

**A VERY UNLIKELY MESSENGER,
IN A VERY UNLIKELY PLACE,
WITH A VERY POWERFUL MESSAGE**

On an island in northern Japan, at the foot of a low mountain chain, sits the tiny village of Yobito, Hokkaido. It's home to several hundred people who eke out a living as fishermen and farmers, and is centered around a small Buddhist temple. It's not the most common place for a Jew to find Hashem, but for Jason Katz*, the words of the local Buddhist priest sent him on a mission to return to his roots.

Jason grew up in the Detroit area and was very involved in his Reform synagogue, but it was a religious experience that lacked religious practice.

"There was no G-d involved. The only mention of G-d was in prayers, but otherwise nobody spoke about G-d," Jason said. "You just lived your life without Him."

Jason went to Japan as an exchange student during high school and lived in Yobito. His host father was Mitsuo Kiyosu, a forty-ninth generation Buddhist priest whose family traces its lineage back to the 1400s. He was the spiritual leader of the village and a source of wisdom and guidance to many.

Jason developed a close rapport with him. During high school and in the years following, he often spoke to the priest, drinking in his wisdom and advice for his own life.

"He was a tremendous example to me of two sterling qualities that I've never seen before in my life — patience and chesed," Jason said. "He is the center of the community. His wife is like a rebbetzin, doing everything for the community, always serving other people. I did not understand the word chesed until I became frum. I just saw him as very kind, giving."

*Excerpted from
Homeward Bound: Inspiring Stories of Return*

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Despite Jason's open-minded curiosity about the world and various religions, the priest never pushed him toward any particular religious observance.

Years before, when he had first trained to become a priest, Mitsuo Kiyosu had studied with a Christian minister and a rabbi and thus had some understanding of each religion.

After college Jason moved to Japan again. He spent seven years there and frequently visited the Kiyosu family. After seven years he felt like he had to finally return to America, but he was unsure of a career path for himself. Before leaving, he decided to visit Mitsuo Kiyosu one final time for some well-needed advice.

After dinner, Jason sat alone with his host father at his kitchen table, sipping green tea. He mentioned his upcoming return to America and his uncertainty about a career path for himself. The priest deftly pierced through Jason's words and directed the conversation to the real issues that plagued him.

"My host father realized that I was searching not only for a job, but for spirituality," Jason said. Mitsuo Kiyosu described to Jason what he believed would happen to himself after death.

"When I die, there will be such-and-such spirit in the next world who will save me. I live this life with confidence because I know I will be saved when I die. On the other hand, a Christian person has their leader, who is only a bridge to the Jewish G-d. That's how he will be saved when he dies.

"But you, you are a Jew. You have a direct connection to the Jewish G-d. What more are you searching for?"

That comment opened Jason's eyes. He grew up hearing about G-d as the Judeo-Christian G-d, but he had only heard Christians ever speak about G-d. Mitsuo Kiyosu refuted this idea. He opened Jason's eyes to understand that it is not Christianity that has a direct connection to G-d, and not even his own Buddhism. It is only the Jewish people who have a direct conduit to G-d.

"He woke me up to the fact that I have a unique place in this world as a Jew and an intrinsic relationship to G-d," Jason said. "G-d had been just a philosophical concept to me and was the last thing I was searching for."

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While Jason didn't initially recognize it, something changed inside him that day.

"At that time I still knew virtually nothing about G-d, nothing about Torah, but my heart was different, like a seed was planted inside," Jason said.

Jason moved back to the States, and settled in Florida. A few months later a family friend recommended a class given by a local Chabad Rabbi. He soon began going each week. The class focused on the weekly Torah portion, in particular, and the Jewish perspective on life, in general. Jason was stunned by what he heard.

"It was so profound, so deep," Jason said. "My whole life I had been searching around the world. I had been to missionary camps and spoken to Buddhist priests and Hare Krishnas. I had no idea that there were such depths in Judaism."

Over the next two years the rabbi spoke often about G-d and His relationship to the Jewish people. Hearing these messages gave new life to that seed inside Jason. The class helped Jason acknowledge his personal connection to G-d, which gave him the reason to begin keeping mitzvos and delving into Jewish learning.

Jason eventually chose a career path for himself and became a physician. But that is only a side result of the story. The real story is how his quest for professional and personal direction led him to the ends of the earth to gain wisdom and a life direction from a most unlikely of sources.

In the beginning of the Torah portion of Kedoshim, Hashem commanded Moshe to speak to "Kol Adas Bnei Yisrael — all of the Jewish people" and say to them, "You shall be holy" (Vayikra 19:2).

The Alshich explains: Hashem told Moshe to speak to all of the Jewish people, to teach them that each and every person can become holy. Hashem is the G-d equally to all of the Jewish people, and each person is equally prepared to get close to Hashem.

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Unlike other religions in which only certain designated “holy people” can become close to their deity, a key tenet of Judaism is that every person can reach the same level of holiness and closeness with Hashem. Every person can attach himself to Hashem through careful performance of the mitzvos and Torah study. Each person has his own potential, based on his individual personality, nature, and capabilities. However, we all possess an ability to become holy, each in our own ways.

Ironically, it was a Buddhist priest who taught that message to Jason. Mitsuo Kiyosu was the “holy man” of his village, living a sacred lifestyle while residents of the village continued in their daily, mundane lives. It was he who led Jason to realize that Judaism teaches the exact opposite path, that each and every person can become holy.

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