

BERESHITH
"IN THE BEGINNING"

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by Beginners

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בראשית

ROAR OF THE SHOFAR

Rabbi Naphtali Buchwald

On the second day of Rosh Hashana, we read from the Torah the well-known story of the *Akeidah*, the binding of Abraham's son, Isaac.

The Patriarch Abraham traveled to an undisclosed location where the *Akeidah* would take place with his son Isaac, his older son Ishmael and Eliezer--Abraham's Damascan servant. As they were traveling, Abraham spotted a mountain covered in clouds. The Midrash recounts the conversation that ensued. Abraham asked Isaac what he saw. He responded, "I see a mountain covered in clouds." He asked Ishmael and Eliezer what they saw, but they saw nothing miraculous. Abraham informed Ishmael and Eliezer that they would not be continuing on this journey, rather they would remain with the donkey they had been travelling on because they were similar to the donkey.

The Sages (Rashi, *Tractate Megillah* 14a) tell us that Abraham and Isaac were both prophets, but Ishmael and Eliezer were not.

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BASHERT

Rachel Storch

Fifteen years ago, a rabbi in St. Louis gave me a copy of *The Committed Life* by Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis, of blessed memory. I was mesmerized. Inside the pages of the book were timeless lessons about human relationships and our relationship with Hashem.

At the time, my mother, also now of blessed memory, was suffering from leukemia and was in the hospital. I brought a copy of the book to her, knowing that she would respond to it as I did. She, in turn, called my brother in New York City and suggested that he go meet the Rebbetzin at Hineni, an outreach center that she had founded on the West Side of Manhattan.

He dutifully went to Hineni and waited after class to meet Rebbetzin Jungreis. She assumed that this big, handsome young man had come to seek her help in finding a *shidduch* (soulmate). No, he explained, his mother was ill, and he wondered if the Rebbetzin would be so kind as to contact her. The following day, the Rebbetzin called my mother, and continued to call her each Friday with a blessing before

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"I AM SORRY"

Ellen Smith

Memories of Rosh Hashana in my childhood and early adulthood include my sister Marsha. She was five years older than I was, and after she went away to college, I do not remember ever fighting with her or any words of anger between us. That was when we learned to appreciate each other. From her years in college onward, we got along so well.

Although we were not raised to be *Shomer Shabbat* (Sabbath observant) or to keep kosher out of the house, our home was traditionally kosher. We attended the Orthodox synagogue in Stamford, CT, and were enrolled in the Hebrew school, which meant two after-school sessions and a Sunday morning session from age eight through middle school. I really enjoyed my Jewish education.

In addition to attending public high school, I also attended my synagogue's "Hebrew High School." Each semester in Hebrew High, we could choose from a generous curriculum of Judaic studies. Some classes were weekly and some less often. They were offered on Sundays and in the early

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ROAR OF THE SHOFAR (cont. from p. 1)

Obviously, only the prophets could see a miraculous cloud on the mountain. What then did Abraham expect? Even more troublesome is Abraham's response, it seems quite harsh, especially for the patriarch known for his never-ending kindness.

The answer is given that the cloud was not a miraculous cloud. In fact, it was an ordinary cloud in an extraordinary location resting atop a mountain. Ishmael and Eliezer were capable of seeing it, but they weren't looking. You didn't have to be a prophet to see the cloud, you just had to be in search of a sign from G-d. Therefore, Abraham rebuked them and compared them to the donkey that notices nothing because it seeks nothing. Just as the donkey goes about its day with no express purpose or meaning, so too Ishmael and Eliezer just went along for the ride, but without seeking something greater than them.

Growing up in my parents' (Rabbi Ephraim and Aidel Buchwald's) home at our weekly Shabbat table I encountered thousands of people who were searching and yearning for G-d and meaning in their daily lives. They had opened their eyes and noticed an ordinary cloud atop their mountain of life and decided to figure out what it meant. They often questioned our every move, wanting explanations for every custom. "Why do we wash our hands? Why do we sing? What are the final waters for?" They had discovered their cloud and now were ready to benefit from it. But they only reached this point due to their insatiable desire to seek and find meaning. If they hadn't been looking, they never would have noticed the cloud atop their mountain.

Growing up in such an environment often reminds me to continue to search and question in order to find greater meaning in my own spiritual life.

For nearly 5 years, I have been living in Houston and have thankfully survived several hurricanes relatively unscathed, including the notorious Harvey. Although, the sound of rain usually lulls me to sleep, during those storms they kept me awake. The very same sound that sometimes induces slumber, will at other times create insomnia. The difference is that when we recognize that there is a threatening storm coming, we pay attention. If not, we never know what will happen.

Maimonides (*Laws of Teshuva* 4:3) writes that the sound of the shofar is intended to wake us up from our slumber so we should repent. "*Aryeh sho'ayg mi lo yirah*," When the lion roars who doesn't fear? We can, at times, listen to the sound of the shofar and hear the sounds of a beautiful instrument. At other times we can hear the alarm sounding, "Wake up! Wake up!" It all depends what sound we're listening for.

In life, we often forget to look for the signs, the sounds, those special moments of inspiration. If we're not looking for G-d in our lives, then we're not going to find Him. We can be like Abraham and Isaac searching for G-d in our lives, or like Ishmael and Eliezer, not looking for anything at all. The question is, are we going to spend another year letting those

moments pass us by, or will we hear the sound of the shofar and discover the inspiration that is all around us? It's raining outside and a storm is brewing. Are we going to sleep?

Let's make this coming year a year when we truly seek out G-d wherever He can be found.

A native of the Upper West Side of Manhattan, Rabbi Naftali Buchwald studied at the famed Beth Medrash Gavoha in Lakewood, NJ, before joining the Kollel in Houston, TX. He currently serves as the Assistant Rabbi of the Young Israel of Houston and is a member of the Judaic studies faculty at Torah Girls Academy High School in Houston. Rabbi Buchwald is married to Shira (nee Schonfeld) and blessed with five children.

BASHERT (cont. from p. 1)

"THIS MAN IS TOO GOOD AN OPPORTUNITY TO MISS! YOU MUST FLY TO NEW YORK TO MEET HIM!"



THE SHIDDUCH

...Shabbat, for nearly two years until she passed away.

Upon my mother's passing, the Rebbetzin flew to St. Louis, spoke at the funeral and came to the cemetery with my family before returning to New York. While sitting shiva, we gathered in the dining room, and listened to the Rebbetzin on speakerphone, as she called with comforting words and memories of our precious mother.

Just a few years later, Rebbetzin Jungreis returned to Missouri to give an evening lecture. At the end of the evening, the Rebbetzin pulled me aside and told me that there was someone very special that she wanted me to meet, and that she intended to have him call me.

Barry called me a day or two later. There was something so warm and kind in his voice that I did not want the conversation to end. But, he was in New York and I was in St. Louis, so we left things open-ended and agreed that we hoped to meet at some point in the future.

The Rebbetzin called back a few days later: This was too good an opportunity to miss, she told me. I must fly to New York that week! Let me add that I was 37 years old, not particularly observant, and had never been married. I was busy with work, but I would never say no to the Rebbetzin, so I bought a ticket and flew to New York.

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“I AM SORRY” (cont. from p. 1)

...evenings, rather than right after school like Hebrew school in the primary grades. Among other course offerings, I chose to take a course about avoiding gossip, known in Hebrew as *sh'mirat balashon*, “guarding one’s tongue.” Imagine the brave rabbi who taught this class to the five teenage girls! Although the concepts involved in avoiding gossip were strange to me, I was sensitive enough to know that this was ultimately a behavior I wanted to emulate.

The rabbi taught that during the days leading up to the High Holy Days, we should approach our family members and friends and ask for forgiveness for anything that we may have said or done that may have hurt their feelings. He also said that G-d wants us to settle our mistakes with our fellow human beings directly with them. For issues between humans and G-d, He will forgive.

Marsha and I soon established a tradition of asking each other for forgiveness each year right before Yom Kippur. We would always ask each other, “Please forgive me for anything I did that hurt you or may have insulted you, that I may have done knowingly or unknowingly.” That would be followed with a sincere, “Of course,” and a huge hug. It felt so satisfying and purifying.

It became easy to ask my sister for forgiveness. After all, we got along so well, and we had a rhythm going year-after-year. We did not intend to do this by rote, but it was not internally challenging.

On the other hand, having the courage to ask forgiveness from someone with whom I did not feel comfortable, was not simple. Preparing to ask such a person for forgiveness called for introspection, sincerity and bravery. When I was 16, my parents sent me on a teen tour to Israel run by a Brooklyn-based travel agency. A long-time camp friend and I chose to do this together. Being that the tour was based out of Brooklyn, the majority of teens came from Brooklyn and Long Island, and we did not know any of the other girls going. My friend became very close with a girl whom I found irritating. Because we had a friend in common, I found myself spending more time with the irritating girl than I wanted. After the tour was over, I reviewed in my mind all the petty disagreements that we had and saw them as shallow and unimportant. I wanted to make amends.

In those days, people sent batches of Rosh Hashana cards through the mail. The lessons I learned in Hebrew school during the previous year in my anti-gossip class came back to me. I decided to send a Rosh Hashana card with a note to this girl who lived in Brooklyn. I wrote that I was sorry that we had argued and didn’t get along, and I hoped that she forgave me. Then I thought to myself, what would happen if she doesn’t forgive me? I had learned in the class that if a person refuses to forgive us the first time, we should try two more times. If after the third time the person doesn’t forgive us, then G-d sees we tried and He will forgive us. An inner voice told me that she was never going to forgive me. A lightbulb went off in my head. I would put all three requests in the one



card. Looking back, I realize now that I lost confidence in what I was doing, and just wrote a trite note. Something like “If you don’t forgive me, then I am asking you again. If you still don’t forgive me, I am asking you a third time. After the third time, well if you don’t forgive me, G-d will automatically forgive me anyway.” Is it any wonder that I never received a response?

Nevertheless, despite my unsuccessful experience, asking for forgiveness from someone you did not get along with can be done with heartfelt sincerity and can have a positive outcome. When I was in my 30s, after I became fully *Shomeret Shabbat*, I realized there was someone I had embarrassed and I felt quite badly about it. She lived in the town where I grew up. This time I again picked up a pen and notepad, but with a very different attitude. I wished her a happy Rosh Hashana. I told her that I was sorry for embarrassing her, and wrote to her how I could have handled the situation more wisely. I said I would never repeat my behavior. I asked for her forgiveness and mailed the letter, not knowing what type of response I would get, if any. A week or so later a package arrived. It was from the woman to whom I had apologized. She had heard that I had recently adopted an infant (although I did not include that news in my apology note) and she sent me a generous baby gift. In her note, she wrote that she would look for me at my parents’ synagogue on Yom Kippur. On that day, we had a lovely conversation. Although she did not come out and say, “I forgive you,” the unexpected baby gift was a tangible sign that she did forgive me.

The same method of asking for forgiveness I had used with my beloved sister can also work in situations with people who may be truly justified in feeling hurt and holding a legitimate grudge. You never know how a person will react. There is a strong chance that she or he will be willing to start over and forgive. After a sincere apology, the same satisfaction and feeling of purification is waiting for you. Please note, that a huge hug is not necessarily part of the package.

Ellen Smith graduated from Hofstra University with a degree in English. She and her husband, of almost 34 years, live in Edison, NJ, where they raised 3 children. Ellen is a Professional Organizer and wardrobe stylist and owns iDeclutter, LLC. Her sister Marsha passed away in 2000 from melanoma.



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BASHERT (cont. from p. 2)

Barry came and picked me up at my brother's apartment--the warmth of his voice on the phone was now apparent in the twinkle of his eyes--and I knew immediately that there was a special connection. For eleven months, we dated, and then became engaged and married a few months after. I learned later that Barry's mother had also passed away--the year before mine--and that both mothers, separately, had asked the Rebbetzin to help their children find a Jewish soulmate. That is why she had introduced us to each other.

Now, *Baruch Hashem*, we live in New York City and are parents to young children whom we raise in a kosher home. As the New Year approaches with a special opportunity for reflection, I remind myself of the countless lessons of this story:

1. The Rebbetzin's ability to engage in acts of *chesed*—lovingkindness, which impacted on so many lives. Despite being an acclaimed author and speaker of international stature, she devoted time and energy every day to acts of *chesed*, such as phone calls, hospital visits, etc. that brought deep meaning to countless lives.

2. "Never say never." My husband was 50 and I was 38 when we married. Neither of us had ever been married before.

Many people lose hope of finding a *shidduch*, and yet, it is critical to remember that Hashem knows the plan and will always do what is best for us. We must never give up hope.

3. Gratitude. In the hustle and bustle of daily life, I try to always hold on to, and be cognizant of, the fundamental gifts that Hashem has given us: health, family, teachers such as Rebbetzin Jungreis and the lessons of the Torah.

In the coming year, I wish that all of you may be the beneficiaries of *chesed* as well, that you too be infused with a feeling of hope, and be filled with a sense of gratitude for all the wonderful gifts that Hashem has bestowed upon you.

Shana Tovah.

After having grown up in St. Louis, Missouri, Rachel Storch is now raising young children in New York City along with her wonderful husband, Barry.

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