

# BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter  
for Beginners,  
by Beginners

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# בראשית

## BEAUTY IN THE EYES OF THE BEHOLDER

Rabbi Chanoch Oppenheim

Imagine finding a painting at a garage sale. It is no great work of art, but you can use it in your garage to cover a hole in the wall. When you get home, you realize that there is another painting underneath the one you bought and, for the sake of our story, it turns out to be a Rembrandt. Word gets out and the person who sold it to you said that had she known its value, she never would have sold it. What would you say? Who should be the recipient of this unexpected good fortune, the seller or the buyer?

Although they probably didn't have garage sales back in 12th century France, a similar incident happened. The question was brought to Rabbi Eliezer of Metz, one of the most highly regarded Talmudic legal scholars of the day. In a case pertaining to a valuable object hidden in a sold object of far lesser value, Rabbi Eliezer of Metz ruled that the buyer may keep the valuable silver object. The seller, he reasoned, never owned the treasure underneath because one cannot acquire legal possession (cont. on p. 2)



## TORAH IN OUR SOULS

Isabella Glaser-Bennaim

Nine years ago, during the summer between my junior and senior years of college, I decided to do an internship in Jerusalem. I was going alone (albeit as part of a Masa program), knowing vaguely of distant relatives and having been in Israel only once before. Oh, also, my Hebrew at that time was limited to the ability of ordering coffee or ice cream (the essentials, right?), and my knowledge of Torah and religious observance was fairly shallow given my upbringing. That summer proved to be a whirlwind of growth and learning, yet, in hindsight I can say I returned to the U.S. being about as "learned" as a kindergartener in Hebrew school – but at least I had graduated from preschool.

After that Israel trip, I continued to grow and learn 'Jewishly' at a slow-and-steady turtle-like pace. As I went through college and graduate school, my life became busy with internships, work and all-nighters spent on psychology papers. In the deep recesses of my secular life, I maintained an aspirational idea of how I wanted my Jewish life to look, but it continued as a vision of the future. The reality, however, was that if I did not put in the work, everything in my life was going to remain the same and that vision of the future would always remain in the future. In order to bring (cont. on p. 2)

## SHAVUOT? HUH?

David Pine

Shavuot is a difficult holiday to explain to non-Jews, and even to many non-observant Jews. This is the case even in the great Jewish metropolis known as New York City, where almost everyone knows about Passover, from either having attended a Seder (traditional or non-traditional) or having tasted Matzah or some other delicacy made for the holiday. Many New Yorkers are also aware of the "booths" we construct for the holiday of Sukkot, and may have seen Jews walking around with palm fronds and "lemons."

Mention Shavuot, however, and you get a blank stare. "What? What is that?" It has no obvious rituals and few special foods (except cheesecake and blintzes, a dubious distinction). Perhaps New Yorkers recognize the name of Shavuot from the radio announcement proclaiming the cancellation of alternate side of the street parking. (It's a New York thing.) But, how Jewish is that? What are the chances that your average generic American calendar lists Shavuot? Slim to none.

Shavuot, however, is unique in a way that other Jewish holidays are not. Shavuot is a reminder that "less can be more!"

One of the beautiful customs of Shavuot is that, during the synagogue service, we read the entire Book of (cont. on p. 3)

**BEAUTY** (cont. from p. 1)...of an object without being aware of its existence. This ruling later became codified in the *Shulchan Aruch*, the Code of Jewish Law.

Lord Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of England, said that the most fateful moment in his life came when he asked the following question: Who am I? Is the real me my job? Is it my house or estate? Is it the car I drive or the country I live in? We all know these are merely aspects or possessions in a person's life, but it is not *you*. How did Rabbi Sacks answer this fateful question? "I am a Jew, and this is why: I cherish the Torah, knowing that G-d is to be found not just in natural forces, but in moral meanings, in words, texts, teachings and commands, and because Jews, though they lacked all else, never ceased to value education as a sacred task, endowing the individual with dignity and depth."

Shavuot is a holiday not known to many Jews. If you ask someone with little Jewish education and/or affiliation what comes to mind when you think about Rosh Hashanah, the answer will most likely be -- *Shofar*. How about Yom Kippur? Fasting. Sukkot? The Sukkah and shaking the Etrog and other species. Passover? Matzah. Shavuot? *Ah, not sure; never heard of it*. Not only have many (perhaps most) Jews never heard of it, no real symbols are associated with it. However, it is the one festival in which we rejoice over the Torah. It is a time when we thank G-d for giving us an instruction book for good living; something that has united Jews for centuries. Jews might not agree on politics, religion, economics, or how to solve the world's problems, but when a Jewish college student spends a semester abroad, (s)he will look for a family for the Passover seder or for a place for the High Holidays. (S)He will connect to people who are Jewish and inspired by the Torah.

The holidays are just one aspect of Torah. The Torah instructs, and even commands, us to be honest in business, support the poor, and build and support the communities in which we find ourselves. The Torah guidelines are distinct from other religions in that they do not separate the world of spirituality and the world of action, i.e. good deeds. Being righteous, being "good with G-d" is important, but how one treats other human beings is of equal significance. A novel concept for many Jews who are just getting their feet wet in learning about their heritage is that Judaism begins from the time one wakes up in the morning. It is how you treat your parents, your brother and sister, your spouse and the people at work. If you are in a position in which people report to you, are you sensitive to them? Do you create an emotionally safe place for people to come to speak with you?

The synagogue has its place in Judaism, but it is not its focal point. Whether or not you attend a formal synagogue service, or if you are on the road and there's no place of worship, as a Jew there is still a world of opportunity for you to express your Judaism. The incorrect notion that all of Judaism revolves around the formal religious synagogue service is what led one of the most prominent 19th century German Rabbis to suggest that we close all synagogues for one hundred years! Although he might not have meant it literally, Rabbi (cont. on p. 4)

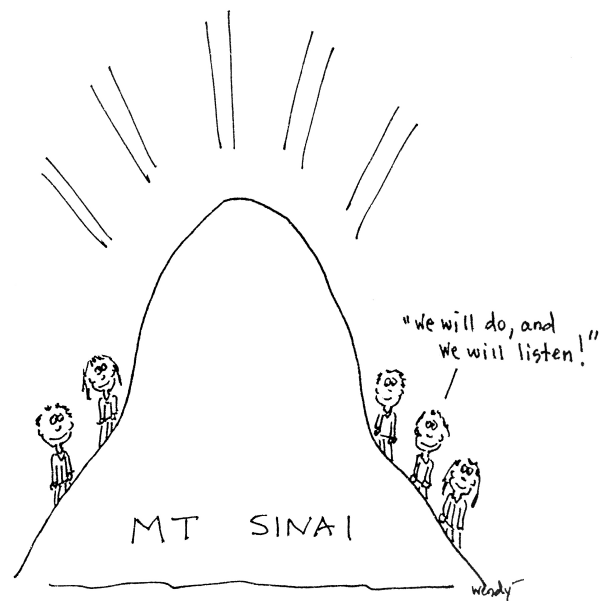
**TORAH IN OUR SOULS** (cont. from p. 1)... it to the present, I was going to have to put in a great deal of work.

There are at least two Midrashim (legendary rabbinic sources) that speak to every Jew's innate relationship to the Torah. Tradition teaches us that all the souls of Israel, including the ones to be born in future generations, were present at the giving of the Torah at Sinai. In response to receiving the beautiful gift of Torah, the Israelites pledged, "*na'aseh v'nishma*" (Exodus 24:7) - "We will do and we will listen." Rabbi Elazar is cited in the Talmud (*Shabbat* 88a) as saying: "At the moment when Israel gave precedence to *na'aseh*, we will do, ahead of *nishma*, we will hear, a Heavenly voice went out and said to them, 'Who revealed to my children this secret, which is used by the ministering angels?' As it is written, 'Praise God, O God's angels, mighty in strength, who do God's will and understand God's word' (Psalms 103:20) - first they do [God's will] and then they understand [God's word]." Our souls committed to doing God's will, but how is it possible to know the Torah innately?

According to another famous Midrash (*Niddah* 30b), an angel teaches the entire Torah from beginning to end to every child in utero, but then, just as the child is born, the angel touches the child in the space between the nose and the upper lip (creating what is called the philtrum) and the child forgets everything.

From birth, Jews have, deep within themselves, that intuitive commitment and knowledge of the Torah. It exists on a more sub-conscious level, perhaps like the DNA of the soul. It is part of every Jew's

nature. On the conscious level, our Jewish practice and education comes about through "nurture." Some are raised in a Torah-rich environment, in a fully observant home life and receive tremendous religious schooling. But even if someone comes from such an ideal scenario, being observant compels one to nurture practice through continuous learning. Regardless whether someone comes from a Torah knowledgeable background or not, one of the greatest challenges of committing to learning and practice is inertia. In physics, inertia is the property that enables matter to continue in its existing state (e.g. resting or continuing in uniform motion in one straight line), and the only way to change that state is by an external force. With humans, inertia is expressed through the idea that it is easy to keep things the way they are. (cont. on p. 3)



## TORAH IN OUR SOULS (cont. from p. 2)...

To shift my inertia, I jumped, so to speak, into the deep end of the pool. I started attending traditional Shabbat services every week (despite still not knowing Hebrew), signed up for Hebrew classes, started learning a little bit every day, observing Shabbat and Yom Tov -- I used flashcards, books, *chavrutot* (learning partners), and mentors. I was like the kindergartener taking high school classes; it was often confusing and overwhelming. As time passed and I continued to learn, I noticed that the small strokes of knowledge slowly started to build a beautiful landscape, as if it were an impressionist painting. But, it is now obvious that it is all a continually evolving art piece, and there will never be a moment to declare it is finished -- it is a continuous process of nurturing.

One of the many wonderful aspects of Shavuot is the opportunity for budging standstill inertia into moving, resulting in greater spiritual growth and Torah learning. *Tikkun Le'eyl Shavuot*, the traditional all-nighter of studying the Torah, can act as a jump-start for our spiritual engines. At first it can be a bumpy start, but the view along the way and the destination are beautiful. As we learn from *Pirkei Avot* (5:26); "Ben Bag Bag said: "Turn the Torah over and over, for everything is in it. Look into it, grow old and worn over it, and never move away from it, for you will find no better portion than it."

*Isabella Glaser-Bennaim has a Bachelor of Science from Trinity College, Hartford, CT, and a Master's in Social Work from Yeshiva University, with an additional Certificate in Jewish Communal Work. She currently works at the Leo Baeck Institute, a nonprofit focused on German Jewry, in development. She and her husband, Simon, live in the Upper West Side of Manhattan.*

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## SHAVUOT? HUH? (cont. from p. 1)...

Ruth. It is the story of a Moabite widow who, after committing to become Jewish, was faced with a very hard life, but did so nonetheless. Her devotion to G-d was so great that she has even become the prototype for a *ger tzedek* (righteous convert), and her dedication to her widowed mother-in-law, Naomi, is a lesson for all. Judaism prizes not only adherence to the mitzvot, but also *gemilut chasadim* (performance of acts of kindness). Ruth exemplified both, to the extent that she was rewarded with the privilege of being the ancestor of King David, and therefore, *Moshiach*.

The book of Ruth also has personal meaning for me, as my wife, Stephanie, is a *giyoret tzedek* (convert). She spent several years learning and preparing for life as a Jew. Like Ruth, she did not foresee the path that brought her to Judaism and, also like Ruth, it was not an easy journey. But her commitment was like that of Ruth, who famously said to Naomi, "Whither you go, I will go, wherever you lodge, I will lodge, your people will be my people and your G-d will be my G-d." (Or words to that effect.) The point I'm trying to make is that whether one is a *Baal Teshuva* (a Jew who returns to Torah observance) or a convert, the personal sacrifices are enormous, both life changing and life affirming.

While Shavuot may not, as mentioned above, be the most well-known of the Jewish holidays, it is a festival filled with great meaning. This holiday marks the completion of the counting of the *omer*, which is seven weeks from the second night of Passover - accounting for the holiday's name as the Festival of Weeks (*shavuot* is weeks in Hebrew). In biblical times, the seven weeks marked the transition in Israel from the spring grain crop of barley to the beginning of the summer grain harvest of wheat. Therefore the holiday has yet another name, *Chag Hakatzir*, (harvest). It is also called *Chag Habikurim* (first fruits); Shavuot commemorates the harvest of the first fruits in Israel, which were brought to the Temple in Jerusalem. In recognition, most synagogues are decorated with flowers and other signs of spring.

For such a short holiday, Shavuot has lots of names. Surely there must be more to it. After all, we've been counting down (really up) every day for seven weeks toward this holiday!

Shavuot commemorates G-d giving the Torah to the Jewish people. During the holiday prayer services, we read the story of the Revelation at Mount Sinai and the giving of the Ten Commandments. It is an amazing story, one that was even made into a classic Hollywood movie - thunder, lightning, fire. Great special effects!

For some time now, I have had the honor of being my synagogue's Torah reader for the portion from *parshat Jethro* that describes the event. It always gives me the chills when I read how G-d actually spoke the first two commandments (inconceivable to me) to the assembled masses and that the people actually asked Moses to continue, because the experience of G-d speaking to them was too intense.

Shavuot is the holiday of the Ten Commandments. How many people who never heard of the holiday of Shavuot have heard of the Ten Commandments? Almost everyone! The legal doctrines of the Ten Commandments became universal and even made their way into common law in many countries.

But what is really the main event of the celebration of Shavuot? Torah study. The prevalent custom of learning throughout the first night, *Tikkun Le'eyl Shavuot*, followed by early morning prayer, dates back to the 16th century mystics of Safed. A *Midrash* relates that on the morning of the Revelation, the Israelites overslept and almost missed their meeting at Mount Sinai. To make up for it, we today affirm our commitment to Torah by learning all night to atone for this near disaster. Some synagogues host all-night study, while others sponsor late-night speakers (complimentary cheesecake included). One's level of knowledge and ability does not matter. The Torah is there for us all to study and connect with G-d.

Shavuot reminds us of the amazing gift we were given. After all, the Torah with all its commandments and advice exists for us to improve our lives. G-d does not need us to pray three times a day, shake a palm branch, wrap leather straps around our arm, and avoid eating shellfish. It is WE who need the mitzvot. The mitzvot help us become better human beings (not just better Jews) and bring us the happiness and fulfillment we are looking for in (*cont. on p. 4*)



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**BEAUTY** (cont. from p. 2)...Samson Raphael Hirsch did in fact make this statement.

*If I had the power, I would provisionally close all synagogues for a hundred years. Do not tremble at the thought of it, Jewish heart. What would happen? Jews and Jewesses without synagogues, desiring to remain such, would be forced to concentrate on a Jewish life and a Jewish home. The Jewish officials connected with the synagogue would have to look to the only opportunity now open to them to teach young and old how to live a Jewish life and how to build a Jewish home. All synagogues closed by Jewish hands would constitute the strongest protest against the abandonment of the Torah in home and life.*

Although the synagogue is the recommended place to be this Shavuot, let us rejoice in the fact that we are a people who can, and have, survived with nothing other than studying, keeping the Torah, and building Jewish homes guided by it. Shavuot is a time to check out some Torah classes, partake in the festive holiday meals and find inner peace in the wisdom and practices that have inspired our people for thousands of years. It is the time to discover the beautiful painting that sometimes gets covered over.

*Rabbi Chanoch Oppenheim is the Rabbi of the Charlotte Torah Center, an educational resource engaging college students, young professionals, and adults. He is a graduate of Columbia University and was ordained by the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem.*

**SHAVUOT? HUH?** (cont. from p. 3)...our lives. Here is my unsolicited advice: Hang on to them for dear life.



This year, we have a special treat. A three day holiday! We get to enter Shavuot coming off the spirituality of Shabbat. So on Saturday night, May 19, grab your favorite topic of Torah study, Hebrew, English or any other language, and spend some time enjoying the life-enriching gift we were given on Mount Sinai, so long ago.

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**בראשית**

*Beresith: "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](mailto:info@njop.org) or visit [www.njop.org](http://www.njop.org).*

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*Illustrations by Wendy Dunn*