

# BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter  
for Beginners,  
by Beginners

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# בראשית

## HEARING THE SMALL, STILL VOICE OF G-D: ROSH HASHANA

Rabbi Daniel Cohen

Have you ever heard the voice of G-d? What does it sound like?

I want to take you back to a story from a few thousand years ago about Eliyahu HaNavi, Elijah the Prophet. Idolatry was rampant. Although following the historic showdown at Mount Carmel, the people declared their faith in G-d, Elijah's life was threatened by Jezebel, the queen of Israel.

Elijah ran away and found himself at Mount Sinai. He was seeking the voice of G-d and reassurance in his mission. A great wind blew, and G-d was not there. An earthquake shook the ground, and G-d was not there. A fire came down and consumed the earth, and G-d was not there.

But then Elijah heard a *Kol Demamah Daka*, a small, still voice. He knew that it was the voice of G-d.

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## THE ART OF REMEMBERING

Avi Tobias

There are certain memories in my life that when I think of them, bring a smile to my face and warmth to my soul.

Remembering is a very Jewish concept. We are commanded many times in the Torah to remember, and sometimes not to forget. We are commanded to remember that G-d took us out of Egypt and that we were once slaves. It certainly is not meant to have us focus on our enslavement. Rather, it's that we should be better people. The exodus from Egypt actually transformed us into the Jewish nation. We are called upon to remember where we came from; to treat other people with kindness, and to appreciate all that we have. Remembering all the good things that have happened to us and even the seemingly "bad" things, makes a person into who they are.

My grandmother, may she rest in peace, passed away this year at the age of 98 and a half. She came to America when she was 16 years old. She would always speak about growing up in Austria like it was yesterday. I often felt that she lived in two worlds; the world of Europe

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## A DAUGHTER REMEMBERS HER BELOVED FATHER, RABBI DR. MORDECHAI REICH, Z"l

Nechama Reich Weiser

Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Reich, z"l led the Lincoln Square Synagogue High Holiday Beginners Service with Rabbi Buchwald for close to 40 years, including for 30 years after moving to Israel.

Also, in his role as the first Program Director of NJOP, Rabbi Reich played a critical role in setting up the logistics for the Crash Course in Hebrew Reading that has now taught over 260,000 people to read Hebrew.

This very moving piece by his oldest daughter, Nechama is a most fitting tribute to this very special man.

May his memory be a blessing.

I wish to focus on my Abba's (father) *middah* (virtue) of *anava* (humility). My Abba was larger than life, but he lived a life of humility and modesty.

My Abba was a rabbi, a highly esteemed clinical psychologist with a PhD, an organizational consultant, an expert speaker on parenting and ADHD, a mentor, a devoted husband and father and a loyal and compassionate friend. He saved numerous lives

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## HEARING THE SMALL, STILL VOICE OF G-D:

ROSH HASHANA (cont. from p. 1)

He understood that in that small, still voice, G-d was speaking to him. It's that small, still voice that we hope to hear, particularly during the High Holiday season. In fact, in the hallowed prayer *U'Nesaneh Tokef*, we acknowledge its existence and yearn to tap into this Divine frequency in our lives.

Do we hear the small, still voice? What does it sound like?

We actually experience it every single day, and almost every moment. The voice is manifest in the breaths that we take every day.

In the past year and a half, we have become much more attuned to the gift of every breath. All too often, we lose touch with the breaths that we take every single day. There is not a single person alive who at some moment during the pandemic has not paused to reflect on the gift of a simple breath. The race for ventilators early on made this awareness even more acute.

If there is any holiday that reinforces for us the gift of every breath we take, not only at birth and death, but every day, it is Rosh Hashana. Rosh Hashana teaches us that this breath is the small, still voice of G-d in our lives. Rosh Hashana represents the birth of humanity. On the day of our creation, G-d breathed into humanity the breath of life, our souls.

Rabbi Moshe Wolfson explains that for this reason, the main mitzvah of the holiday is a respiratory one, the blowing of the shofar. It can only be fulfilled through the gift of the breath with which G-d has endowed us. Every inhale and exhale reflect the small, still voice of G-d. Every breath reminds us of G-d's love.

A 93-year-old man recovered from COVID-19 last summer, and on his way out of the hospital, he was given the bill for one day on the ventilator. When he looked at the \$5,000 bill, he started to cry. The doctor asked him, "Are you crying because you can't pay the bill?"

He answered, "I don't cry because of the money I have to pay. I can pay all the money. I cry because I have been breathing G-d's air for 93 years, but I never pay for it. It takes \$5,000 to use a ventilator in the hospital for one day. Do you know how much I owe G-d? I didn't thank G-d for that before."

In every breath, G-d is reinforcing His love and whispering in our ears, "I'm with you. I love you. I'm thinking about you. I have not abandoned you."

The small, still voice is not only G-d's love, but G-d challenging us to give the world new light.

A number of years ago, somebody asked Rabbi Avigdor Miller, זצ"ל, a renowned Torah scholar, "What is the one thing that I can do during this High Holiday

season to help my fate for the coming year. What should it be?" And he said to them, "The best thing that you could do is smile."

He explained.

"There was a business in financial trouble and the consultants recommended to the owner to let go of a few salespeople. The owner said, 'That's fine. You can identify a few, but there's one employee I don't want you to get rid of. His name is Mr. Glee. When people come into the store, he just really lifts them up. He makes most of the sales, and people come into the store just to meet Mr. Glee.' Rabbi Miller said, "G-d looks at the world that way. The world is imperfect. The world is in need of healing. The world is in need of hope. And when we are people who smile at others, who lift people up, we're G-d's partners. G-d says 'I want you on my team. I need you to help me continue to repair the world.'"

When G-d infuses humanity with his breath, He endows us with the power of speech. It is no wonder that this holiday, more than any other, is preceded by offering blessings to each other. When we wish a "Shana Tova," when we smile, when we say "hello" to a person on the street, we harness the breath of life and the power of speech to not divide, demean or diminish, but to unite, to elevate and to energize.

The small, still voice of G-d is ever present in each moment, in every breath we take. G-d willing, in the year ahead, we will stay attuned to His love when we take a breath and become ambassadors of hope, kindness and joy and G-d willing, experience a time of healing for all humanity, and peace and joy for the world in the year ahead.

*Rabbi Daniel Cohen has served in the rabbinate for over thirty years and currently serves as senior rabbi at Congregation Agudath Sholom in Stamford, CT, the largest Modern Orthodox synagogue in New England. Rabbi Cohen is the author of "What Will They Say About You When You Are Gone? Creating a Life of Legacy." For more information about Rabbi Cohen visit [www.rabbidanielcohen.com](http://www.rabbidanielcohen.com).*

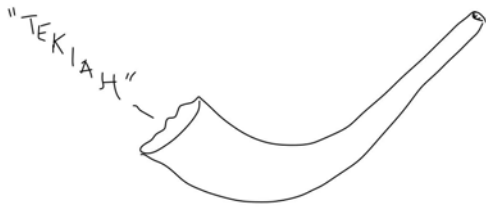
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## THE ART OF REMEMBERING (cont. from p. 1)

...and the world of America. She lived every day with the memories of her childhood.

I have some very fond memories of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. My Aunt Frances would make sure to make stuffed veal for me for the holidays because she knew how much I loved it. I remember the Rosh Hashana dessert called *Teiglach* which was a mountain of dough dipped in honey. When you ate it with tea, the honey melted in your mouth. I can almost taste it while I am typing this story.

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"THE SHOFAR IS THE MEANS TO AWAKEN US FROM OUR FORGETFULNESS... TO REMIND US... REMEMBERING ALMOST TAKES ON A HOLY ROLE"

I remember living in Israel and walking on Yom Kippur night through the streets of Jerusalem. There were no cars driving, no stores open, no noise, just people walking the streets on their way home from synagogue. Everyone just wished each other an easy fast and a Happy New Year. It was sublime and beautiful. I remember my time there and can still hear the tunes that were sung in synagogue on those High Holidays. I miss those times terribly.

The Torah describes the holiday of Rosh Hashana as "Zichron Terud" – a memory of blowing. I think what the Torah is telling us is that Rosh Hashana is all about remembering on an individual level. The shofar is the means to awaken us from our forgetfulness...to remind us...remembering almost takes on a holy role.

It is a time of year to remember the most important events in our lives and to focus on what is important and how we want to improve. It is a time to look back on the past year and to see all of the small miracles that occurred in our lives, while being thankful for all of the goodness that we have.

There are many names attributed to G-d in the Torah. One of them is "HaMakom," which means the "place." The simple meaning is that He is found everywhere. I think we can learn something more personal and profound. G-d is found in a place that we make for Him in ourselves. Each of us has our own past with our own unique set of struggles and talents. Remembering that we have our own personal relationship with G-d and that He knows our own personal stories, is very comforting.

Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are really all about family and tradition--about memories and meaning in life. We are a people with a remarkable past and beautiful memories. That is the message of the shofar.

I wish you all a sweet, happy and healthy New Year.

*Avi Tobias, a successful businessman, was inspired Jewishly through his studies in Yeshiva in Israel and continues to look for Jewish growth opportunities in his daily life. Avi lives with his wife Ilana in Edison, New Jersey.*

...of his suicidal patients, among them teens, and he saved so many individuals spiritually—bringing them closer to their faith and to G-d. But most important, he was Abba. Despite his many degrees and credentials, he was grounded, authentic and a modest and humble Jew—constantly striving to do better and improve himself daily.

I was so proud to walk around with my father; sometimes it felt like walking around with a celebrity. His kindness and warmth attracted those around him like a magnet. As a young girl, I remember walking down Ben Yehuda Street in Jerusalem with my father and homeless people would call out his name. He would stop and greet them warmly, giving them some money and, more importantly, encouraging words. When we went to the States as a family for the *Yamim Noraim* (High Holidays), where my father co-led the Lincoln Square Synagogue Beginners Service with Rabbi Ephraim Buchwald, the same feelings surfaced. The Beginners would have this admiration and respect for my father that felt very celebrity-like, but his response to them was humble, warm and kind—he always gave credit to others and shied away from the honor. I remember feeling so proud to be his daughter!

Despite my Abba's many accomplishments working with clients in Israel and abroad, organizations and one-year programs throughout Israel, and several Fortune 500 companies, he never let his professional success undermine his humility. The name of his company was *Ma'ane Rach*— "a gentle response." With all of his accomplishments, his focus was always on helping people and providing the best care possible. It was never about the honor, the status or the fame.

A memory comes to mind from when I was with my Abba in the hospital during one of his hospitalizations. I mentioned to him that someone had said to me "your father is a *tzadik* (saintly person)." My father became (uncharacteristically) angry and said to me, "I am not a *tzadik*." He never wanted to acknowledge his greatness, but even with his imperfections (he was human after all), I truly believe he was a *tzadik* and a beacon of light in a world that can sometimes feel bleak. His humility kept him grounded, constantly striving to become better.

Toward the end of his life, my Abba spent much of his time sitting in his usual chair, often with his eyes closed. When my brother once asked him what he was doing, his reply was that he was considering a specific incident and how he could have done things better or differently. Even when he did not have the *kocho* (energy) to do good with his actions, he worked on himself inwardly; only a person who is truly humble would spend the little energy they have on self-improvement.

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## DATED MATERIAL

A DAUGHTER REMEMBERS HER BELOVED FATHER  
*(cont. from p. 3)*

During *shiva*, the husband of one of my dear friends said that he thought my father could have had such a following—he could have been a leader, a rebbe. But the fact is that he did have a following, just not in the public and honor-laden way some other rabbis do. His following was quieter and more subtle, it was daily and consistent, it was powerful and impactful. The outpouring of letters, calls and emails detailing my Abba's impact is a clear indication that he had a massive following across the globe.

In the weekly *Divrei Torah* (words of Torah) that my Abba wrote to us, titled "Dear Children," he wrote often about humility. One of his entries speaks of his own efforts at mastering this *middah*— "Humility is a lifetime of work. I notice that if I work on humility, I am much less likely to become angry or offended by others. But we need to look deep inside and make sure that the humility is real and sincere."

My Abba's small COVID-19 funeral was exactly what

"ABBA WAS ALWAYS STRIVING TO IMPROVE HIMSELF - EVEN TO THE VERY END!"

"How could I have handled THIS SITUATION MORE EFFECTIVELY!"



he would have wanted. When I dreamt of his funeral during his sickness, I imagined the *hesped* (eulogy) room filled with all the people he had touched and impacted—standing room only. But that is not the life he led, and it was so much more fitting to have a small and intimate burial that represented who my Abba was—he did things quietly, modestly and without fanfare.

Abba—you were the biggest *anav* (humble person) I know—full of sincere humility and modesty while always striving to grow and improve. You set an example for all of us and now that you are no longer here to show us in person, we will carry you along in our hearts as we navigate our own paths trying to be humble and modest in the process.

*Nechama Weiser is a certified Health and Life Coach at Nourish Nurture & Wellness in Efrat, Israel. She specializes in working with busy moms and helps them prioritize their health and wellness through mindset work and habit change, essentially bumping themselves to the top of their priority list. She can be reached at nourish-nurturewellness@gmail.com or +972-54-451-4002.*

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*Bereshit: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Larry Greenman of NJOP. Special Beginners Services are conducted at synagogues throughout the United States to introduce those with limited backgrounds to the beauty of the traditional Hebrew service. For more information regarding the Beginners Service closest to your home, to establish a local Beginners Service, or to learn more about NJOP programs, please contact us: 1345 Avenue of the Americas, 2nd Floor, New York, NY 10105-0014 646-871-4444, e-mail [programming@njop.org](mailto:programming@njop.org) or visit [www.njop.org](http://www.njop.org).*

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Illustrations by Wendy Dunn