

BERESHITH
"IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter
for Beginners,
by Beginners

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בראשית

GET YOUR NON-LEATHER DANCING SHOES ON!

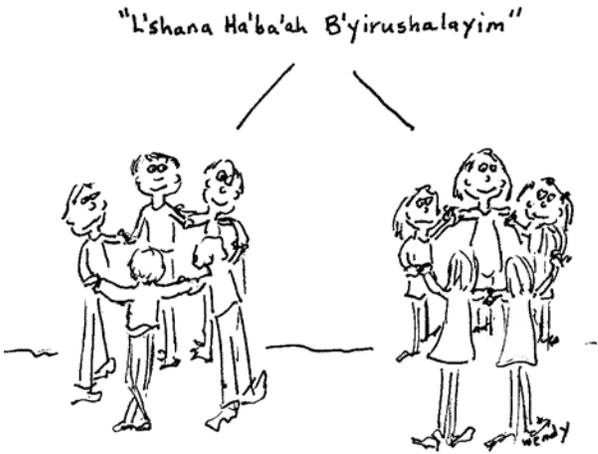
Rabbi Michael Davies

My favorite part of the High Holy Day season is dancing on Yom Kippur. "Dancing on Yom Kippur?" you ask. "When does that happen and how come I have been missing it all these years?"

I recall presenting this idea to my congregation on *Kol Nidrei* night, the beginning of Yom Kippur, a few years ago. "The real challenge of today is dancing after *Neilah* (the closing service of Yom Kippur)." One of my beloved congregants approached me afterwards and said, "Rabbi, that was a great metaphor," but I was not quite sure to what he was referring.

People don't think of Yom Kippur as a joyful holiday and I believe that this has a lot to do with it being one of two long fasts on the Jewish calendar. Because Yom Kippur and Tisha B'Av* have many similarities in practice, most notably the five forms of 'bodily affliction': refraining from eating and drinking, no anointing or washing, wearing only non-leather shoes, and abstaining from marital intimacy, they are often confused with each other.

Tisha B'Av, however, is the saddest day of the Jewish year – no contest. There are so many terrible events that have taken place on or around that calendar date. Even though these events took place at other times of the year, many other tragedies are associated with that mournful day. As mourners, we sit on the floor during much of the day, avoid any unnecessary (cont. on p. 2)



DANCING ON YOM KIPPUR

"EITZ CHAIM HE" - THE TREE OF LIFE

Ricki Gold

I suppose my Jewish journey began with a tree . . . Now before you roll your eyes, consider first that I was an impressionable high schooler searching for answers. I was at a United Synagogue Youth (USY) summer encampment when I learned that my good friend's father, who was a *chazan*, was dying. I was extremely upset to think about the tragedy befalling a talented young man with four beautiful children who devoted himself to the service of G-d. I was confused and angry. I wanted answers. My camp counselor sat with me for hours and listened to me rant and cry. Finally, she told me that she had no real answers, but that someday I would get a sign that G-d does exist and that the world and its beings are in His hands.

The last day of camp, I looked at my friends waving goodbye, but something else caught my eye . . . Way across the lake, on a little island, was a small mountain of trees – and one, just one, of those trees seemed to be blowing and glowing! I saw it, and I felt it, and I truly believed that was the sign I needed! I remember looking up and thinking "Thank You G-d!" (cont. on p. 2)

TWENTY YEARS SINCE LEAVING EGYPT

SR Hewitt

In our household, there is no holiday quite as beloved as Sukkot. One might find that funny since I hate being cold and I live in Montreal, Canada, where winter comes early and it has been known to snow on the holiday.

My husband, David, loves building *his* sukkah - and the personal possessive pronoun is the way he thinks of it. He even calculates how many invitations we get to other people's sukkot over the holiday to make certain that we are home the majority of the time, preferably with guests.

When we first purchased our home, the attached courtyard/patio was a huge draw because of its ability to be transformed into a sukkah. There were, however, several issues to contend with before we could make a proper sukkah there. For instance, the existing walls are not quite tall enough. Luckily, my husband used to work in construction, and so, after consulting with our rabbi, he got to work making creative adjustments. Since then, once a year, he proudly gives friends a tour of the *halachic* (Jewish legal) concepts he used to (cont. on p. 3)

GET YOUR NON-LEATHER DANCING SHOES ON!

(cont. from p. 1)... conversation, and contemplate the destructive forces that continue to rattle our world.

Many people think Yom Kippur is the Day of Judgment, and if we take the meaning of the judgment to its extreme, we would likely cry our eyes out! (Actually, Rosh Hashanah is the Day of Judgment.) Yom Kippur, however, is the Day of Atonement and any comparison to Tisha B'Av couldn't be further from the truth. Yom Kippur, I would argue, is actually the happiest day of the year. "The happiest day of the year?" you ask. "How could that possibly be?"

On Yom Kippur, we have the opportunity to complete the process of *teshuvah* (repentance), and this fact is one of the reasons for the confusion regarding the tone of Yom Kippur: Many people today simply don't believe in *teshuvah* (repentance). They don't believe in forgiveness. Our society has replaced the idea of judgment with the idea of "do the best you can do." Because people don't expect to do better than their supposed best, they create superficial selves that function in a community because they believe that if the world ever discovered their inner selves they would be rejected as a fraudulent, weak and/or evil person.

The whole point of Yom Kippur is the exact opposite. It is to not conceal one's self. The *Al Chayt* (the process of beating our breast in confession) service can be understood as challenging God by saying, "Would You even love this person?" And, the answer is 'Yes!' The goal is to believe that our core is worthy of honest love. The judge is not a mortal jury who we think would condemn us. Our Judge is our Father, sitting on the throne of glory.

On Yom Kippur, we sing our sins. AaaAiyaiyai... *ashamnu* (we are guilty), *bagadnu* (we have betrayed ourselves), *gazalnu* (we have stolen)... Are we singing away our sins? Singing praises makes sense, but singing sins? It seems strange, but the reason we sing is not only because we know we have sinned. But, we also know that we have the potential to do better, to go beyond where we are, and to achieve greatness. Yom Kippur is the day that we search for our potential and realize that we can reach extraordinary heights.

The fact that we fast on Yom Kippur often has negative connotations. On Yom Kippur, however, we fast in order to positively focus on what is happening for us on this great day (instead of focusing on the food on our plate). To take it one step further, perhaps the fast reminds us of the shift that is occurring within ourselves and the cleansing that we are going through, and therefore how could we possibly eat? Why would we involve ourselves in washing, anointing, or acts of intimacy? How can we be anything other than fully-focused on our special and unique relationship with the Divine that allows us to start again?

The goal of Yom Kippur, of the entire High Holy Day season, is to be able and willing to go through the process and come out the other end ready to tackle the challenges that we will face in the coming year and be proud of who we have become through this process.

The conclusion of Yom Kippur is certainly a time to sing

and dance. We can sing *L'shana Ha'ba'ah B'Yerushalayim* (Next Year in Jerusalem) and join with so many who hope for a brighter future for our people. We can dance to *Am Yisrael Chai* (The Nation of Israel Lives), because we are here and we are strong, both as individuals and as a nation.

*The 9th of Av commemorating the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and other calamities throughout Jewish history.

Rabbi Michael Davies is the first Rabbi of Congregation Dor Tikvah in Charleston, South Carolina - an exciting start-up congregation in one of the oldest Jewish communities in the country. Rabbi Davies brings a personable affect and great enthusiasm to all that he does, with particular interest in Youth and Experiential Education.

THE TREE OF LIFE (cont. from p. 1)...

I grew up in a "traditional" Conservative family -- Friday night consisted of Shabbat candle lighting, my father making Kiddush and dinner followed by going to the "late" Friday night service at shul with my parents and sometimes my older brothers. My father's voice singing *Lecha Dodi* still fills my heart. On Shabbat morning, when I got to wear my patent leather shoes, I was dropped off for Junior Congregation. It was a mandatory part of Hebrew School, which I also attended three afternoons a week and where, at best, I -- well, actually I don't really remember learning anything other than the *Mah Nishtanah!*

In high school, I became very involved in USY. It sparked my *neshama* (soul). At regional conventions and encampments, I learned how to *daven* (pray), *bentch* (Grace After Meals) and keep Shabbat. I would return home from the events thinking that keeping Shabbat was something I really wanted to do, but I wasn't there yet. I was co-captain of my High School cheerleading squad and our games were always either on Friday night or Saturday. However, every week, I "remembered" Shabbat by lighting candles and attending synagogue.

As often happens, however, I became far more ambivalent about my Judaism during my college and post-college years. The Hillel on campus did not engage me. Even a trip to Israel sponsored by a Zionist organization, which had no religious components, failed to inspire me.

Eventually, I married. My husband (also from a Conservative background) and I had much in common Jewishly. We celebrated Shabbat and the holidays in much the same ways. After our first daughter was born, we decided that even though we were not very observant, we should keep a kosher home so our daughter would at least know what kosher was. With the help of the rabbi, we kashered our kitchen without really understanding the *halachot* (Jewish legal concepts) involved.

When I was pregnant with my second child, my husband's 52 year old father unexpectedly passed away, which resulted in my husband pretty much opting out of attending synagogue. However, he was always supportive of our home observances. He even built a sukkah every year! Our children went to Hebrew School, and I took them all to synagogue every Shabbat morning.

(cont. on p. 4)

TWENTY YEARS SINCE (cont. from p. 1)...“create a kosher” sukkah.

Our beautiful sukkah is not, however, the reason for my special feelings about the holiday of Sukkot. For me, there is a sentimental connection, particularly to Shabbat *Chol Hamoed* (Shabbat during the interim days of the holiday). Shabbat *Chol Hamoed*, you see, is the anniversary of my starting to observe Shabbat.

It all began just over twenty years ago when I spent my junior year of college at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. During that first month, when all the students moved about testing different friendships and cliques, I made arrangements with two friends to use the upcoming fall break, which began right after Yom Kippur, for a tour of Egypt. At the time, it didn't occur to me that we would be traveling over the Sukkot holiday.

In the time between booking the trip and our departure I had become close with a group of students who were becoming observant - a path that I had also begun the year before. Even before I boarded the plane to Israel, I knew that I was going to become more traditional, but I did not expect to actually become Shabbat observant. With this new group of friends, I found the company of people striving toward the same goals and enjoyed beautiful Shabbat meals with local families. Additionally, the experience of celebrating the High Holidays in Jerusalem had a profound impact on my connection to traditional Judaism.

Coming off the high of a particularly inspirational Yom Kippur, I was suddenly faced with a true conundrum - whether to go on the very expensive trip for which I had already paid, or to celebrate Sukkot in Jerusalem. I went on the trip, but made my own “compromise.” I brought grape juice and cups and little cakes so that I could make kiddush (on the bus) in honor of the holiday. I also brought a prayerbook and made certain to recite at least one service each day.

I cannot deny that the tour of Egypt was both fun and fascinating. Throughout the entire trip, however, I had this small, nagging feeling of discomfort even as I tried to be aware of whatever I could do to adhere to Jewish law.

Upon our return, as the bus began its ascent to Jerusalem, I felt an entirely new sense of anticipation. It was Friday afternoon, *Chol Hamoed* Sukkot. I had called ahead and knew that my friends had already arranged Shabbat meals for me. I kept glancing at my watch, worried that we might not make it to the city before sundown. Finally, we were there. Standing on the streets of Jerusalem, I experienced another inspirational moment as the first light rain of the season began. It was all-the-more amazing because Sukkot is the holiday during which we pray for rain in the Land of Israel. My friends and I grabbed a taxi, and I was back at the Mount Scopus campus with just enough time for me to drop off my stuff and change into Shabbat clothing. The rain stopped in time for everyone to enjoy the Friday night meal in their sukkot.

Twenty years later I can still remember the feelings I had disembarking from that bus in Jerusalem, the experience of that first rain, and, perhaps most significantly, the conscious choice to fully observe that Shabbat. In our daily prayers and during our holidays (especially Passover), the Jewish people spend a



WHAT AM I DOING CELEBRATING SUKKOT IN EGYPT?

great deal of time remembering and being grateful for God taking us out of Egypt (*yetziat Mitzrayim*). In my mind, the return trip from Egypt was my own personal *yetziat Mitzrayim*.

When God took the Israelites out of Egypt, it was the beginning of their journey to the Promised Land. In fact, it was the beginning of a history of journeys. That first Shabbat in Jerusalem was the beginning of my own personal journey that has taken me to many places, both emotionally and physically, and has now led me to Montreal.

This Sukkot, I will sit in our beautiful, unique sukkah with my handy husband (who will probably have helped build one or two other sukkot in the neighborhood) and our incredible children and thank God for the wonderful blessings He has rained down upon me. On Shabbat *Chol Hamoed* (provided there is no snow), I will retell this story to my family while we huddle together under the heat lamp that my husband so thoughtfully installs for me each year.

SR Hewitt is the Publications Coordinator for NJOP and the editor of Bereishith. She is also the author of NJOP's daily email: Jewish Treats: Juicy Bits of Judaism, Daily, an archive of which can be found on JewishTreats.org.





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THE TREE OF LIFE (cont. from p. 1)...

After attending Shabbat services at the Orthodox Shul in Harrisburg, my three oldest were so impressed with the Junior Congregation, how much the children knew and how well they were able to daven, that they begged me to send them to Harrisburg's (Rabbi David L. Silver) Yeshiva Academy! It's impossible I said -- we lived about 40 minutes outside of Harrisburg, in York, Pennsylvania, where their father had a lucrative business. After repeating the request to my husband, he not only thought it was a great idea but arranged for a realtor to show us homes in a near-by Harrisburg community. Three months later, we relocated to Mechanicsburg, joined my childhood Conservative congregation in Harrisburg, and enrolled our three younger children in the Day School! The teachers in the school, the parents of my children's classmates, the members of the community, who welcomed all of us unconditionally, and the summer SEED program led by members of the Yeshiva Chaim Berlin Kollel, all had a tremendous impact on my children and myself.

It was my oldest son who spurred us further in our Jewish development. After his Bar Mitzvah, when he became active in NCSY, he started staying with *Shomer Shabbat* families in Harrisburg every week for Shabbat. While we were still members of the Conservative shul, we as a family, decided that we needed to move into the *eruv* (which creates the border of the community) and begin observing Shabbat. So, 24 years ago, on a Friday morning in August, we moved to Harrisburg. That night, I lit my Shabbat candles for the first time fully committed to Shabbat!

My husband, while not observant, is amazingly supportive and respectful, and enhances each Shabbat and Yom Tov with his mere presence. Our children have grown and have chosen their own paths, but, inherently, they know who they are because we gave them the solid foundation that is needed to grow as a Torah Jew.

Maybe it was the "tree." Maybe it was my father, *zt"l*, who sang to my soul. Maybe it was the spark in my *neshama*. Maybe it was knowing that I wanted/needed more for my family and myself. But I guess the answer to why I became observant is simply because that's what G-d planned for me.

Ricki Gold, a wife, mother and Savta, retired from teaching after 23 years at the Rabbi David L. Silver Yeshiva Academy. She currently serves as a Mashgicha for the KOVE (the Kosher option under the auspices of the Star-K) at Dickinson College in Carlisle, PA.



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| <p>Rabbi Buchwald's Weekly Torah Message</p>  | <p>JEWISH TWEETS & TREATS</p> |
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בראשית *Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Sarah Rochel Hewitt 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: 989 Sixth Avenue, 10th Floor, New York, NY 10018, 646-871-4444, e-mail info@njop.org or visit www.njop.org.*

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Illustrations by Wendy Dunn