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Editor's Notes: Humor for the High Holy Days

By DAVID HOROVITZ RECENT COLUMNS

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On the day of his conversion through the Conservatives in California, he got an audition for an acting role. "Wow," said one of his uncles, "word travels fast." Evidently, comedy runs in the family.



Yisrael: I've been trying since I was 16 to have a relationship with God. Photo: Courtesy

Doing the odd commercial and working as a limo driver, Campbell, in time, was also becoming ever-more observant, keeping kashrut and Shabbat. "My agents thought it was cute at first when I put on a kippa, less so when I turned down work. I had to turn down a Shabbat job, and another on the eighth day of Pessah. My agent at the time leapt out of her chair and shouted at me, 'I happen to know that Pessah only has seven days.'"

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He came to Israel, finally, in the summer of 2000 - "I landed here on the same day that Barak arrived at Camp David" - to take courses at the Pardes Institute for Jewish Studies in Jerusalem, but extended a stay of a few weeks to a year, and then another, and another.

And after being rebuffed a few times by Orthodox rabbis, he was finally able to convert one last time, with one last ceremonial snip. (At a key test, he was asked what blessing he'd make over Coke. "I really wanted to say, "God bless America," but I held myself back.") He fell in love (with a Pardes teacher), married, had twins "and then a singleton, as it says in the twin literature," and built a new, fulfilling life.

He dresses kind of haredi, except that he eschews the black jacket - "I'm wearing three shirts already" - and prefers a blue shirt to a white. And he prays at the self-styled "halakhic egalitarian" Shira Hadasha congregation. So classify him as you wish.

THE STAND UP routine emerged from an invitation from Pardes to tell his story to an advanced learning seminar. It went down well. "Some of them told me, you should package this." So he did.

He played some Purim parties. Got spotted. Got invited to a Dead Sea hotel one Pessah. Someone from England saw him, and invited him to Manchester. He's done the Limmud annual study gatherings in the UK and US. (You can see his Website at www.yisraelcampbell.com) Intermingling stand-up with continued Jewish study, he

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performs for birthright alumni events and for solidarity missions of Diaspora Jews. "I resonate with them: my search for God; they're generally searching for identity, or strengthening it, too."

And he's just come back from New York, where he made a first foray into the Catskills and is hopefully being set up for an off-Broadway run.

The Israeli-Palestinian gigs were a case of one improbable contact leading to another - "I know a guy who's Black and a convert." "Really? I know a guy who's black and a convert." (Think about it.) And they're playing here again in November.

"I don't pretend to think that if we all get together and laugh, the conflict will end," he says. But he does think the laughter can help.

He no longer looks at Israel from the glowing innocent perspective of the *Exodus* reader of half-a-lifetime back. "It was easier, three or four years ago, when we had an external enemy. Lately, waking up to the internal rot - the corruption, the probes..." He tails off. "Ari Ben-Canaan's father, walking to the Yishuv from Ukraine, would have been disappointed."

Then he brightens, and paraphrases Winston Churchill: "What is it they say? 'Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the other forms.' Well, I suppose Israel is the worst Jewish state, except there are no others."

Campbell says he does comedy "because it's what I do best," but also that some of the material is indeed aimed at conveying a deeper message, with a particular resonance at this period of the Jewish calendar - an emphasis on "Torah values relating to how we should interact with our fellow man... which you can do much better when you have people laughing."

For instance, with that Hanukkah candle riff, "I couldn't just say, 'Sometimes we don't treat each other so well.' But I can make that same point with the joke."

The fact is, he says quietly, "I've been trying since I was 16 to have a relationship with God, and some of my friends really tell me they have a deep connection. Well, I don't get a sense of that connection. If and when I feel any spiritual interaction with God, it's in that moment of connection between human beings."

And that, he says, is what he hopes his comedy helps foster - drawing people in, making them laugh, reminding them they're alive, sharing an experience.

MY FAVORITE Campbell line is a gentle throwaway, when he talks about having changed his first name from Chris to Yisrael. "Yisrael Campbell," he says softly, letting it hang in the air for a few seconds. "On average, it's a Jewish name."

On average, he's a precious, life-affirming comedian.

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