find creative ways to use technology to bring the Tribe into the 21st Century...kicking and screaming if we have to.

So here are five technological innovations, which I feel will greatly improve Jewish life and further the Jewish People.

### **Twitter Minyans**

I brought this up in my last article on Judaism and Marketing. It makes no sense to me that technology and prayer have not been fused together. Most of the prayers are short enough that they will work in Twitter, and we can shorten the other ones to fit in the 150-character box.

I see the need for more Jewish hash tags and propose the following be added to the dictionary of Jewish spiritual language:

**#BDE** - "Baruch Dayan Emet," the proper reply when finding out someone has died

**#SYAEAE** – "Shema Yisroel, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad," the central Jewish prayer, which of course would immediately be followed up with **#bskmlv**, "baruch shem k'vod malchuto l'olam vaed". The former is in lower case, since it's supposed to be said under your breath

**#Apikoros** – the code word for whenever someone says or does something that violates Halachka in any major way as to make them unworthy of the title Jewish. Could also be the standard reply to any bad Jewish news, in the vein of Bernie Madoff. Or maybe **#BadForTheJews** would be better for that

**#613** – this would be the Batman-style signal that there needs to be some major mitzvah action. The rapper Y-Love used to do this a lot and I say we make that normative

**#ShabbatShalomFF** – already in use, the combo of Follow Friday and Shabbat Shalom encourages people before candle lighting time to go ahead and friend other Jewish twitterers before it gets to be too late and the Shechina makes you forget to do it

### **Digital Shabbos Candles**

There's nothing that requires a Shabbos candle be a physical candle.

My logic goes like this: if turning on a switch is “building”, then it is building in the same sense that one builds a fire. Secondly, some argue that electricity is like fire itself. Third, a light bulb does create heat and the filament “burns” just like anything else. So under my loose Halachka, I figured that a candle screen saver would work just as well for Friday night as your typical grocery store Holy Land Candles. If you want something a little more low-tech, a simple flashlight would work just as well. Matter of fact, a woman at OneShul has already done this: she uses electric tea lights because she runs Shabbat services in her dorm room and they will not let her have candles.

### **Robot Shabbos Goys**

Need a Shabbos goy but don't want to bother the nice Christian family next door? In the future, we'll have robots to do that for us. Even today, modern conveniences like the Roomba by iRobot take away any pressure to work on Shabbat.

### **Kosher iPhone**

The future is here and it's called the iPhone. iBlessing and ParveOMeter are two amazing iPhone/iTouch apps to appease the yiddishkeit desire to introduce efficiency into the Jewish lifestyle. Future apps that I would like to see include the Modeh Ani alarm clock and a call-your-mother app that sends pre-recorded voicemails to your mom, letting her know you haven't dropped out of med school (yet)!

### **Insta-Conversion**

Utilizing the power of the Internet, we can completely re-think how new Jews are brought into the Tribe. The general requirements are a pre-interview, some kind of Judaism 101 class, Bet Din, bris, mikvah and a public ceremony. If we break this down, we find that most of this can be done quickly and efficiently, utilizing e-technology. Pre-conversion interviews between Rabbi and convert can easily be done via IM or Skype. Classes can be modeled after distance learning with e-books to read and online exams. The Bet Din can be turned into a teleconference, or again, another Skype adventure. The bris (for men) and mikvah would need to be in person, but as far as I'm concerned a public ceremony could be a mass update on your Facebook/Myspace/Twitter. We could also use webcams to broadcast this event.

## **I Woke Up and Saw Y-Love's Foot**

It's August 19th, 2009, and I am staring at Y-Love's foot. We're sharing a sofa bed with a pillow mechitza between us. How did I get to Teaneck, New Jersey? That's right – I am on tour with Shemspeed.

A few nights ago, I was in Chicago with Stereo Sinai, Matthue Roth, and for some strange reason, Martin Atkins, the drummer from Ministry and Public Image Limited. He tried to run away after his set, a weird Power Point presentation about how to be a successful musician. My drummer and I chased him down the street with our CD. No way we were going to let this opportunity pass.

And now I am in Teaneck, surrounded by kosher bakeries and glatt kosher restaurants. Our friend is hosting us in his family's home. The night before, we had played a concert in a nightclub that had a whopping ten people in it.

The late night after the show was the best part. Our hosts, Y-Love and I wandered the neighborhood sharing some kind of obscure brown liquor. Y-Love was waxing poetic about how if you are going to do drugs, they should just be natural ones that come from HaShem's earth. I agree. If it goes in your nose or your vein, it's worth avoiding.

I feel more alive now than ever.

The next time I saw Y-Love's foot was at the Bellhouse in New York, several days later. In Asbury Park, I ate a kosher hot dog that gave me food poisoning. I have spent the entire day throwing up and crapping myself in a luxury hotel in Tribeca, funded by my guitarist Mary's sister Rachel. I decide to take my last two hundred dollars and buy a plane ticket home. I won't be able to handle the twelve-hour drive home in the back of my drummer Josh's van. I feel like a traitor, but it's not my fault. My body is rotting from the inside, out.

But for now, I am at the Bellhouse, and Y-Love's foot is in a Doc Martin boot, the tongue sticking out like a playground slide. His boots are huge against his thin legs. I hear, "Punk Torah, where you at?" as he rocks the mic. I throw my hand up to the stage to slap his.

The crowd is weird: Orthodox teens from Crown Heights. I watch from girls flirt madly with cute little hip hop loving yeshivish boys. They are all a bottle away from premarital sex. They are New York kids. They aren't as sheltered as their families wish they were. Their families aren't as sheltered as they pretend they are, either.

The last time I saw Y-Love's foot was at 92Y a few years later. I am interviewing him for The G-d Project. He tells me a story about his mother dying from her drug addiction. Had I known two years earlier that I would be hearing this intense story, I would have thought less about his feet.

## **My Jewish Blogger Bromances**

I'm an egalitarian person. So I'm not going to discount the amazing role that Jewish and Jew-ish women have had in the development of PunkTorah: Rivka Bowlin, Miriam from Stereo Sinai, Amanda Rainey, Leah Jones, Jean Meltzer Masculi, Jennifer Gibson, Lacy LeBlanc, Emily Cayer, Ketzirah Carly Lesser, Jennie Rivlin Roberts, Naomi Rabkin, Sandra Lawson, Judy Chessin, Michelle Jones, Miriam Bak, Chava Barner, several people I know who would rather be nameless and of course the big four, Sarah, Rivka, Rachel, Leah. In my next book, I'll write about these women and more.

I will say that my Jewish Blogger Bromances really made a difference in PunkTorah going from my pathetic little YouTube videos to something bigger. It was these guys in my early days, these wild mad men of Torah Judaism who really gave me an intellectual and creative kick that made me realize that PunkTorah was not about me.

And whether they know it or not, they deserve credit. Screw Maimonides, sometimes people deserve to be called by name, like it or not.

### **Matthue Roth**

I know there is a God because Matthue Roth exists. No joke.

I "met" Matthue when I was pounding the pavement for promo. Can!!Can was my number one priority at the time and I scored his email address from another author. I checked out his blog and realized this was a major co-religionist. Matthue's riot grrl Chasidism, sacred punk rock poetry and (sorry Matthue) honest nerdcore made me realize that there was a place in this world for Alterna-frum people. Matthue gets credit for me becoming more religious. And in fact, it was Matthue who first discovered what PunkTorah was and encouraged me to do it.

Props to you, good sir.

### **Heshy Fried**

I'm not sure how it happened, but Heshy Fried aka FrumSatire found a PunkTorah video and reposted on his blog. Suddenly, I received a ton of hits and a few nasty comments. The internet gives people balls of steel sometimes.

Heshy is a good guy. He's a classic social commentator in the vein of Woody Allen. He's willing to push boundaries, but he does it through "inside language". If Heshy were a guy like me, FrumSatire would not be as amazing as it is. Heshy went to yeshiva. He speaks the lingo of his readership. Whether it's exposing the myth of the Hot Chani (frum women who dress un-tzniut) or lovingly poking fun at frum gays or baal teshuva, Heshy does everything with a sincerity and knowledge that makes him like teflon. No amount of bashing sticks to this

guy. As the old saying goes, “if you are going to tell people the truth, you better make them laugh. Otherwise, they will kill you.”

Heshy taught me a valuable lesson: tell the truth, tell it well, and don't worry about anything else. It's like the blogger version of “don't sweat the small stuff”.

### **Michael Croland**

It's a little sad to me that HeebnVegan is no longer active. But Michael had other, more important grown-up things to do.

Michael is another guy that I met while whoring myself out for music press. Our love of Jewish culture and punk rock made us instant friends. Michael is also in the rare category of people whose houses I have slept at. Anyone who is willing to lend me a couch is a hero.

Michael is a scholarly cat, more so than I am. He backs up everything he does with a lot of research. He even once backed out of writing a dvar Torah for PunkTorah.org because he could not back-up his thesis with research. While many people would write their op-ed and be done with it, Michael would not allow his own opinion to be “enough”. It takes courage to do that. I'm not that self aware.

Another fun story about Michael: one Purim, I was driving up to NYC from Atlanta with my band. At three AM, I found myself six blocks from his apartment, unable to get into a parking space because the blizzard had left three feet of snow in the spot. Michael comes outside with buckets and shovels that frankly couldn't scoop and ice cream cone, let alone a Snowpocalypse. He didn't care: between myself, my band mates and Michael, we shoveled as much of the snow as possible and made it work. When I was complaining about how tired I was, Michael was offering me and my band mates snacks, helping set up our beds, and telling me that he would be glad to take me to any minyan of my choice in the morning to pray Shabbat Shacharit. That's awesome.

### **Leon Adato**

Leon's the writer for Edible Torah, a blog that connects Jewish spirituality, the parshas and the Shabbat table. I heard about Leon through Michael Sabani, my long time partner in crime at PunkTorah. “Check this guy out” Michael said. Frankly, I wasn't in the mood. But I did, because I knew it mattered to Michael. And sure enough, Leon was awesome.

Leon has done so much to make PunkTorah possible. His blog is featured on the PunkTorah.org site and NewKosher. Leon posts everything himself. I have absolutely no editorial part in it. I don't have to: he's that good.

Another great thing about Leon is that he wants to help everyone. He loves getting feedback. And I have learned from him the importance in engaging

with people.

Lastly, Leon is very transparent. His writing on spirituality expresses something very deep. It's funny: I have very little problem making my life an open book. But Leon goes way beyond that. I admire it. I'm also frightened by it, because I don't know if I can be that candid.

### **Honorable Mention**

These guys weren't bloggers when I met them, but it's worth noting that Jeremiah Satterfield and Michael Sabani are the kingpins of PunkTorah. Michael has obviously been with PunkTorah since the very beginning, and while his path has lead him from being with PunkTorah full time to something more consulting oriented, his impact is incredible.

Jeremiah is now blogging as Circle Pit the Bimah on PunkTorah. Another guy who has been with us since the beginning, Jeremiah is now an active part of PunkTorah's day-to-day. Jeremiah represents everything that PunkTorah is: he's indie, he's spiritual, and he's always there for you. Meeting him, along with all the other great people I have met from this gig, is totally awesome.

## **A Dvar Torah For Non-Jewish Holidays**

A Dvar Torah is a teaching on the Torah. It's the Jewish version of a sermon, to put it lightly.

I love writing drashes about non-Jewish holidays, because I recognize that in America, Jewish people live multiple lives. We wax poetic about assimilation during Hanukkah, then go to our company's Christmas party, secretly enjoying the lights on the Christmas tree. We debate whether or not to celebrate Halloween, and then realize that most good candy is kosher and there really isn't that much of a difference between celebrating the Purim blood bath and dressing up in one of those ridiculous "naughty" costumes they sell at Wal-Mart.

But the role of Judaism is to make the mundane sacred. And when non-religious holidays find their way onto the calendars that the Jewish funeral homes put out, we should stop to think about how we can elevate these secular events into a state of holiness, as HaShem directs us.

So here's a few points to think about, for some of my favorite non-Jewish holidays. Forgive me if your favorite is not in here. Boxing Day and Guy Fawkes Day aren't my scene.

### **Valentine's Day**

If you're a person who believes that there is nothing outside the material world: no G-d, no spiritual forces, no power beyond what the senses can experience, then you might be inclined to say that love, for lack of a better word, is non-sense.

Love may, in fact, be an evolutionary development. Knowing that human beings survive better in groups than alone, evolution may have driven our attachment to others. We know that hormones in our brain create the passionate emotions which give us amorous feelings, and our specific desires in our romantic partners come from a process of trial-and-error; our brains learning to attach value to those who have the qualities that make us happy, creating "love maps" which guide us to the right partners.

If love is simply a result of thousands of years of natural selection, then it's trivial to have a holiday like Valentines Day. After all, we do not have a holiday that celebrates other biological phenomena. This urge to make love the central theme of celebration points me in the direction toward believing that love is in some way "real" beyond physiology.

Ask anyone who does not believe in spirituality if love is real, and you'll generally get a "yes" reply. That's because there is something within people that takes the emotion called love, and removes it from this material, biological, personal experience. We can objectively see love as a pleasure button in the

brain, but we don't. We treat love as though it is a condition outside of human experience, like an ideal to strive for, to celebrate, and to insist on from the whole of the human race. Love is both personified, and transcendental. Love is so close that we feel our skin tingle, but so far away that we yearn for it.

Does this remind you of anything?

In the same way that we feel about love, we can feel about G-d. G-d is a condition outside of human experience, an ideal state to achieve, to celebrate. If you believe in the idea of human redemption, then G-d, like love, is something that the whole world should be drawn toward. We feel G-d close to us, and yet, so far away. G-d, like love, seems to hurt us sometimes, and heal us sometimes. And we know from science that our brains may be wired to experience religious ecstasy in the same way that our bodies create the chemicals of love and attachment to those around us.

Science proves what religious has said for thousands of years: that G-d and G-d's love are inside us.

It makes perfect sense to celebrate Valentines Day and to feel its Jewishness, because our covenant to cling to G-d, to create a just world, act in compassion for our neighbor, are all rooted in a sense of love that is beyond the material world. So remember this Valentine's Day, whether it's romantic love, the love of a friend, familial love, or the love of a child, remember that love, and G-d, are within us, always.

### **Saint Patrick's Day**

I'll admit it, there's nothing objectively Jewish about St. Patrick's Day. But I have a strong urge to make St. Patrick's Day a Jewish event, because my name is Patrick, and for the past twenty years or so, people around me have acted like St. Patrick's Day was somehow my second birthday.

I'm not going to get into the particulars about whom St. Patrick was. Bottom line: he was a Catholic missionary who went to Ireland and converted the natives. That simple.

More important to the how-to-make-St.-Patrick's-Day-Jewish story is about the process of St. Patrick's Day being an Irish-Catholic holiday, to the Guinness-drenched, Shamrock Shake chugging pot-pie festival that turns everyone green for a day.

Like most great things in America, it came from immigration: after the Great Potato Famine, Irish immigrants flooded the United States seeking better opportunities. They were met with strife: a Protestant nation that considered itself settled that did not want any more people "polluting" its shores. Yet, they came, and integrated into society. Eventually, their cultural practices blended with other cultures in the key metropolitan immigrant cities, and became normalized. As people left these large cities for smaller cities and towns to escape overcrowding

and to find better opportunities, they took this Americanized Irish identity with them. Over time, people found themselves attracted to their culture and eventually we got the St. Patty's Day that we have today.

So what does this have to do with Judaism?

The Jews, like all other religious cultures that survived the Axial Age, are really good at adapting to the world that surrounds them and integrating other cultures' ideas to meet their needs. The Purim story is a great example. This tale of survival is most likely an adaptation of the Babylonian story of Ishtar (Esther) and Marduk (Mordechai). Most of what we call "Jewish food" is really "kosherized" versions of dishes that already existed in Europe and North Africa. The wearing of kippah is another folkway that found a means of expression in the Talmud and became the yarmulkes that we wear in synagogues.

Today, Jews celebrate St. Patrick's Day, like everyone else in America, in a secular sense. Wearing green, pinning a shamrock to your chest, searching for four-leaf clovers, eating traditional Irish dishes and of course, drinking copious amounts of dark lager, are all a part of the festivities. The fact that Jews can celebrate this holiday without feeling less Jewish is what makes the holiday Jewish!

Our survival has been based on taking what the world provides us, and making it Jewish, so that we can always have a place to be. By being active in the culture around us, but with a Jewish inflection, Jews show that we are the same as everyone else. And it's this adaptability that makes us both attractive, and unique. There are no "Jewish" people in the way that there are no "American" people. We aren't one culture, one language, one race. In fact, we are a collection of cultures, languages and races. But we fuse these elements together, each of us with a different slant, to create this amazing Oneness called "Jewish". This is the same way that America made an Irish holiday a favorite past time.

Shalom, and save a beer for me!

## **Easter**

I can already see the negative press on this one. "I really loved Patrick Aleph's book, until he tried to convince me to celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus. This is proof that he is a Messianic Jew, hell bent on destroying Judaism. If you have ever given to PunkTorah, please stop."

No, I'm not going to tell you to celebrate Easter. I certainly don't. But I am going to tell you that many Jewish families have, and will. We just need to chill out and wrap our brains around reality for a moment.

My first experience with this was six years ago from a girl I was trying to get with. Her family was from Poland and she talked lovingly about her Jewish background. She also told me that every year she colored Easter eggs.

How, I asked, could she do that and remain authentically Jewish?

She told me that her mother didn't think anything of it: what is so religious about dyeing eggs?

Recently, another friend of mine and I talked about Easter eggs. "What's dyeing an egg? We can do that anytime we want!" And I agree. Why can't I dye an egg?

If you look at Easter, as we celebrate it culturally, it really isn't very Jesus-y. It's more about spring time, renewal, and of course, copious amounts of chocolate.

So here's my theory: paint your eggs. Eat your chocolate. Go to a petting zoo and pet some bunnies. Don't call it Easter, just call it family-together-time. That's all an interfaith partner wants: to feel like their traditions are included. What is the kavanah (intent) behind it? Is it about Christianity, or is it about a childhood experience they wish to pass onto their children? Doing the things that makes your family happy is not turning your back on thousands of years of Jewish tradition, especially if you can use it to promote Jewish values.

And if Passover falls at the same time as Easter, why not paint the boiled eggs with Exodus themes? That sounds pretty rad to me.

### **April Fool's Day**

April Fools Day completely baffles historians. We have no idea where it came from, what its original purpose was, or why it so infectiously spread through the Western World. It's like Mussaf: some of us ignore it, some of us love it so much that we extend it to times when it's not supposed to be there, and most of us are ambivalent.

There's speculation that April Fool's Day came from calendar changes: a "fool" being someone who kept the previous culture's calendar instead of adopting the new one. There's also a theory that April Fools Day is a rite of spring, a renewal holiday where people delight in all the behavior that they normally cannot indulge in during the rest of the year, like Mardi Gras, for example.

Nevertheless, April Fools Day persists without serving any real purpose. No one "needs" April Fools Day. I know I can go without a day of watching my back as my "friends" find many, varied and unusual ways of torturing me.

April Fools Day is a meme: a cultural idea passed on because it sticks to us so well. April Fools Day is fun, creative and silly. And I love it.

There are a lot of things in Judaism that spark the same "W-T-F" nerve in my brain as April Fools Day. First, tefillin. These weird black boxes and leather

straps look like a Chassidic S&M tools. I understand the expression "bind as a sign" on your arm and between your eyes, but you would think the rabbis of the Talmud would have come up with something a lot less dirty looking!

How about the Sukkot etrog? Here's a weird idea: let's create a Thanksgiving holiday where a random piece of lemon-esque fruit has to hang in a hut for a week. It's another one of those Jewish "what were they thinking" moments that I revel in.

When I think about all the silly traditions that I live by, I pause and wonder how I can look at myself in the mirror and say, "now there's a rational human being". But you know what? I don't care how strange any of this seems to anyone. I like all the pointless, meaningless rituals in my life, because that's what is great about being human. While the rest of the animal kingdom is simply trying to "get by", our brains and abundance allow us the time to "piddle around" and do strange things like wrap ourselves in leather straps or gaze lovingly at the "fruit of the beautiful tree."

So go ahead and enjoy April Fools Day. It's another one of these silly things that makes you remember why it's awesome to be alive. And when you remember why it's fun to be alive, you might think about whom gave you life, and what you should do with it.

### **Spring Break**

The weather is warm and the beach is calling: Spring Break is here! A week off from school, work, or whatever normal life issues plague you.

Judaism is filled with "breaks". The holiest day in the Jewish calendar is Shabbat, and that is a day entirely dedicated to doing nothing. So do we need more breaks?

If you ask many Jewish people, what they really want is a break from Judaism.

A few years ago, I attended the first national conference of Birthright Israel Next, an extension of the famous (some would say infamous) organization that funds trips for Jewish college students to Israel. The goal of Next: to help young Jews expand their connection to Israel, deepen their commitment to Jewish life and to form a Jewish community.

In a gorgeous hotel in New Orleans, I hung out with Jewish activists from around the country. These are people who spend every day of their life working on making Jewish life relevant to their peers. And what I learned, more than anything from these people, is that Judaism can be really tiresome.

"By the time Shabbat arrives, I don't want to do anything Jewish", said one woman. She spends all day in a JCC office. Her break: hanging out with her non-Jewish friends. "Doing Jewish" every day just sucks the energy right out of

her.

If anyone would want a secular holiday from the Jewish tradition, it would be this group. But when I asked most of these people what they were doing for Spring Break, many said they were going on "service work" and "alternative break" trips: giving up Spring Break to go to places like Haiti and Africa to help build communities. Others were just planning on going home, to visit family.

It seems this is the power of Judaism: to take something like Spring Break, the ultimate excuse to destroy your spirit (neshama) through drugs, booze and promiscuity, and turn it into an opportunity for havurah (community) and repairing the world (tikkun olam). To this I say, "Am Yisroel Chai": long live the Jewish people! The power of any movement is that its impact is so powerful that it transcends itself. Good for us!

## **Halloween**

Halloween is one of my favorite holidays. And although I stopped dressing up (and for the most part, going out) on Halloween, I still get a thrill out of carving a pumpkin and laughing at the ridiculous oversexed costumes that are on the market these days.

So what does Halloween have to do with Judaism? Simple: Purim.

Purim and Halloween have more than the obvious dressing-up-and-acting-out shtick in common. The real common denominator of the two holidays is that they came from somewhere else and were turned into something completely different than what they started as.

Halloween find its roots in the Celtic holiday Samhain, remixed with All Souls Day from the Roman Catholic world. Purim, some scholars believe, is actually a Babylonian holiday based around the stories of Ishtar and Marduk. Ishtar became Esther, Marduk became Mordechai and there you have it.

I like how Judaism is able to take what's outside of itself and bring it in. That's a good skill to have: it means survival, flexibility, openness. It also means that Judaism can have an impact on broader culture. Jewish people have taken part in the labor movement, feminism, civil and immigrant rights, environmentalism, and many other great movements in this country. Why? Because it's tikkun olam...it's part of our culture, whatever that word even means these days.

So here's my idea for Jew-ing up Halloween. Before you take your kids Trick or Treating, buy a bag of candy and some costumes and take it down to the local women and children shelter. Give them a little bit of fun. And then go Trick or Treating. It's a mitzvah, so if you're the type to worry about chillul HaShem because you are celebrating a goy holiday, at least you've canceled your sins out a little bit.

## Thanksgiving

My favorite episode of King of the Hill is the Thanksgiving episode, where Bobby renounces the holiday in solidarity with John Red Corn, who teaches Bobby about the atrocities that happened to the indigenous people of the United States.

Growing up is a terrible thing, because the nostalgia of your childhood gets replaced by the "enlightenment" of getting older. When you're young, Christopher Columbus is an amazing adventurer, your parents are the smartest people you know, and G-d is in heaven smiling down on you and making sure you're OK. Then your teen years happen and you become cynical, giving up on the genocidal Spaniard, you realize your parents are clueless and sure enough, G-d is make believe.

But education doesn't have to be this way. We don't need to "grow up" out of everything. There are certain truths to life that transcend the intellectual and should never be taken away from us. Thanksgiving, I believe, is one of them. Yes, native people were massacred. But giving up on turkey and mashed potatoes doesn't make that go away. Bobby Hill learned that, and I think we should, too.

And how about G-d? Does the fact that no one has recently split the ocean or stopped the sun or made a snake or a donkey talk really going to persuade you to stop believing in the Higher Power? It's true, and I'll be the one to say it: we have no historical proof that the Patriarchs and Matriarchs existed, or that Moses and the Exodus were real, or that any of the miracles really happened. But in giving up the fairy tales, are you really going to be ego-centric enough to say that there is no Creator? And even if you struggle with the "facts" of the Bible, will that be enough to keep you from a Shabbat table?

I'm happy with Thanksgiving, even if the Puritans were dubious people and that native people got a raw deal (and frankly, still do). And I'm OK with the fact that the history of the Bible is not terribly accurate. It won't keep me from celebrating my own humanity, which is what I believe holidays like Thanksgiving and Shabbat have in common.

By the way, I lucked out on this whole Thanksgiving thing -- my mom's family intermarried with Native Americans when they got off the boat from the Old Country (which we think is somewhere in Prussia). It's nice to know that your guilt only has to go so far!

## **Star Wars and Andy Warhol: PunkTorah's Non-Jewish Influences**

Like all great religions, Judaism lends itself well to just about any cultural context. And because I'm not sitting in a yeshiva in Jerusalem banging my face into a Chumash, I, along with everyone else at PunkTorah, have been influenced by the outside world.

There are a vast number of influences to write about, but here are a few of the obvious ones.

### **Star Wars**

It's painfully obvious that Star Wars is a huge part of the PunkTorah ethos. I think this is because Star Wars is so Jungian, so Cambellian. It's about archetypes and mythology. Luke Skywalker is a knight, Obi Wan is the sorcerer, C3PO and R2D2 are the innocent.

Of course, it could also be that I am a huge nerd. Actually, that probably has more to do with it.

Star Wars was successful because it took the myths that were already there and put them together with memes that made sense for the time. Star Wars, when looked at from a post-1960's lens, was not a religious treatise. Rather, it's about fighting The Man. George Lucas may have screwed his movies up for future generations (may it be God's will that he not do it anymore), but the impact that Star Wars has on the PunkTorah office is incredible.

### **DIY Music**

We are called PunkTorah because of rebellion. But if we were really being honest, we would call ourselves DIY Torah. DIY, or "do it yourself", really is at our core. We do Judaism our own way.

But doing Judaism your own way doesn't mean faking it. A guitar player in a DIY band still needs to know how to play a few chords. A drummer has to keep a beat. Otherwise, it just doesn't work and you suck.

Sonic Youth is the perfect example. Thurston Moore can play normal stuff. You have to know the ins and outs of a guitar in order to play that insane noise he has been producing for over twenty years.

Where people criticize DIY Judaism is that they cannot see the forest for the trees. DIY Jews know what they are doing, just like DIY musicians. They just do it outside the system, or outside the rule book. Just as Thurston takes his guitar, tunes it to all hell and runs it through enough pedals to cause a nuclear meltdown, so do the radical do-it-yourself Jews of the PunkTorah community.

DIY music also thrives because of an important axiom: that music is not an adult medium. At a time when music was heavily produced, cocaine ridden

non-sense, indie bands rebelled by learning the basics of musicianship and allowing themselves to be raw and vulnerable.

PunkTorah is the same way. Guess what: there are spelling errors in just about everything we put out. We don't speak the King's English (but neither do you). We aren't the titans of SEO and our strategic plan is to connect people with God, not to make a million dollars. We're rough. We're honest. We're vulnerable.

### **Andy Warhol/The Factory**

Love him or hate him, but Andy Warhol is one of the greatest artists of our time. His Factory was a completely new paradigm in creative expression. His openness to all of New York's underground crazies made him an amazing mirror on American society.

PunkTorah is like The Factory. We let a lot of people in. Our ideas don't come from us (whoever "us" even is.) They come from you! I am not a genius. I don't know what will make or break the independent Judaism that we are trying to create here. But you do. And that is why we mimic the Factory model in just about everything that we do.

Another cool thing about Andy was his motto that everyone would one day be world famous for fifteen minutes. While some people have taken that as an expression of how vain society is, PunkTorah looks at it another way: we see the fifteen minutes of fame as evidence that everyone in the world matters. When we stop viewing people in terms of their perceived importance and recognize instead that everyone has value, enough value to be "famous for fifteen minutes" then we are truly an open organization.

### **H&M**

OK, I guess it makes me a hipster, but I can't deny how cool H&M is. Granted, I weight more than eighty pounds so I can't wear anything that H&M sells, but their business model is awesome.

H&M developed something called "fast fashion". As soon as they get an awesome idea (or steal an awesome idea from a celeb), they hit the production line, create a limited quantity, and once they have sold out, they never reproduce that piece again.

It sounds absurd: why would anyone create amazing fashion that sells well, then abandon it? Because H&M understands the need to stay innovative and fresh. While everyone else is looking to hit home runs with consistent product, often striking out in the process, H&M knows the value of all this little wins.

PunkTorah is like that. We don't have a silver bullet. In our first year of full time operation, we published four books, built four websites, several social

media pages and sponsored a heck of a lot of events through our marketing channel. Are we as big as Hillel? No. Do our sites ever get more than ten thousand hits a month? No. But the impact is incredible: we've created multiple entry points into the Jewish Experience and inspired people all over the world to be a part of Judaism, from whatever perspective they may hold. And that will always be more important than search engine optimization.

## A Day In the Life of PunkTorah

### **4:35AM**

I am sitting at my dining table, listening to the movie The Prince of Egypt while hacking away at this book. This is not an early morning for me: I have yet to go to bed. And I wonder how long I will sleep once I do decide to call it a night. Just remember: in five and a half hours, you have a phone meeting with a potential donor. Better put your best foot forward!

Welcome to a day (and night) in the life PunkTorah, the 501(c)(3) non-profit Jewish multimedia company that never sleeps.

I was recently asked, "What is your day like?" I suppose running an organization called punk-anything would lend itself to a strange schedule.

I suppose I take my schedule for granted. I don't think my work habits are any less normal than anyone else's. But today, I've decided to keep track of everything that I do. So here it goes:

### **5:00AM**

Finally went to bed after working a twenty-hour day of non-stop writing. I tend to do that: once a month, I pull an "all nighter" so that there will be plenty of content on the websites and I can focus my time during the day on the phone, fundraising, dealing with email, etc. Set my alarm for 9:30AM so I would not miss my big phone call at ten with a potential donor.

### **8:41AM**

Woke up. Walked to my dining room and checked my email. It looks like Jennie from ModernTribe wants to look at real estate with me for the Jewish Center. I'll email her back later. Back to bed.

### **9:30AM**

The alarm just went off. I lay in bed, reading a book about the Rebbe. Twenty minutes later, I debate whether I should hit the showers and wake myself up a little more, or if I should continue to lay in bed in this extreme bliss.

I'm starting to feel chest pains. Could be from exhaustion. Could also be from eating too many fried okras last night.

Checked the bank account. Looks like payroll went through OK. The UPS driver just delivered the paperwork from the payroll company to my door.

### **10:00AM**

I'm like a teenager girl wondering when "he" will call. Although in my

case, I'm a full-grown man...and he is a she. I think I should make some fresh apple carrot juice, because if I start slicing fruit and turn on the juicer, that is when the phone will ring. It's like going to the bathroom in a restaurant: it's always....

Phone is ringing.

#### **10:52AM**

Just got off the phone. Great conversation. I think a lot of things are going to move forward. Very, very excited.

Got an email. Apparently I said something dumb on Facebook that may have offended people. Swell. This is a fairly regular occurrence.

I lie down for a while and read more about the Rebbe. He was an amazing man. In my head, I am saying the opening of the Amidah, "open my lips HaShem so my mouth may declare your glory." That's all I want: to glorify God and to make community for people who don't have it.

#### **12:30PM**

I call my friend Jennie and ask her opinion of my Facebook rants.

"Patrick, you have this hard shell anarchy personality. And it's a character. It's not you. I know you. We've worked very closely together. You're a warm guy. You just need to cultivate more one on one relationships, and then people will know you."

I start to bawl like a baby. A cross between lack of REM sleep and an even greater lack of self confidence has made me wonder if I am the right kind of person to be running a multi-national Jewish non-profit.

"Sure you are," my friend replies. "You're the only person I know who can go to these Jewish conventions and say half the stuff you do and get grants for it."

I calm down.

#### **1:15PM**

I'm at my favorite coffee shop, Ike and Jane. This place approximates the level of awesome that I need in a coffee house. It's the closest thing to Voodoo Doughnut in Portland that the Southeast can create. And really, they do a better job of it: shorter lines and hotter, more laid back women. I order a large iced coffee, a chocolate almond and white coconut doughnut and grab a seat.

I haven't checked email in three hours, and my inbox is so full I can barely get through it. Truth be told, I get an anxiety attack every time I check

email.

Running a non-profit is like being a seventy five year old man. On one hand, you have to plan for your future. You could live to be one hundred! On the other hand, you also have to live like it's going to be all over in six months. It's a weird way of living on the edge.

That's why email scares me. I'm waiting for messages like, "congratulations, you just won the insert-Jewish-sounding-foundational-grant." On the other hand, I'm also expecting a message that says, "dear applicant, go to hell. Sincerely, someone more important than you."

The worst is when you have been awarded grants in the past. That first check is like shooting smack: a high so amazing that any time after that, you're just chasing a dragon you'll never catch.

#### **1:32PM**

I get a text message from Jon, a local Occupy organizer. He wants to do a social justice Shabbat on the University of Georgia's campus. While PunkTorah doesn't get involved in politics, I agree to attend and host the ritual aspects of Shabbat. A shliach's work is never done and should know no boundaries.

Back to social media. Twitter is blowing up like crazy because I wrote an article about how conversion. For PunkTorah, the two most powerful communities we work with are LGBT and converts. So when we write something on the PunkTorah website, or post a video on our channel that speaks to either of these experiences, it opens the floodgates.

#### **2:14PM**

When you are in a coffee shop for over an hour, especially a small mom and pop one, you start to wonder if you are taking up more room than you should. How much Internet and table time does that iced coffee really buy me?

I think I should go home, or go to the library. After a brief scan of the room, it looks like there aren't tons of people looking for tables, so I should be fine.

I'm trying to decide if PunkTorah.org needs to move more in the direction of a corporate website, or if people are using it more as a blog. It's a tough call.

#### **4:00PM**

I have been here for too long. I wonder if the employees laugh at me for monopolizing the best table in the house? No bother. It's almost cocktail hour.

I walk home.

#### **4:10PM**

Just got a phone call from my landlord. I am trying to get out of my current apartment in Athens so that I can relocate back to Atlanta.

“Hey, I'm showing a property and I think this woman would like your duplex. Can we come by in thirty minutes?”

“Of course,” I reply. Crap. I need to clean this place up!

I scramble to throw dirty clothes into my closet, wash the dishes that have piled up in the sink and otherwise make myself look like a civilized human being.

#### **4:25PM**

It seems like all the cleaning is done. I have ten minutes before they get here. Enough time to fry some okra, the first real food I will have had all day.

I toss some oil in the wok, set it to high and do a final scan of the apartment before the landlord and potential tenant get here.

Then, there is a knock at the door. They are here already.

The landlord and tenant-to-be look around. I do everything I can to be my respectful, responsible self. And a few minutes later, the tenant replies that she will think about it.

Then, we smell smoke. Crap! I have left the hot oil on the stove.

The landlord rushes into the kitchen. “Open the back door, now!” He screams. The wok is on fire.

He tosses the wok out the door, hot oil spattering onto the concrete, appearing to evaporate as it touched the ground. Smoke is everywhere. The apartment feels one hundred degrees hotter than before. And my face in red with terror and the worst form of embarrassment I have ever felt.

“I guess we got you off your game, huh?” The landlord said, cavalier.

“Guess so.” I replied, staring at the ground like a small child who has just been caught doing something bad by his father.

My landlord and his client walk out the door. I throw my face in my hands thinking, “dumbass!”

I decide to sit down and relax, sprawling my legs out onto my coffee table.

Another knock at the door. Great. This must be the landlord telling me that he is going to kick me out of the apartment for being reckless. I suppose that's one way to get out of a lease!

To my surprise, the landlord and his client are both at the door.

"She's interested," the landlord says. "Whatever you did there, it worked I guess!"

We exchange numbers so she and her roommate can look at the place before they make a decision. We trade numbers and they leave.

Moral of the story: pyrotechnics and real estate are quite complimentary.

I decide to pass on cooking and eat chocolate ice cream instead. This is now the second dessert that I have had as a meal.

#### **4:55PM**

Listening to Jeff Buckley while working on my board meeting presentation. Once every few months, my board members and I get together and discuss the fate of the world. It's a lot like the Protocol of the Elders of Zion, but it usually happens at a Holiday Inn with veggie nachos.

#### **6:00PM**

I get a call on Skype. It's Rivka, our fearless leader at OneShul.org. We decide to do a podcast together. Ah, the greatness of technology. Rivka and I have been friends for a couple of years. We've only see each other a few times, but we talk in some way at least twice a week. Rivka teaches Torah at OneShul on Mondays, and OneShul would not be alive without her. Rivka lives in Louisville, Kentucky, and I have considered more than once moving up there just to strengthen PunkTorah. I even went up there for a day, just to check it out.

#### **7:00PM**

I probably should eat something real. I'm at that point where you are too hungry to cook, because it means you have to wait and in the meantime you get angry that the food isn't ready, already. And it doesn't help that I make everything from scratch and seldom have anything left over. No easy meals for me. I decide to walk down to the Mexican restaurant near my house. Word of caution to anyone who keeps kosher: make sure to ask if the restaurant uses lard in the beans. If you are too embarrassed to do that, just see if the beans are used in the vegetarian menu. If they are, you're OK.

I take an order of veggie tacos, rice, beans, chips, salsa and sour cream to go. I nosh on it while watching Parks and Recreation on Hulu.

**8:45PM**

I have to call my day quits at some point, but there is always just too much to be done. I decide to work on our Google Docs Torah commentary book, editing the dvrei Torah I have written over the years, gluing into our open source text.

**10:00PM**

I end my day by reading my favorite (non-Jewish) blogs: the Best of Craigslist, the Art of Manliness and OKTrends, the statistical analysis blog of the dating website OKCupid. From these blogs I learn the following: there is nothing better than a straight razor shave, people are perverts, and never trust mathematicians to build a dating website. It will always turn into a sociological experiment.

At this point in the evening, I was too tired to continue narrating my life. I gave up and watched more TV. I was in bed asleep by 11:30.

## **Frequently Asked Questions**

Everyone has an idea for a Jewish non-profit. And even though I am incredibly green and have no idea what I am doing, people want me to give them advice on how to get their own project going. I'm flattered. But really, I am the wrong guy. Talk to Birthright Israel, Hillel or some group like that. They have been around forever. PunkTorah is only two years old.

But I suspect that the people who seek answers from us have already tried that and have not been successful. Or perhaps, they feel like we are more their cup of tea.

So here is the best I can do. Perhaps in a few years, I will have better answers. But this is all I have to offer.

### **How do you make money/get grants/pay for things?**

The real question people are asking is, "how do I turn my hobby into something I can do all day, every day?" People don't care about money. I doubt any of us in the Emergent Jewish world sit at home playing with spreadsheets for fun (except me). Really, the question is about how to quit your day job. That's what everyone wants. I know all about this question, because it's the question that musicians ask themselves and other musicians every day until they die.

The answer is: I don't know. I lucked out. I found a few people that really liked what PunkTorah was doing, and they helped us with everything. What they didn't do, the PunkTorah community did, and very, very well. And honestly, that seems to be how it works for everyone. The truth is, the Jewish world is funded by fewer and fewer people. There are Rabbis whose entire paychecks come from one rich person. There are synagogues that are effectively owned by one family.

It makes me sound like a traitor to my generation, but I don't think that crowd source fundraising is really going to majorly impact the Jewish world. I think the model of financial oligarchy will prevail for a very, very long time. I love the romanticism of Kickstarter and Indiegogo, and perhaps they work well for some people, but from what I have seen, the majority of the revenue that is made to projects using crowdsourcing comes from only a few people in the network. No matter the medium, most people will give eighteen dollars, and a tiny portion will give eighteen thousand dollars. Deal with it.

On the other hand, I do think that crowdsourcing is great for programming and is terribly underutilized in the Jewish world. Our books are written through crowdsourcing, and it is amazing. I am so proud of the fact that our community writes so much, so well, so quickly. It's amazing and shows the real power of community. Money is cheap. Volunteerism is worth more than you can possibly imagine. I am grateful for the PunkTorah community of volunteers.

I don't think the big donor dilemma has to be a bad thing. The desire to kick the rich and call foul on old money chasing old ideas is a very tempting one. I think instead, trust in the fact that if your idea is good and resonates with the right people, you'll get what you need. No, you won't get a million dollar donation. But then again, you don't need that either.

And what about grants? Well, we've only gotten one: the Jewish New Media Innovation Fund. So again, sorry, I don't know. But I do know that persistence is very important. You have to live, eat and breathe whatever you do. Stay motivated. Keep working. Never take a break, except for Shabbat. Heck, I am writing this on Thanksgiving. Am I a loser? No. I'm in love with what I do.

So I'm sure you're pissed off and thinking, "OK, so how do I get the old, rich, oligarchy money?" I think you have to create community, and if you are really doing something cool; someone who wants to be a financial partner will make himself or herself available. Not the answer you are looking for, but I'm fairly certain that is the answer.

Money isn't top-down. It's actually bottom, up. The people who give to organizations want to be a part of your community, your vision, and your program. Top down, to me, means someone who is wholly removed and yet calling the shots. My very limited experience in the non-profit world is that this is seldom true.

That is a good thing. You want the people who give you money to care about you and what you are doing. People who want to give you money so that they can call the shots, often arbitrarily, are not the right kind of people you want to partner with. Remember, if what you are doing matters, and is really affecting people and bringing out their best qualities, then you deserve to be given a lift up, not a burden.

Treat your financial world like your virginity: give it away to someone who cares, who matters, and will treat you well.

#### **How do you inspire volunteers?**

I hope I do OK with this. I really love the PunkTorah community. I try my hardest to keep in touch with everyone, to make sure everything is good and that people are getting what they need. Sometimes I fail. It's hard. Hopefully everyone knows how much I love them.

Enough already, right! But it's true.

It's easy to beat up on volunteers. I've seen this before: volunteers who get treated like unpaid employees with all the demands of a "real job". I was treated like this once at an organization I volunteered for. No surprise, that organization no longer exists.

PunkTorah is unique, in that we don't develop our programs and

projects on our own. There is no hidden fortress of solitude where we sit around and think, “hmm, online indie minyan” and build a website. We watch what people say on Twitter and Facebook, we constantly ask people what they want out of PunkTorah and we do whatever people tell us to do. We aren't leaders in the sense that we are forcing programming on anyone. Instead, we're serving the needs of others.

Yeah. That's it.

**How do you get people to visit your website? Improve your SEO? Or some other sexy Internet thing.**

Here I get to be a contrarian again. Looks can be deceiving. A website that gets a million hits a year is worthless if they people running the website are scumbags or have no vision or practical sense for what to do with the power that they have.

This is true of any kind of blog or social media outlet. Fantastic, you are great at getting people to read your blog. Now what? You're still waiting tables at Chili's. Swell.

So this is where I commit heresy and say, screw SEO! Who cares? And who cares about how many people visit your website? What matters, I think, is how they interact with whatever it is that you provide, and how it impacts their life.

To put it another way: millions of people watch Ke\$ha on YouTube. But I doubt any of them will become pop stars. Very few people watch PunkTorah videos. But I hope that many of them will become more spiritual.

Get it?

Some of the best concerts I ever played in The Love Drunks or Can!!Can were in front of only a hand full of people. Some of the worst shows I played were in front of a huge crowd that didn't care. It's not about the number of people, it's about how much they are rocking out to you. Message and presentation matter. Everything else comes second to it.

But if you are obsessed with SEO, talk to the guys at Jewlicious or Occupy Shabbat. They know more about this than I ever will. And they are really stand up people who do amazing stuff.

**How do you start a non-profit, get non-profit status, etc.?**

It's a long process, but it goes something like this:

Incorporate. Find a small team (always keep it small!) that will serve as a board of directors. Start a corporation. You can do that online. There are tons of articles on it. Or you can go to the local library and find one of those Dummies

books that will show you how.

File for non-profit status. Again, you can do this online. Religious organizations have it easier than secular ones. Not sure why.

I suggest finding an attorney. Search your social network. Come on people, we're Jewish, someone is bound to be a lawyer. A lawyer can really help smooth things over, read your language and offer the best advice you can get.

Keep track of everything: every dollar you receive, every person who volunteers. Every piece of work you do. The IRS wants to know everything, and the more organized you are from the beginning, the better.

The IRS will most likely write you a letter asking for clarification on things that you have done or submitted in your 501(c)(3) request. Don't panic. It's a little bit like rabbis turning you away three times before you convert. The IRS wants to know you are legitimate. So answer their questions and cross your fingers.

Just because you don't have non-profit status does not mean you are completely out of luck. Donations to non-profits that are not 501(c)(3) are retroactively tax deductible one year before you receive status. So that means that if you received your non-profit status April 2011, anyone who donated to you after April 2010 is going to get his or her tax deduction.

Well, this was totally unhelpful. Thanks Patrick, you are a jerk.

OK, here are a few more things that I think are worthwhile.

Purpose. You really need to believe that what you are doing serves God, the Jewish community and changes people's lives. If you don't, then get out of what you are doing. It's not worth your time.

Prayer. Yes, praying. I know that makes me sound like a fundie, but I do believe that sincere meditation and introspection are valuable. Clearing your mind, focusing on what matters, removing obstacles that are in your way. These are tools that have helped me a lot.

Humility. I have always had trouble keeping my ego in check. But this job is helping me a lot with that. PunkTorah survives because of tzedakah: a willingness of the PunkTorah community to support itself. In turn, as the captain of this crazy ship, I myself live off of tzedakah. I'm a beggar. I do my best to live up to the expectations of this community. At the end of the day, none of us in the non-profit world are anything but stewards of tzedakah. And I think it is important that we see ourselves that way.

Having good mentors. I have a core group of friends and mentors I can always turn to, bounce ideas off of and complain when things are looking bad. Find those people and take care of them as much as you can. They will take

great care of you.

I hope that helps!

## **PunkTorah's Hate Mail and Love Mail**

With a name like PunkTorah, one expects a lot of hate mail. The funny thing is, I don't think anything we do is that controversial. Sure, we have produced videos that compare the Passover story to gay liberation, and I did once argue that tattoos were valid under Jewish law. Oh, and the time I gave a d'var Torah with my shirt off. Or was it the time I stood up in front of three hundred Jewish professionals at the Federation General Assembly and told them to stop treating Jews like pocket books?

OK, perhaps we do deserve it.

I seldom reply to hate mail. It's not worth the time. Every hour I spend trying to convince someone that I am not the living incarnation of the yetzer hara (the evil impulse) is another hour that I am away from the Jewish community. And nothing keeps me away from the Jews!

So if you send me hate mail or write some smack on the Internet about PunkTorah, or me I am sorry to admit, it won't get much of a rise out of me. All that will happen is that I will publish your drash in a book. Matter of fact, I should probably thank all these people: every book that sells is another dollar in the pocket of the PunkTorah community. So critics, thanks for helping to write our book and increasing our royalty rate on Amazon.com!

Less talk, more rock. Here are a few of my favorites.

*"When did alternative become synonymous for ditzzy? Patrick Aleph is further proof that 1) the hipster movement is over, and 2) affiliated Liberal Jews are desperate in their attempts to stay 'relevant' and to 'engage.'"* -David Kelsey, editor of Heeb Magazine (comment published on TheKvetcher.net)

Epilogue: I saw David at the 2010 Jewish Federation of North America convention in New Orleans. He was standing outside the Jewlicious booth. I gave him a hug and I may or may not have acted like I was going to make out with him. If you ever want to see a tiny Jewish man fear for his life, give him a not-so-hetero bear hug. I'm very comfortable with my sexuality, so this doesn't bother me. But I know it scares the heck out of some men. In any case, I don't recall whom I was near, but Sarah Lefton and possibly David Abitbol or David Sieradski can back up that this actually happened.

*"Punk, hardcore, these aren't scenes, they're communities. They stand for a lot more than clothes and music, and you're doing a disservice to those that live that life. Yeah, so some of us are covered in tattoos, we're queer, straight, and in between, orthodox, secular and in between, but the uniting factor is that we want a better world, and are willing to take action to create it. Not that we have patches on our clothes and go to indie minyans"* -LastDitch, a commenter

on my article at Jewcy.com

The ironic thing about this person is that we are now friends and have a couple of friends in common. She is really rad. And frankly, the fact that she called me a sexist pig in my article, "Rocker Dude Seeks Bitchin' Beshert" is not without merit.

*"You have the power to reach out to so many people. But what you are teaching is wrong! You need to go on Aish or Chabad for real Judaism."* -The wife of a local Rabbi

I emailed her back and was invited over for Shabbat. It was fun.

*"You shouldn't be talking about G\_d without a shirt on."* -TrueLoveKnight on YouTube

*"How can you say you believe in god when you talk about the Parshah with no clothes on! Where is your respect!!!!"* -DoveKer on YouTube

OK, for the record, my dvar for Parshat Shelach Lecha was not in the nude. I just didn't have a shirt on. And you couldn't see anything other than my shoulders and neck, so no harm, no foul. Besides, it gets hot in Atlanta without air conditioning in the summertime.

One of my favorite veins to mine for criticism of just about anything is FrumSatire.net. FrumSatire's fans have no problem putting me in my place.

*"Punk is a goyisher ideology and philosophy and what it stand for is antiethical to G-d. G-d wants us to submit to Torah, the Yoke of Torah. As it says, rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft. Long story short stop being a punk!"* -FrumGer

One word, "douchebag." -Anonymous

*"Patrick has got to be the most pretentious douche bag ever.. ughh."* -FrumGer (again)

Apparently the word "douche bag" is a common adjective among the readership of Frum Satire. Let's continue.

*"I am sure he is a nice person and I would not be against being friendly with that guy but he seems to have been doing a little bit too much marijuana smoking."* -SkepticButJewish

*"Patrick, you seem like a well-intentioned, nice guy who loves your Judaism and is sincerely trying to do good, but this kind of stuff is a chillul-Hashem. Have you thought about spending some serious time in a yeshiva, for at least half a year or so, just sitting and learning?"* -Adam

My favorite detractor is actually a fan of ours on Facebook, Yid Vicious, who frankly loves us and loves busting our balls/ovaries at the same time:

*"You really need to start calling this Punk Reform Judaism or Punk Kindasorta Just a Tiny Bit Judaism or Punk I Wanna be Jewish While Disregarding All of the Most Basic and Fundamental Principles of Judaism. There's nothing wrong with any of that. You can practice (or not) your Judaism as you see fit. Just don't call it Torah if it isn't."*

*"You guys are probably Jewier than Jews for Jesus, but that's about it."*

Seriously, I love this kid.

Of course, the love mail that we get has a greater impact on us than anything else.

*"I went to a conservative Jewish middle school and I absolutely hated it. There was no flexibility or religious diversity. After discovering PunkTorah, I was inspired. This is exactly what I want from Judaism: something that accepts everyone and allows varied beliefs. Thank you so much for creating this wonderful organization." -Teenage girl in New Jersey, via email*

*"PunkTorah is amazing! Keep up the good work!" -Eti, posting on FrumSatire.net*

*"I wish you were a lesbian, 'cause I'd date you...you're the dude whose youtube video got me into saying modah ani when you posted it...thanks! I wrote it above my bed after that and it was the first mitzvah I decided to take on." -E, posting on FrumSatire.net*

*"I really appreciate PunkTorah's YouTube videos, and I watch them each week. I consider them an integral part of my Jewish learning. Your fresh and youthful perspective is also full of timeless wisdom. Kudos to you for producing them!" -Rob, via email*

*"Patrick Aleph is so dead on and really funny. People use 'new jews' in a weird way. He just is that and doesn't have to talk about it." -Lilit Marcus, former editor of Jewcy.com, in an interview for Slouching Toward Bushwick*

Thank you lovers, thank you haters, thank you everyone. You make this job more fun than it should be.