

BERESHITH

"IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter
for Beginners,
by Beginners

Vol. XXX No. 4
Sivan 5777/May 2017



בראשית

HAVING MY CHEESECAKE AND EATING IT TOO

Melody Coven

I hate the term *Ba'al Teshuva*. I'll start by saying that. You know, the term often used to describe someone who didn't grow up traditionally observant but now identifies as such? I know that some people connect to it, and I'm so glad for the people who find beauty in it. It means Master of Return- plenty of room to find beauty in that. All that I find in it, though, is a fear that I might insult my parents. After all, if I'm a *Ba'alat Teshuva* (the feminine form), then why do all of the home videos of my childhood feature Chanukah song sessions, Shabbat candle lighting and Passover seders? Well, I guess if they filmed the seder, there's your answer, huh? While I did not grow up traditionally observant, both my husband and I were proudly raised with the Yiddishkeit that our parents knew and connected to, and for that, I will be forever grateful.

One holiday I barely knew about growing up, aside from the occasional festive salmon dinner, was Shavuot. It makes sense. As if my mother was going to drag her children at 10 o'clock at night to the rabbi's (cont. on p. 3)



SHAVUOT AND THE TOP TEN

Rabbi Marc Mandel

Since we commemorate the historic event of receiving the Torah on Shavuot, one of the customs of the holiday is reading the dramatic events of the Children of Israel receiving the Ten Commandments. In many synagogues it is customary to stand up for the reading of the Ten Commandments. However, not everyone agrees with this custom. In fact, the Rambam (Rabbi Moses ben Maimon/Maimonides) vociferously opposed standing up for the Ten Commandments because he felt it gave too much prominence to one part of the Torah over other parts for which we do not stand up.

For us in Rhode Island, at the Touro Synagogue, the oldest synagogue building in the United States, the Ten Commandments have a special significance. In the summer of 1852, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807 – 1882), the famous American poet, brought his family from Cambridge, Massachusetts, down to Newport for a vacation. While walking the local streets, he became interested in the old Jewish cemetery. He later wrote a poem, "The Jewish Cemetery at Newport." Here are some excerpts from that poem.

(cont. on p. 2)

FREEDOM ALONE ISN'T FREEING

E.B.

Why did the Israelites have to leave Egypt to receive the Torah and then wander for 40 years in the wilderness? Wouldn't it have been enough just to leave Egypt, receive the Torah, and then go straight to the land of Israel?

The Children of Israel were crippled by the mental enslavement that comes with physical slavery. It wasn't enough that they were released from Egypt and received the Torah, the "slave mentality" had to be lifted first. Hence the 40 years in the wilderness and the need for all of those who were born into slavery to pass away before Israel as a nation would be able to conquer the land of Israel.

The best comparison I have for the process the Israelites went through is the example of an addict, of someone who struggles with their addiction every day of their life. They may finally be able to get clean, but the mentality, the "addicted lifestyle," and all that comes along with it is still ingrained in their personality. In order to break free from the shackles of the emotional-mental attachment, addicts must fundamentally change their way of thinking. One way is by using a 12 Steps Program. The 12 steps are designed to help create a physiological, emotional, and mental change (cont. on p. 2)

FREEDOM ALONE ISN'T FREEING (cont. from p. 1)...
within a person so that they are able to truly be free from the
crippling chains and enslavement of addiction.

As someone who has gone through the 12 Steps, I can
assure you that they are not easy. Creating a mental paradigm
shift takes a lot of hard work, but that shift can occur within a
split second. The hard work and time before that split second
is vital to the change occurring. We as the Nation of Israel
were faced with the need for a paradigm shift. We needed to
remove the slave-like mentality and create a state of mental
freedom. Physical bondage can end, but the mentality of
slavery continues. Seeing the *makot* (plagues), leaving Pharaoh,
Kriat Yam Suf (splitting of the Sea), *manna* (unending
heavenly food source), receiving the Torah, etc., all brought
the Israelites as a nation to a place of acceptance necessary to
remove their slave-like mentality. So was accepting that their
old way of life was not going to help get to their desired
destination: The Holy Land of Israel. To get there, the people
needed to go through a special "12 Steps." They needed to
struggle, to work, to examine their every thought, emotion,
and mental process and thus to ensure that they would be
"free." Without that freedom from the inside, they would not
have been able to face the nations of the world, fight the
battles that needed to be fought, or establish a land for our
people.

Every generation must face its own *Mitzrayim*, its own
form of enslavement. Today we fight another internal battle.
The fear of others. This is the mentality of "What will others
think? What will happen should they xyz...?" This is our
Mitzrayim. This is our enslavement. Fear separates us from
Hashem (G-d).

The Lubavitcher Rebbe was once asked by someone about
how to achieve the feeling of fear and awe of G-d in prayers,
and how to carry that within themselves. The Rebbe
responded: The main thing is to delve into the love of G-d,
not so much in the fear of G-d. Fear is paralyzing. It was only
when Moses overcame his fear of Pharaoh that he was able to
come and help free the Children of Israel. It (cont. on p. 4)



"WHY DID THE ISRAELITES HAVE TO LEAVE
EGYPT TO RECEIVE THE TORAH AND THEN
WANDER FOR 40 YEARS IN THE WILDERNESS?"

SHAVUOT AND THE TOP TEN (cont. from p. 1)...

*How strange it seems! These Hebrews in their graves,
Close by the street of this fair seaport town,
Silent beside the never-silent waves,
At rest in all this moving up and down!*

*The very names recorded here are strange,
Of foreign accent, and of different climes;
Alvares and Rivera interchange
With Abraham and Jacob of old times.*

*Closed are the portals of their Synagogue,
No Psalms of David now the silence break,
No Rabbi reads the ancient Decalogue
In the grand dialect the Prophets spake.*

*How came they here? What burst of Christian hate,
What persecution, merciless and blind,
Drove o'er the sea -- that desert desolate --
These Ishmaels and Hagars of mankind?*

*But ah! what once has been shall be no more!
The groaning earth in travail and in pain
Brings forth its races, but does not restore,
And the dead nations never rise again.*

Longfellow's view of Jewish life in Newport was very dim. He
could not see a possibility of a living Jewish community in
Newport. As far as Longfellow was concerned, the Jewish
community was gone forever. But another famous poet also
wrote a poem about that Jewish community in Newport. Emma
Lazarus (1849 – 1887), who is famous for the words which are
inscribed on the Statue of Liberty, was familiar with the Touro
Synagogue because her family spent their summers in Newport,
as did many other Jewish New Yorkers. Even though, at that
time, the synagogue was closed, it was well maintained and used
on special occasions. Lazarus' poem "The Jewish Synagogue at
Newport" was written as a response to Longfellow's poem "The
Jewish Cemetery at Newport." Lazarus used the same title format
and the same meter as "The Jewish Cemetery at Newport." Here
are a few lines from the Lazarus poem.

*Here, where the noises of the busy town,
The ocean's plunge and roar can enter not,
We stand and gaze around with tearful awe,
And muse upon the consecrated spot.*

*What prayers were in this temple offered up,
Wrung from sad hearts that knew no joy on earth,
By these lone exiles of a thousand years,
From the fair sunrise land that gave them birth!
How as we gaze, in this new world of light,
Upon this relic of the days of old,
The present vanishes, and tropics bloom
And Eastern towns and temples we behold.*

*The weary ones, the sad, the suffering,
All found their comfort in the holy place,
And children's gladness and men's gratitude
Took voice and mingled in the chant of praise.
The funeral and the marriage, now, alas!
We know not which is sadder to recall;*

*For youth and happiness have followed age,
And green grass lieth gently over all.
Nathless the sacred shrine is holy yet,
With its lone floors where reverent feet once trod.
Take off your shoes as by the burning bush,
Before the mystery of death and God.*

The last stanza of the Longfellow poem included the phrase “dead nations never rise again.” Lazarus concentrated on the “living power” of the synagogue: “The sacred shrine is holy yet.” Lazarus had hope for the future of the Jewish community in Newport, and each time we read the Ten Commandments at the Touro Synagogue we prove that Longfellow’s vision was incorrect.

On a larger scale, all the successful work that NJOP does with smaller Jewish communities across America and Canada demonstrates that we are not a dead nation. Quite the contrary, we are alive and well.

This Shavuot, when you hear the Ten Commandments being read, think of our community in Newport and think of all the smaller Jewish communities across this great land, where Lazarus’ words ring true as Shavuot is celebrated with great learning and joy. *Chag Samayach.*

Rabbi Marc Mandel is the rabbi at Touro Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island. Rabbi Mandel and the members of Touro Synagogue are grateful to NJOP for all their leadership and assistance.



HAVING MY CHEESECAKE (cont. from p. 1)...

house to do a little textual learning. I don’t think so, pal.

Now, though, Shavuot is one of my favorite holidays. For surface level stuff, I love Simchat Torah and Purim. When it comes to the deeper meaning, though, I love Shavuot as much as I love the cheesecake I get to eat at our Shavuot dinner.

Let me explain. When I was growing up, I loved getting presents. It was the best, right? For my family, that meant Chanukah. It meant unwrapping gifts, getting a little pile of gifts that said “Melody” on it, and anxiously awaiting another night when I could open one more. Birthdays weren’t bad either. Now, imagine the literal best gift of all time. That is what Shavuot is about. Getting THE best gift of all time. G-d gave His people the Torah. It was a gift so epic that, thousands of years later, we have a whole holiday celebrating it. Oh, and did I mention, a gift so consequential that I can’t eat at Wendy’s anymore?

I always believed in *Torah MiSinai*, that the Torah came directly from G-d. When I went to Hebrew School growing up, it just made sense to me. They taught us about G-d, and they taught us about creation. We decorated little clouds with

cotton balls, and everyone was happy, more or less.

As I approached the age of Bat Mitzvah, though, I started learning that many of the people I knew didn’t actually believe that G-d had literally given us this book. I learned about the concept that some men wrote it down and that it was up to each of us to decide how much we believed G-d was involved. I was only twelve-years-old when I got into a heated debate with my rabbi. What do you mean? This was all a sham? If the Torah isn’t from G-d, why are we following it? Why won’t my mom let me have cheeseburgers, and why do we have the longest services ever every Saturday morning? The hypocrisy felt paralyzing.

I had many Bat Mitzvah class debates with my rabbi. At one point, I picked a real fight over the concept of “Chosen People.” “It’s elitist,” I quarreled. “How can we think that we’re better than everyone else? I don’t believe in this. It’s wrong.”

My rabbi turned to me and told me something that has stuck with me since that day. “Melody, you’re going to be the most religious one here.”

“What?? What do you mean? I’m telling you that I don’t believe in this! I’m not one of the Chosen People!” He had incredible insight, though. He wisely realized that to engage with religion is exactly that, to engage.

My *B’nai Mitzvah* classmates haven’t exactly ended up purchasing sheitels (I still can’t really believe I’m a full-on wig-wearer). They have ended up, as the statistics show as statistics. But here I am, celebrating the greatest present of all time. Why? It came to make sense to me that G-d created us and gave us His precious Torah. *Torah MiSinai* was my starting point, my constant, my foundation. Orthodoxy and keeping *halacha* (Jewish law) eventually followed, in their own time.

I am very cerebral, so the notion that I should be following mitzvot as a traditionally observant Jew came from a painstaking, intellectual game of tennis with my beloved rabbi and rebbetzin in college. I already kept kosher, more or less. I started keeping Shabbat of my own volition way back in high school...I was so many steps of the way there, but I hadn’t received my present yet. I didn’t have that big shiny ribbon-covered box that was life as a traditional Jew. And every day, I got closer. The first time I wore a modest skirt when it wasn’t Shabbat was terrifying. I felt like everyone was going to look at me like I had spaghetti sauce all over my face. That’s how I felt. But each day, there was a little less sauce. I felt a little more normal.

Now, I have my cheesecake and eat it too. I live my life as an unapologetic, thoroughly-enthusiastic, deeply-committed, but totally-tolerant-traditional Jew. Last year, I had the profound privilege of leading a class during Shavuot. I related the Delivery from Egypt to real delivery - childbirth, while I held my perfect, tiny, 10-month-old daughter. G-d had given me another big, shiny, incredible gift: the opportunity to teach my children Torah.

Melody (Mostow) Coven, originally from Pittsburgh, PA, holds a BA from Indiana University and an MA from IDC Herzliya. She is the proud wife of Avi, even prouder mother of Dita, and founder of the website QuestionsForMyJewishFriend.com



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FREEDOM ALONE ISN'T FREEING (cont. from p. 2)...
was only through Israel's trials and wanderings in the wilderness that they were able, as a nation, to develop a relationship with G-d.

We are also taught that *Hashem* loves us unconditionally. However, unless we love ourselves, this concept is lost. Many addicts do not know how to love because, often, they are filled with self-loathing, while harboring a deep need to "just feel normal." If a person doesn't love him/herself how can they expect or accept that someone else will?

This is the challenge of the modern *Mitzrayim* -- of needing other people's approval. Every community places expectations on its members. In order to connect with G-d we need to break out of our fear of not meeting those expectations and, in this way, discover our own path to developing a loving relationship with G-d. Breaking from our *Mitzrayim* leads us to Mount Sinai, where we can truly receive the Torah.

On Shavuot we celebrate this special love relationship between the Children of Israel and *Hashem*. *Mitzrayim* was left behind. We accepted the Torah. But we weren't yet free of the slavery, of the emotional dependency of our previous life, which is why the Israelites worshiped the Golden Calf. But

with time and action, they were able to break that chain, and *Hashem*, in His intimate love, still took His people to the land of Israel. He said: "I get it. You're not there yet, but you're searching. So let Me show you that you are worth it."

We are not our ancestors, and our *Mitzrayim* is more metaphoric, but no less entrapping. Each year, Shavuot is an opportunity for each person, no matter if they are just discovering their interest in Judaism or grew up in a home surrounded by Torah and mitzvot, to shift their paradigm and shake off the shackles of the current *Mitzrayim* to connect through love with *Hashem*.

This article has been submitted anonymously.

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Illustrations by Wendy Dunn