

Community Connection / By Devorah Klein

Yonason Manring of Minneapolis: Flight to Judaism

Mr. Yonason Manring of Minneapolis is a unique individual. The young John Manring was born and raised as a devout Roman Catholic. Through a series of fascinating events, he discovered Judaism. In addition to his riveting journey, John, now known as Yonason, is probably the only shomer Shabbos air traffic controller in the country. In this interview, Mr. Manring shares his journey to Yiddishkeit and thoughts about his profession.

Can you tell us about your background?

I grew up in Michigan, attended a Catholic school, and planned to become a priest when I grew up. However, when I was in my later teens, I began to question some of the Catholic precepts. They just did not make any sense. As my questions remained unresolved, I basically became what you might call an agnostic; I wanted to believe, but I did not know what to believe.

How did you first discover Judaism?

When I was in high school, I dreamed of becoming an architect, but people told me, "Architecture is a dead field — become an engineer." So I went to college to become an engineer, but I was not motivated and I became a restaurant manager. I worked in four different restaurants over the course of ten years. There were students who were working under me, and I saw them graduating from college. Here I was, at the age of twenty-five, working fifty-five to sixty hours a week, and going nowhere. It was time to go back to school.

This time I decided that I wanted to become a novelist. I tried writing three different novels, which were all rejected by the publishers. But I was not to be swayed, and for my fourth try I was determined to write "The Novel." I chose the Arab-Israeli conflict as my subject and began studying the issues in depth so I could write a believable story with realistic characters, plot, and settings. I began reading the Koran

and other Islamic books. Someone recommended the Soncino Talmud in order to learn about Judaism, so I called the company, the Judaica Press, and started chatting with the sales manager, Mr. Nachum Shapiro, on the phone.

I began reading the Soncino Talmud and the *Midrash Rabbah*, also translated by Soncino, and began to admire Jewish scholarship. Somewhere in the middle of *Vayikra Rabbah*, I looked at the ceiling and said, "Fine, You exist. What should I do about it?"

What happened next?

By 1994, I had read four hundred books on Judaism, Islam, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. I really wanted my novel to be published. This would be the book that would explain the Arab-Israeli conflict like never before. I had my plot and I knew what I wanted to happen. I went to Arabs, and they said, "Unbelievable — this would never happen." I went to Israelis, and they said, "Unbelievable — this could never happen." Let me tell you that every one of those things has happened!

One day I was reading a book on the 613 *mitzvos*, and suddenly it all made sense. I realized that Judaism was something that I could believe. Nachum Shapiro directed me to a Discovery seminar. I was amazed, and left thinking, "This deserves some serious thought."

In the summer of 1994, I discovered some tapes by Rabbi Noach Weinberg, *zt"l*. It was a four-tape series giving evidence of G-d's existence, and I listened to these tapes ten times in a row. I also listened to a series of tapes by Rabbi Yisrael Chait of Far Rockaway that was very convincing. However, I was not ready to jump in.

Parents don't lie to their children — yet I had been raised to believe in Christianity, and now I was discovering that it was all a bunch of mumbo-jumbo. How would I know that my children would not decide one day that this was also mumbo-jumbo?

Over time, the more I listened to the tapes, the more I became convinced that Hashem had spoken to the Jewish people at Sinai. I saw [this] in the *pesukim* of the *Chumash*, with words that I could not explain away. I was also greatly influenced by the Rambam's Thirteen Principles of Faith.

When did you convert?

There was one rabbi who recommended that I check out a group in Athens, Tennessee, that



L-R: Mr. Yonason Manring with Rabbi Yechezkel Greenberg, Rav of Congregation Bais Yisroel in Minneapolis.

was committed to living according to the *sheva mitzvos bnei Noach*, but that was really very uninspiring. In late 1994, I became convinced of the truth of the Torah and *Yiddishkeit*. It took four years, but in August of 1998, I finally converted.

We had been living in a different area of Minneapolis, but at the beginning of that year, we were able to move and bought a house within the *eruv*. We have been part of the Minneapolis community ever since. I often speak to potential or recent *gerim* and *baalei teshuvah* and encourage them in their path to Torah and *Yiddishkeit*.

When did you become an air traffic controller?

In 1987, when I was trying to become a novelist, my brother, who was working at the time as an air traffic controller, recommended that I consider the field. Today, certification to become an air traffic controller is a long, drawn-out process, but at that time it was much easier. I simply took the civil service exam; then I was hired and sent to Oklahoma City for training.

The Oklahoma City training was basically a two-month stress test. There was an artificial environment to teach us how to control the planes; even in very stressful situations, we could not lose our composure. In real time, if there are two 747 jets flying at each other at one thousand miles per hour, you just can't freeze up! There was constant critique, people waiting to jump on you for every mistake. Either you made progress or were shown the door. After two years and seven months, I became an FPL — a full performance level controller. Today I am a CPC — a certified professional controller.

What is your work like?

Our job is to direct the air-

planes and make sure they stay apart. Most of the time, the routine is pretty cut-and-dried, with certain basic rules and protocols to follow. Often, I can be manning twenty different planes at a time. There are rules about what to say and what order to say it in. If I give a pilot clearance to land and he misunderstands me and I don't catch that, then it is my fault, according to the FAA. Almost every day, I catch a pilot who misunderstood my commands.

It has been said that air traffic control is 95 percent sheer boredom and 5 percent sheer terror. Every time there is a crash, we learn from it and adjust the rules to prevent crashes in the future.

We don't separate airplanes, we separate air space. We need to assure that there is at least one thousand feet above and below the plane, and three to five miles around the plane, depending upon the type of airspace.

In the Torah, there is a concept of building fences around the prohibitions. If you get too close, you have already transgressed on a certain level. Similarly, if planes get too close, even if they don't crash, the air traffic controller has failed.

It has been said that it is almost impossible for a person who is shomer Shabbos to work as an air traffic controller. Is that true? How do you manage?

I would not say that it is impossible, but it is very difficult. There is one *frum* man who is currently training in the field, trying to see how far he can get. The key is to avoid telling your employers that you cannot work on Shabbos for as long as possible. They cannot legally say that they are not hiring you because you won't work on Shabbos.

When I made the decision to convert, I was working in air traffic control and my wife was working as a nurse, so we were both in

facilities that operated twenty-four hours a day, every day of the year. Bill Clinton was president then and had just signed an executive order that the federal government should bend over backwards to assure that the religious needs of employees are met. With the backing of this order, I went to my employers and said, "I am converting to Judaism; I need to keep the Sabbath."

In my environment, union and seniority are very important, and since I had already been working for ten years, I was able to pull it off, but it has not been easy. I end up working "religious compensatory time" (RCT), which means that I work extra time during the week so that I don't have to work on Shabbos.

Many of my fellow employees, mostly those who were lower in seniority than I was, were jealous of the accommodations that were made for me. I have had two equal employment opportunity court cases that were literally nightmares, but I have never worked on Shabbos since I converted.

A couple of times I was scheduled to work from ten to six o'clock on a winter Friday. As the supervisors would not accommodate, I switched shifts with someone else. I often end up working the difficult shifts that no one else wants — like Motzoei Shabbos from twelve to eight, or Sunday night.

Any final words?

I have discovered that Hashem and His Torah are the only way to go. If G-d offered to pay for my education, do I want to stop at seventh grade or go for a doctorate? I keep on learning, because if something is worth doing, it is worth doing right.

I have had many people call me for guidance. Anyone who has questions about air traffic control or returning to Torah is welcome to call me at (612) 812-6946.