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PRAYER POINTS



Judaism, Sacrifice, and the Education of Alex Clare

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Before he became famous, the observant pop star gave up his career in order to stick to his Jewish beliefs.

Alex Clare is a pop star. His first hit, "Too Close," peaked at number four on the UK Singles Chart. It reached number seven in the US. Adele loves his music. Beyoncé wanted to record one of his songs. That's big time. It must be easy.

Well, almost easy.

Alex Clare is from London. His family is musical. He grew up listening to jazz, soul, hip hop, and punk. He loved music. He played the trumpet, drums, guitar, and sang. He wrote songs. And he was determined to make music his career.

Alex took his guitar to the pubs and sang. He played any gig that came his way. When there weren't gigs, he went to the open mics. He played every open mic in London – at least it seemed that way – and he fronted a few bands as well.

And it paid off. Alex met two producers – they were a team – and they offered him a contract. It was a production deal. They were going to produce his music and Alex was going to be big. It was that easy.

Except that the contract was terrible. Alex was a newbie, he didn't know what he was doing, and he got locked into a raw deal. "The first contract is always the worst," Alex told me in an exclusive Aish.com interview. True. The Beatles started with a bad deal, too.

But he kept at it. About a year later he met a publisher. The publisher offered him another deal and it was a much better than the first. It was small – it wasn't for much money – but it was something. Alex signed. He was moving up; he had a decent publishing deal and his production contract was due to expire. Something better was bound to happen.

Alex is spiritual. He wanted to learn and explore. And the best place to start is your own backyard.

And something did, something big. Island Records was interested. Island is as big as it gets – think Bob Marley, U2 – did Alex want to sign with them? Oh yes. He signed, recorded his debut album, *The Lateness of the Hour*, and went to work promoting the album. He was ready to make it and this time it was for real. That was quick.

But nothing is ever that easy. It can't be.

Around the time that Alex was playing in bars he started thinking about religion. Alex is Jewish – not that he knew anything about Judaism; he was raised in a secular home, he didn't belong to a synagogue, and he wasn't from a Jewish section of London – but he is spiritual. He has an innate belief in God. He wanted to learn. He wanted to explore. And the best place to look – at least to start – is your own backyard.

Alex started with the Hebrew language. He took beginner classes: he learned the alphabet, words, and how to read. His Hebrew teachers introduced him to important Jewish texts. It was great stuff.

He loved the bible, the biblical stories, the characters, the drama. He dug that. He met a few rabbis – he dug them too – and they taught him the basics of Judaism. He studied. He learned. It was fascinating.

But for Alex, fascinating isn't enough. The more he learned, the more he wanted to try. He put some of the laws into practice. He tried observing the Sabbath. He tried Jewish prayer. He liked how it felt. He liked [Judaism](#) and he liked what it was doing for his life.

And by the time he signed with Island Records, he was [keeping kosher](#), living in a Jewish neighborhood, and observing the Sabbath and holidays. So far so good.

Record companies don't care about your religious beliefs. It's not what they do. They aren't anti-religious, they are a-religious. They don't care. They are about selling music and making money.

And record companies are used to temperamental artists. They are used to dealing with weirdness. Odd living situations? Crazy diets? Ok. It comes with the territory. What musician isn't a wacko-paleo-vegan lunatic? You keep kosher? What else is new? And better a food nut than a drunk or drug addict. Worst case he gets really fat.

But [Sabbath observance](#) is another thing. A religious Christian would be thrilled to host a televised Christmas special. Why not? Sunday morning TV interviews? Sure. The more the better.

Not so for an up-and-coming growing-in-observance Jewish pop star. The Jewish Sabbath is off limits. No work after sundown Friday night. No gigs. Don't even ask.

As D-day for the release of Alex's album approached, the people at Island started setting up promotional appearances; TV, interviews, the whole nine. And for some odd, bizarre, difficult-to-explain reason, every appearance was scheduled for a Friday night.

And Alex said, "No."

He said "No" a lot. It was as if every event or appearance his label arranged was on a Friday night. Alex was never available on a Friday night. Never. It wasn't going to happen.

**"Alex, you are going to tour with Adele. It doesn't get any bigger."
Except that the tour started in April. That's Passover.**

"Ok," the record company said. "You have your religious beliefs. We respect that. We respect spirituality. That's cool." And they meant it. The industry brass wanted to help. They wanted to make it work. Alex was Mr. No. Ok. But it was his religion. Fridays are no good. Ok. We'll work with that.

"Alex baby, Adele loves you. She loves your music. And Adele is hot. Huge. And – dig this – you are going to tour with Adele. It doesn't get any bigger. Tour starts in April."

Great news. Tour with Adele. Sell records.

Except that the tour started in April. That's Passover. Alex wasn't about to perform on [Passover](#). First and last days were out, plus the Sabbath and the intermediate days of the festival. Ten days off.

"Sorry I can't do it." Mr. No.

The summer came and went. His album was released. Nothing. Crickets. A few random fans in Holland and Romania. Not enough to justify a tour. No radio play. Alex's career was stalled. He needed to promote his album. But his commitment to Judaism was making that difficult.

At the end of the summer Alex told the people at Island that the holidays were approaching. "I can't work Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur. I hope that is cool." And it was cool. They understood.

That Yom Kippur Alex read the story of Rabbi Amnon of Mainz, the author of *Unesaneh Tokef* (a moving liturgical prayer read every Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur). The Bishop of Mainz gave Rabbi Amnon an ultimatum; convert to Christianity or die. Rabbi Amnon asked for three days to think about it. He went home and regretted asking for three days. He should have said, "No. Kill me now." It wasn't a question. He was never converting. After three days, he told the Bishop, "No. I am not converting. And I regret not telling you that three days ago." The Bishop was furious and Rabbi Amnon was tortured – his arms and legs were amputated one joint at a time – sent home, and died.

Alex took the story to heart: a Jew doesn't compromise his principles. Judaism is a serious commitment.

After Yom Kippur Alex turned on his cell phone. There was a message. It was from the record label. Good news. He had a gig – a big gig – in four days.

Uh-oh.

The label didn't know that [Sukkot](#) was in four days. More time off. Alex told them he couldn't do it. Mr. No. And the label said – they gave him an ultimatum – this is your last chance. If you can't make the gig it's over.

Alex was still thinking about Rabbi Amnon. He was inspired. He didn't need three days to make a decision. "Thanks, but no thanks. I can't make the gig."

And that was it. He was dropped.

Dropped.

Plop.

It was over. O-V-E-R.

All that work, all those years, all those dreams. Done. No more music career. His name was mud. He was now Mr. Impossible-To-Work-With-In-The-Music-Industry. No one was ever going to book that crazy, religious fanatic, I-am-too-good-to-perform-on-Fridays-or-ever Alex Clare ever again.

It was depressing.

Alex discussed his life with his rabbi (Rabbi Dovid Tugendhaft of Nishmas Yisroel in London). His rabbi told him about Abraham (you know, Abraham, the biblical patriarch). Abraham had a moment like this too. Abraham invested his entire life in a dream. He was an idealist. He was going to change the world.

And then one day God told him to sacrifice his son.

Offer him up on an altar. Deny everything you believe. Give it all up.

And Abraham was stuck. He had to do it – he knew that – he didn't have a choice.

Abraham prepared to sacrifice his son. No more dream. No more idealism. No more changing the world. No one would ever listen to him again. It was over.

But what happened?

Alex already threw his career away. He was Abraham.

In the end Abraham didn't have to give up anything. But because he was *willing* to give it up – to sacrifice everything – he created his future. And not just his future, but the future for generations after him. The world is still living his dream. Half the planet believes his ideas of [monotheism](#). He succeeded not in spite of his sacrifice, but because of his sacrifice.

Alex got the message. It was a powerful point. It was a nice idea – in theory – it wasn't so nice when it meant throwing away your entire career. But it was too late now. Alex already threw his career away. He was Abraham.

Well, almost Abraham. Unlike Abraham, Alex gave it all up for nothing.

A few months went by. Alex was Mr. Former-Almost-Rockstar. It was fun while it lasted. He still had his album. It was fun to produce, and the songs were really good.

But.

One day the phone rang. It was Microsoft. They wanted to use his song "Too Close" to launch a new version of Internet Explorer. Did he mind?

No, not at all. Have a ball.

The song was used as the soundtrack for an ad featuring Internet Explorer 9. Microsoft wanted to push Internet Explorer 9 and launched a massive campaign. The ad was everywhere. And the song was everywhere. It was on every TV. It was played 24/7. You couldn't escape it.

And people loved his song. They bought it on iTunes. They watched it on YouTube. It climbed the charts. It was an international sensation. And, wow. All of a sudden Alex was Mr. New-Thing-With-A-Bullet.

By the end of the Microsoft campaign, Alex's album – *The Lateness of the Hour* – sold six million copies. The video for "Too Close" had 45 million views on YouTube. Alex was in demand. His career went from over to overdrive. He had fans. People wanted to hear him. He was big.

Just like that. It was his Abraham moment.

Last summer Alex played the major festivals. He shared the stage with the biggest names in music. (I saw his show at Lollapalooza. He sang for thousands of people and his *tzi-tzis* were out. "I thought that was great," I told him. "I didn't do it on purpose," he said. "The sun and the lights make the stage really hot.")

His next album is almost done. There will be a tour to promote it. And then – hopefully – life will wind down to normal. He is a newlywed, he has a baby, and touring is no way to raise a family.

But settling down will be easy for Alex. He already gave it up once.