

BERESHITH
"IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter
for Beginners,
by Beginners

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בראשית

BRAVE DECISIONS, AND THE STRENGTH TO ACT UPON THEM

Rabbi Eric Ertel

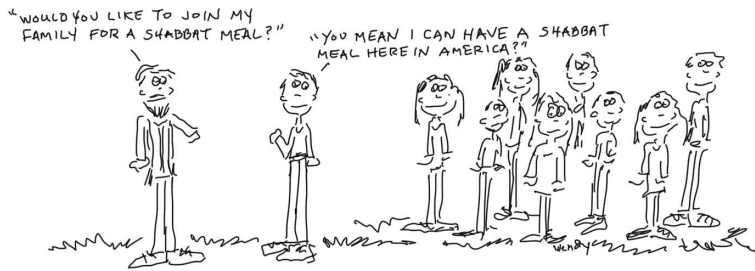
“Every holiday, carries with it an opportunity.” My rabbi, Rav Noach Weinberg of Aish HaTorah, would tell me, “In Judaism, we’re not simply commemorating a past event when we celebrate our holidays—we are reliving the original experience.”

So what is the “opportunity” that the High Holidays have to offer us?

As a young Jew growing up in America, I always felt an attachment to my Judaism. In public school, if we were discussing history or culture, I would always volunteer the information that I was Jewish, and I’d take great pride in sharing my limited knowledge with fellow classmates and teachers. But, did I have a real understanding about what Shabbat is or the meaning behind keeping kosher? Did I have any knowledge about *emunah* (the understanding that G-d runs the world) and *bitachon* (relying on G-d and trusting Him)? No.

In 1995, just before my 19th birthday, I decided to travel for a year. Both of my older brothers, Jason and Rafael, had traveled to
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COLLEGE U



THIS IS HOW YOU BEGIN

Harriet Edleson

I remember it well.

“Stand with your feet together. Take three steps back, then three forward. Bow.” Ah ha! This is how you pray. First, you stand before the King, praise G-d, then begin asking for things.

This was the first Beginners Service I had ever attended. It met at the New York Historical Society on Manhattan’s Upper West Side, and it was, indeed, part of the beginning, on the path to a life with deeper meaning, and adherence to more rituals than ever before.

It was the voice of Rabbi Ephraim Buchwald, essentially saying it was okay, that whatever you’d done before, was okay, that you can transform your scarlet sins into mitzvot that are white as snow. (Isaiah 1:18)

This happens through a process called *Teshuvah*, returning. It didn’t matter what you had or hadn’t done in the past. This Rosh Hashana was going to be part of that new beginning, and at this service Rabbi Buchwald was going to show you how to begin.

It was in the early 2000s, maybe 2001, not long after I’d moved from the Washington, DC, area, to Manhattan, where I was eager to live a life I’d dreamt of periodically throughout my early adult

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THE JOURNEY FROM OUTREACH TO IN-REACH

Brett N. Steenbarger, Ph.D.

Until a few years ago, much of my adult life was lived as a wholly-secular Jew. Yes, I identified with the Jewish religion and occasionally attended services, but I always found something missing.

Still, my first trip to Israel was a wonderful experience, sharing with my wife Margie, the history, culture and magnificence of the Kotel, Masada and so much more. We had time left over before our flight back the next day, and so we decided to tour Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center.

The scope of the museum was stunning, bringing this horrific period to life in a uniquely personal way. I walked ahead of Margie and came to a circular display with overhead maps displaying the number of Jews lost in every country as a result of the Holocaust. I stared for a while at the numbers and the breadth of the loss around the world.

That’s when it happened.

I suddenly began to shed tears. A powerful feeling washed over me, and with the feeling came words: “These are my people.”

I’m not one given to public displays of emotion, so this was entirely out of character. Moreover, it was not like any normal

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BRAVE DECISIONS (cont. from p. 1)

...Israel, and found their inspiration to grow spiritually and to eventually become observant. Between you and me, I wasn't looking to become observant. I was looking for a way to see the world and have fun while doing it.

The choices of organized trips to Israel for young, unaffiliated Jews, was slim to none. I got in contact with a Kibbutz in the Negev, I slung a backpack over my shoulders, and off I went to Israel.

I fell in love. The beauty of the Golan, the majesty of Jerusalem and the serenity of the Negev, made a lasting impression.

Eventually, Rosh Hashana rolled around. My brother, Rafael, was learning at Aish HaTorah in Jerusalem. He extended an invitation to me to visit, and experience the holiday in a "Yeshiva environment."

I knew very little about the holiday, so I took it upon myself to take a few classes. With my new-found knowledge, questions were circulating in my mind.

If *Hashem* has the power to judge and hand down decisions, then surely I have an ability to plead my case for a good judgment. But when and how do I plead my case?

Enter the new concept of prayer.

I was a bit intimidated, and didn't really know what to expect, but I made the brave decision to attend the 'two day holiday services' at the Yeshiva; and boy did I need the strength to follow through! I found myself standing for long periods of time, listening to prayers that I didn't understand, and similar to the Passover seder, I found myself asking, "When are we going to eat?"

But then something happened. The unfamiliar tunes that kept being repeated, became familiar. The prayers that I didn't understand became more and more meaningful the more I'd read them in English, and the sound of the shofar blasts were penetrating my being with the cries of "wake up!"

By the time that last shofar blow was sounded, I was a changed man. All because I made that brave decision to engage in my Judaism, and concentrate my strength on making it happen.

Fast forward 15 years. The year is 2010. I'm married, with 4 daughters, and oh yeah, I have *smicha* (rabbinic ordination) and work as a rabbi on campus at the University of California San Diego (UCSD).

It's the beginning of a new school year on campus, Rosh Hashana is a week away, and the big "Welcome Week" kick-off event is in full swing. Any and all organizations and clubs have booths set up all across the field. Students are walking around with their friends, making quick visits to the booths that appear interesting to them. I have my booth set up trying to attract students to come over and check out the programming that I have to offer.

Unfortunately, my booth is parked right in between the two biggest fraternities and sororities on campus. There are hundreds of students in the proximity of my booth, but they are so pre-occupied with their social lives, that my booth and I seem invisible.

I decided to change my strategy. If students wouldn't come to me, I'd go out to them. I made my way through the dense

crowd of students, until I reached the middle of the field. As I lifted up my eyes, I saw a young man sitting in the grass. He was having a great time listening to the loud music in the background and enjoying the warm sunshine. I said to myself... "Maybe he's Jewish?" I sat down beside him and said, "Hey, I'm Rabbi E. Welcome to campus." He made eye contact with me and said, "No way, I'm Michael (name changed), I'm Jewish."

We started talking and sharing our stories. At one point I asked him, "Have you ever been to Israel?" He responded back with a big smile, "Yeah, I went on Birthright last year. I had a great time!" I asked him what he enjoyed most about the trip. He told me "The hiking and jeep riding up in the Golan was my highlight." I said, "That's awesome, I lead Birthright trips twice a year, and I also enjoy that part of the trip. But tell me, what was a more 'meaningful' experience you had?" He thought for a few moments and replied, "The Kotel, I really enjoyed going to the Kotel on Shabbat." I said, "That's great, my wife and I host Shabbat dinner every week at our house just off campus. Would you like to join us this week?" I will never forget his response. He said to me in disbelief, "We have that here?"

Michael was unaware that Shabbat happens every week, no matter where in the world you are. "*Rebono Shel Olam,*" I said to myself, "Look at your children. So far away from their Torah that this one doesn't even know that Shabbat exists outside of Israel."

Michael came to our home for Shabbats and indeed had a wonderful time connecting with his previous Jewish experience of Shabbat, and left with a desire for more. I invited Michael to come to shul for Rosh Hashana services later that week. Although he was inspired by his Shabbat experience, walking into a shul for a full service, was a little beyond his reach.

I explained to him the opportunity that Rosh Hashana has to offer. The ability to pray, to connect and to grow. I gently encouraged him to attend, and he made the brave decision. Two days later, harnessing all of his internal strength, Michael came to shul and sat through two days of services. The unfamiliar tunes that kept being repeated, became familiar. The prayers that he didn't understand became more and more meaningful the more he read them in English, and the sound of the shofar blasts penetrated his being with the cries of "wake up!"

By the time that last shofar blow was sounded, he was a changed man. Michael went off to Yeshiva in Israel, and the rest is history.

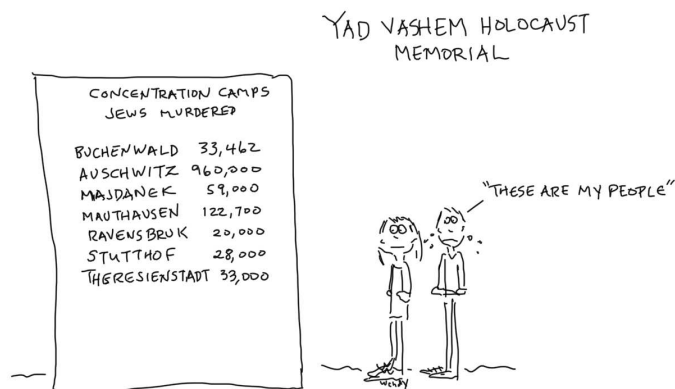
What is the opportunity the "High Holidays" have to offer? Self-reflection, new beginnings, the ability to daven and reconnect. To become inspired. To grow. We just have to make brave decisions and have the strength to act upon them.

Ketivah v' Chatimah Tovah.

Over the past 18 years, Rabbi Ertel and his wife Chaya, have offered classes, led trips, organized social events, and hosted thousands of students at their home for Shabbat. Rabbi Ertel and his family currently live in San Diego, where he is the Executive Director of the San Diego Jewish Experience.

THE JOURNEY (cont. from p. 1)

...emotional episode I could recall. I had the distinct sense that G-d was speaking to me. It was the only way I could explain the overwhelming depth of the experience.



I returned to the U.S. determined to return to my Jewish roots. I began buying and reading books and reached out to one Jewish group after another. All were amazingly welcoming: Beth Medrash Govoha, the large yeshiva in Lakewood, NJ; the Chabad Rabbinical College of America in Morristown, NJ; the Breslov Research Institute in Lakewood; and several local synagogues and religious groups, from Reform and Conservative to Orthodox and Neo-Chasidic/Renewal. With the support of materials from the National Jewish Outreach Program (NJOP) at the Beit Chaverim shul in Westport, CT, I found meaningful worship at Shabbat, Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. The idea of celebrating and worshipping at the same time as so many other Jews around the country, reinforced that powerful sense of being with “my people.”

It was because of the outreach of so many dedicated Jews that I was able to make my return. I could never have found my Jewish voice—my Jewish soul—had others not reached out.

But now I struggle with something different and challenging: “in-reach.”

Outreach connects us with our fellow Jews, but in-reach is what connects us with G-d.

What I learned at Yad Vashem was not simply that I truly am a Jew. If that were the only outcome of my trip, *dayenu!* More important, I learned that G-d is real. I realized that, during flashes of insight and inspiration, G-d is always communicating with us, providing us with “Divine inspiration.” Accessing that inner wisdom—that *chokhmah*—is what in-reach is all about.

For years, as a psychologist, I had worked on a creativity technique known as “brainwriting.” We can think of brainwriting as the written equivalent of brainstorming: we sit and type and type and type in stream-of-consciousness fashion about whatever comes to mind regarding a topic of interest. One thought leads to another, which triggers yet another, and before long, wholly new thoughts emerge.

After my experience in Israel, I recognized that the brainwriting I had been doing is not merely an associative exercise but a conversation with the *Aibishter* (G-d) It is a pathway to in-reach, to finding the divine inspiration within. Or perhaps, as a Breslover might say, it is a form of personal meditation: *hitbodedut*.

My sense as a “new Jew” is that outreach can return Jews to

their roots, but it is in-reach that will keep them there. Of course, the study of Torah, the engagement in prayer, and the performance of mitzvot are all paths to G-d when performed correctly, with *kavanah* (proper intention). But how often do they actually serve that function?

Outreach can teach us about the prayers and practices, but without the in-reach that contacts G-d and what is G-dly within us, those traditions can quickly ossify. Having returned to being a more involved Jew, I find now that I must return every day from the narrow places of exile that fill daily life. Early in my new Jewish experience, a wise teacher explained that, in other religions, you perform good deeds with the idea of going to heaven. As Jews, we focus on life in this world and bring heaven down to us.

That is in-reach.

Brett N. Steenbarger, Ph.D. is Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at SUNY Upstate Medical University and a psychologist who works with professionals in the field of finance. He has written a number of books on the topic of the psychology of trading and investing and authors a bimonthly column for the financial publication Forbes. He and his wife of 36 years, Margie, enjoy five children, six grandchildren and four rescue cats from their home in New Canaan, CT.

THIS IS HOW YOU BEGIN(cont. from p. 1)

...years. From the time I was in my early 20s, I wanted to live on the Upper East Side, but somehow didn't feel ready. Yet, it seemed inevitable that I would take the step. And there were many other steps that followed once I got myself settled on East 86th Street, just one block from Carl Schurz Park.

I didn't know exactly what I would do, but I sensed it would be different from the way I had lived my life before. Growing up in the northern suburbs of New York, I thought I had lived a Jewish life. Our synagogue, and our home, not far from it, were the centers of Jewish learning. At “religious school” on Sunday mornings, I studied *Pathways Through the Bible* (The Jewish Publication Society of America; 1st edition, January 1, 1946), and soaked up as much as I could. I didn't know what I was missing.

Our synagogue, the only one in the village, had begun as an observant place of worship in 1899, then hired a Conservative rabbi in about 1930, and a Reform rabbi after World War II, in the early-to-mid-1950s. I pieced together this history years later. My maternal great-grandfather, paternal grandfather and father were past presidents of the synagogue. My paternal grandmother and mother served as Sisterhood president. I had served on the synagogue board in my 20s.

During that time, I read, two volumes entitled, *What We Believe*, and Irving Howe's *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made*.

The history appealed to me, as described by Howe, but the beliefs, on some level, didn't stack up for me. Separately, I'd heard reasons why Jews are commanded to keep kosher, but the explanations didn't entirely make sense to me. You may have heard some of them, too: To prevent contracting trichinosis, we don't eat pork. In fact, eating kosher is a *chok*, a commandment that remains a mystery as to why G-d wants us to keep it. To me, it's part of *emunah* – faith—and *bitachon* – trust – in Hashem. He asks us to do something (or not) even without a rationale, so we comply.

(cont. on p. 4)



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DATED MATERIAL

THIS IS HOW YOU BEGIN(cont. from p. 3)

In my insatiably curious way, I wanted to know more, and that opportunity came while living in Manhattan, something I am forever grateful I did.

For it was there, I was able to attend classes three nights a week, and learn more Jewish history, Torah and some more Hebrew, though there's always more to learn.

I attended the NJOP Crash Course in Hebrew Reading at Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun to improve my near-dormant Hebrew. I'd studied for two years when I was 10 or 12. I frequented classes at the Hineni Heritage Center, Aish HaTorah and Manhattan Jewish Experience. Later, I read of the blessings and the curses in Vayikra, parashat Bechukotai, and any doubts I had as to which road I was taking evaporated.

Leaving New York City six and a half years ago for work, challenged my observant practice in small ways too numerous to recount here. Yet, it's the minor commandments that we often

overlook, yet which are so important.

I struggle, at times.

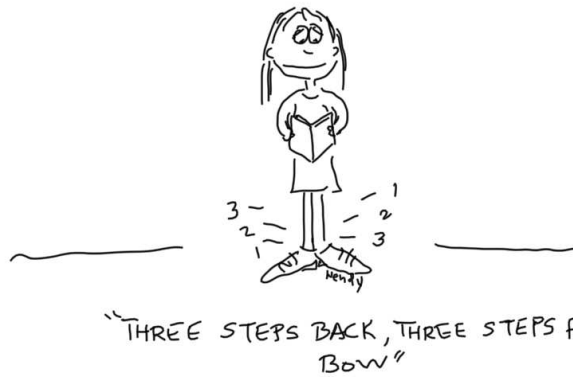
Joining a Modern Orthodox synagogue (as I had in Manhattan), serving on its security team through the Community Security Service and continuing to listen to various *shiurim* (Torah classes) on TorahAnytime.com keep me connected.

It's even harder since the pandemic. The answer for me? *Shiurim, shiurim, shiurim*, for we are all Beginners in one way or another, and always have something more to learn.

And, I'll always remember: "Three steps back, three steps forward. Bow."

This is how you begin.

A Bethesda, Maryland-based writer, Harriet Edleson is author of the forthcoming book, 12 Ways to Retire on Less: Planning an Affordable Future, to be published by Rowman & Littlefield, May 2021. She can be reached at Harriet333@aol.com.



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