

BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter
for Beginners,
by Beginners

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בראשית

TRANSFORMATION

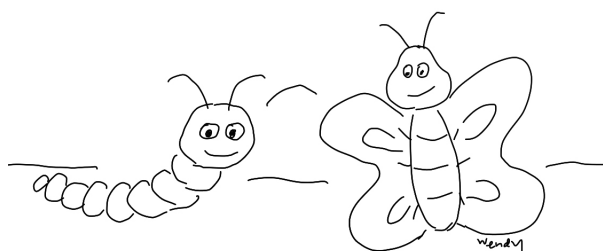
Rabbi Yosef Siegel

There are two common acronyms that are used in the traditional Jewish world. They are FFB and BT. FFB stands for "Frum From Birth," or a person who grew up observant. BT stands for a "Ba'al Teshuvah," or a person who has returned to his or her roots of observant Judaism.

For those of us who are BTs, the change didn't just occur in one day. It's not like I was in the ice cream store eating my ice cream and just said to myself, "Gee, I think I'm going to become an observant Jew today." I officially declared myself to be a Ba'al Teshuvah at the beginning of my sophomore year of college while attending Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut. However, the initial stage of that journey started during the beginning of my senior year of high school.

What happened during the beginning of my senior year that changed my life forever? Before I tell you about that, I must share a little background of my Jewish life growing up.

I grew up in the town of Hewlett, which is located on the southwestern part of Long Island, New York. Hewlett is part of an area commonly known as the "Five Towns" (Hewlett, Woodmere, *(cont. on p. 2)*)



"LIKE A BUTTERFLY, TRANSFORMATION
COMES FROM ALTERING OUR LIVES
SLOWLY, ONE STEP AT A TIME."

THE NESHAMA'S CRY

Rabbi Ari Sytner

Suppose that after your lifetime your soul leaves the world and ascends to Heaven to meet your Creator. After reviewing your life, G-d sentences you to spend every day of eternity attending High Holy Day services in shul. Upon the conclusion of a long day of services, you head home, only to return again in the morning for more of the same. By going through this daily monotony of services, one is sure to arrive at one of two conclusions: either (s)he is in Heaven or in Hell.

For the active synagogue participant who utilizes these "Days of Awe" as an opportunity to reacquaint oneself with his/her mission in life, prayer represents a time of great inner satisfaction and fulfillment, perhaps even Heaven-like. If, however, these Holy Days are viewed as painfully long Hebrew services, accompanied by an occasional sounding of a ram's horn, then the experience *(cont. on p. 2)*

WHAT'S YOUR NAME?

Aaron London

I remember when we all huddled around the Treblinka Memorial on a frigid January night in the winter of 2014. Our group, a blend of students from Rutgers, SUNY Binghamton and NYU, had joined with the other university groups that evening to make the haunting trek from Umschlagplatz, a deportation point in Warsaw, to Treblinka, the infamous extermination camp where the Nazis gassed and burned what is estimated to be 870,000 Jews.

I was one of 150 students who came to Poland on a Jewish educational program to see the skeletal remains of what the Nazis had done to the Jewish people. I came to learn, and left with a deep appreciation of the responsibility I have towards living a worthy life.

I remember the stark stillness when we arrived at Treblinka, the intense quiet, and how deep *(cont. on p. 3)*

TRANSFORMATION (cont. from p. 1)... Cedarhurst, Lawrence and Inwood). Levels of Jewish observance were very diverse, and there were significant representations of Orthodox, Conservative and Reform Judaism. Even though we weren't very traditional in practice, my family belonged to a "right-wing" Conservative Synagogue (no female rabbis, only men were called up to the Torah, etc...).

I referred to myself as a "5 day-a-year Jew." We went to services on both days of Rosh Hashana, fasted and went to services on Yom Kippur, and had two Passover Seders (though we never got back to the Haggadah after the meal). Oh, and I almost forgot to mention Hebrew school, which took place from 4:00-6:00 pm twice a week after public school and 9:00-11:00 am on Sundays. For most of us, Hebrew school fell under the violation of our 8th Amendment rights that bans "cruel and unusual punishment." However, unlike most of my classmates, I had an unexplainable excitement about Judaism and the authenticity of the Torah, the idea that everything in the Torah was true and was the word of G-d. My parents remember me as a 5-year-old child telling them that one day I would have a kosher home. Despite my enthusiasm for Judaism, my observance of rituals remained basically the same "5 days" throughout the first 17 years of my life (with the exception of tefillin, but that's a story for another time). With this introduction complete, I can now share with you how the change in my life began.

There is a common Jewish aphorism that states that G-d prepares the remedy before the malady. The malady here is having an undernourished soul. As is the case in most public schools, football games were either played on Friday night or during the day on Saturday, which is not conducive to the Sabbath-observant individual. During the summer, before my senior year, I got bad vibes from my football coach as to how little playing time I would actually be getting. Despite being a person who doesn't believe in quitting once having started something, I, nevertheless, decided not to return to the varsity football team for my senior year (Hint hint: Shabbat mornings would be free!!). Rosh Hashana arrived in the middle of September that year. Unlike most of my peers, I stayed inside the sanctuary to listen to the Rabbi's sermon. There was one thing that he said that truly caught my attention: "Don't let this coming year be the same as last year. Do something new. Add one thing to your life as a Jew." I turned to my father and suggested to him that we start going to services more regularly on Saturday morning. He agreed, and thus started our year of changing one thing in our lives as Jews.

The ten days beginning on Rosh Hashana and culminating with Yom Kippur are commonly known as the "Ten Days of Repentance." Many people are mistaken

when they think that the key to repenting is having a feeling of remorse over one's past deeds. The real key to repentance is to change one's ways in order that one doesn't keep on doing actions that he feels and/or should feel remorseful about. But what is the definition of "change"? I found two appropriate definitions, and both are critical for one's journey in Judaism. The first definition is to "transform," to make radically different. The second is to "alter," to make different in some particular way. Both definitions seem to be at odds with one another. What I came to learn was that in order to transform, I had to alter my life, one personal issue at a time. I like to think of repentance like the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly. Yes, on the outside we see a complete transformation from one extreme to the other, but what we don't see is the 14-30 day process that goes on inside the cocoon.

When I decided to become observant, I was looking to become transformed. I wanted to change from one extreme to another. I had the unrealistic expectation that it would happen very quickly. At times, my "lack of progress" frustrated me, which in the end slowed me down even more. I wish I would have kept in mind the powerful lesson that I learned from the Rabbi on Rosh Hashana all those years ago: to concentrate on changing one thing at a time.

The simplicity of my Rabbi's statement should be a breath of fresh air for all who seek to transform their lives. It is very doable. Transformation comes from altering one's life slowly, a little at a time.

So during these auspicious days, let us reflect on our lives and think about where we would like to be. Let us choose a few things to focus on for the year to come that will eventually help us transform into that person that we would really like to be.

Rabbi Yosef Siegel lives in Hewlett, NY with his wife Miriam and 7 children. He received his ordination from Yeshiva University's RIETS program. Rabbi Siegel spent two and a half years in Tzfat, Israel learning and teaching in Yeshiva Shalom Rav. He enjoys both watching and playing sports as well as reading epic fantasy novels.

NESHAMA'S CRY (cont. from p. 1)... itself may very well be one's worst nightmare.

The good news is that finding meaning and fulfillment from the High Holiday services is much easier than most people think. Many of us struggle with prayer because we do not know the words. However, the reality is, words or no words, we all know how to pray. The first step to reaching your prayer potential is to realize that the linguistic barrier that we often face between ourselves and G-d does not exist during the High Holy Days.

The greatest testimony to this fact is the sounding of the shofar. After all, what significance does the sounding of a ram's horn have to the awesome Days of Judgment?

The sounding of the shofar is a spiritual *(cont. on p. 3)*

YOUR NAME (cont. from p. 1)... the darkness was. We made our way down the forest path toward the memorial, straining our eyes in the night to see the somber way ahead. We walked together, but each of us was left alone to ponder his or her own thoughts. In place of the train tracks that used to deliver the Jews to the extermination camp were evenly spaced rows of rectangular concrete pieces. We followed this path until we reached what used to be the station platform on our left side, which then opened to the field where the memorial was -- a graveyard of jagged stones with each stone representing a town where Jews had been taken from to be murdered in Treblinka. These jagged stones orbited the large mushroom-shaped memorial that stood where the gas chambers used to be.

We assembled near the main memorial, forming a large circle around Tzvi, one of our tour guides. "Look around you," he began. "Appreciate where you are." The stillness was palpable, the silence a painful bellow of an unthinkable past.

But the eerie quiet was not to remain undisturbed. "We are not to leave this place in silence," Tzvi continued. "Our presence here today is testimony against the very reason for Treblinka!" His words were dense, weighing heavily upon our shoulders.

"Listen carefully," he said. "On the count of three, I want all of us to cry out our Hebrew names. I want us to cry out our Hebrew names so loud that our voices rip through the heavens."

I thought of my name, Aryeh Leib, which in Hebrew means Lion Heart. Jewish wisdom teaches that the name of something defines its essence. On a fundamental level, a person's Hebrew name is the spiritual DNA that informs the tapestry of his or her personality. Aryeh Leib is not nominal; it's definitional. As I've grown in personal development, I have come to appreciate two forces that have emerged as being most prominent within me - a force of inner strength which I see as the "Lion" and a deep compassion for others which I see as the "Heart." But, understanding the potential

NESHAMA'S CRY (cont. from p. 2)... symphony of souls. The notes that flow from the shofar have neither melody nor words. In fact, the notes are not musical in nature. On the contrary, they represent the sound of human cries, cries that only a soul can emit. Crying has no words, yet we all know how to cry. Prayer often comes in the form of silence, silence which screams forth from the innermost chambers of our soul. A simple tear that rolls down one's cheek has no sound, yet it speaks volumes about what is in a person's heart.

There are actually four different calls that are sounded by the shofar, and each one evokes a slightly different emotion. The first sound, the *tekiyah*, is a long solid blast that seems to rise slightly in pitch as it grows stronger. The *tekiyah* can be heard as a solid cry of anguish (cont. on p. 4)



that exists within us is just one level. Recognizing the fact, that bound in each of our names is the responsibility to actualize the unique potential that the Al-mighty planted within us, is an entirely different level.

When Tzvi shouted out the number three, I cried out, "Aryeh Leib" into the starry abyss above. 150 voices came together to rip through the heavens, to affirm our existence in the wake of Treblinka and our obligation to lead noble lives.

Silence settled back in as our voices receded. There was a time when those who entered Treblinka did not leave. That was not our story. We left Treblinka that night, invigorated with a penetrating appreciation of the responsibility that stood before us, that each person has a distinct purpose that he or she is expected to fulfill. Every step I take is a step away from Treblinka and a step toward living a life loyal to Aryeh Leib.

I share this story in the hopes that it can offer a perspective with which to relate to ourselves as we approach Elul and the High Holy Days. We are entering a time of recalibration, of returning to our most essential selves. The cacophony of our lives can be so deafening that we can hardly hear the whisper of our inner voices. Elul is the time to sift through the noise, to forge bravely beyond the innumerable barriers, both inner and environmental, that deter us from living deeply authentic lives.

We can start with our names, with understanding the unique potential that exists within each of us. We do not need to go to Treblinka in order to appreciate that the only way to truly ensure that those who died did not do so in vain is for us to lead self-actualized lives ourselves.

As we head into the High Holidays, may we each come to know, deep in our bones, that becoming the people we are meant to become is not simply a nice idea. Rather, it is a heroic responsibility that lives within the distinct potential that we all possess.

Aaron London is a Rutgers graduate who just finished two years at Machon Yaakov, a yeshiva in Har Nof, Jerusalem. He is now returning back to school in order to pursue a career in nursing and is passionate about helping people appreciate their own potential to lead noble lives.



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NESHAMA'S CRY (cont. from p. 3)...(ahhhhhhhh), like the cry of one who has just come face-to-face with a mistake, or a note of joyous happiness at standing before G-d and having the opportunity to receive forgiveness. The second sound, the *shevarim*, is composed of three medium blasts and is reminiscent of deep sighs or soft crying (where one is gasping for breath). Following these soft sobs come the ten piercing cries that sound much like a person weeping... the *teruah*. Finally, the very last sound of the shofar is the *tekiah gedola*. It is the solid blast of the *tekiah*, only longer, and it is a shout of triumph reaching out to every heart that has silently called out to G-d.

The sounds produced from the shofar are born from the air which fills our lungs, the very air which represents our *neschama* - the spiritual life-force within each of us. This life-force is then released through our lips, the source of speech, yet, is without words. The power of air from our lips being transformed by the shofar has the ability to send our innermost cries to Heaven. When the sounds of the shofar ascend to the Heavens, G-d hears the cries of our souls and the emotions of our hearts. These are sounds



which no language can describe, and which only the shofar has the ability to translate. On the High Holy Days, G-d is listening not only to the words that are being spoken, but also to that which is not being said, the silent prayers of our hearts yearning to return to G-d.

When our prayers are genuine and heartfelt, regardless of the speed at which we can turn the pages in our *Machzor* (prayer book), G-d cherishes those prayers. When one prays with true emotion, to the extent that tears are shed, it is those tears which speak more than all the words in the *Machzor*. Regardless of the actual prayers, the new year allows the silence that is within us to pray to G-d. The sounds of the Shofar, the tears from our hearts, and, most importantly, the renewed commitment in our lifestyle for the coming year are all what make Rosh Hashana the heavenly experience it truly is.

In addition to being the author of The Kidney Donor's Journey, Ari is a rabbi, social worker, therapist, inspirational speaker, Huffington Post contributor, blogger, CEO, organizational strategist, consultant and proud kidney donor. He is the Director of Leadership and Community Development at Yeshiva University.

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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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