

BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter
for Beginners,
by Beginners

Vol. XXXVI No. 1

Tishrei 5783/September 2022



בראשית

A BEGINNER IN ISRAEL

Akiva Moshe ben Avraham

My Jewish life began when Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald, from Lincoln Square Synagogue, answered the call.

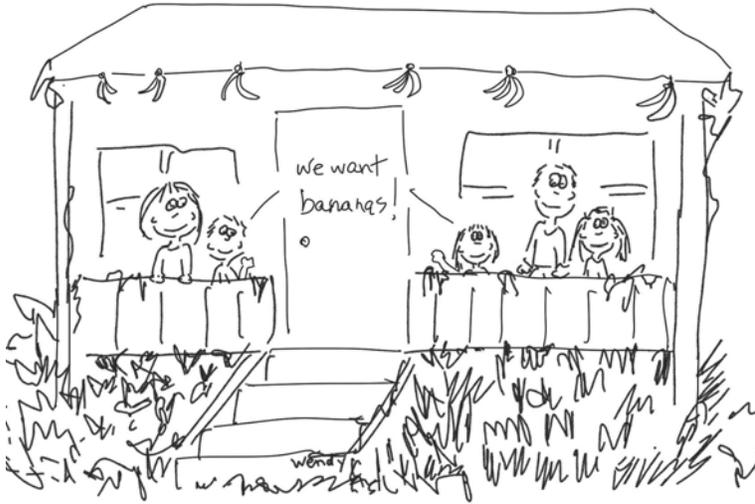
The call came from the famed Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, the only Rabbi I knew at the time: the author of several books I read while studying to convert to Judaism. He took time away from his writing, welcomed me into his home, checked me out, and then called Rabbi Buchwald: "Effie. Y'gotta meet this guy."

And so my life began.

Fast-forward ten years and I am living in Israel, married to my wonderful wife, Sophia, with three great kids, Rut, Yitzchok and Ester, living the life of observant Jews.

It all began with Rabbi Buchwald and the Beginners.

Rabbi Buchwald and the other Beginners were my first Jewish family. It was there that I was taught (cont. on p. 2)



MY ROSH HASHANA NARRATIVE

Rabbi Chaim Leiter

It always starts out as such an ominous and foreboding day. Each and every Rosh Hashana morning, as I wake up, I can practically hear the echoing voice of Rabbi Avrohom Powers, of blessed memory, my high school principal, as he walked through the halls of our dormitory, while declaring with great emotion, "Yom HaDin, Rabosai! Yom HaDin!" "It's the Day of Judgment, my friends! It's the Day of Judgment!" This pious man's reverent call to rouse us, not only from our physical sleep, but also our spiritual nonchalance, has shaped my feeling, thinking and behavior on Rosh Hashana mornings for decades. I am sure that it is, at least, partially due to that voice, and all the awe that it contained, that I make every effort to arrive at the synagogue earlier than usual on Rosh Hashana. After all, I am standing *in judgment*. My physical and spiritual well-being, as well as those of my loved ones, is being determined. The least that I can do is show up on time to make my case.

Then *davening* (prayer) begins, and with it, my attitude begins to change, or, should I say, *develops*. (cont. on p. 3)

ELUL: GETTING CLOSE TO G-D

Neil Baim

It was late September 1968, I cannot remember exactly the date, but I vaguely recall being awakened by a stirring in the hallway of our house in the middle of the night. Apparently, my dad was having a heart attack, but in those days the children in my family were never told details or specifics about serious matters. I was nearly eleven years old and found out only the following morning before going to school that dad had been taken to the hospital. I knew he had had a heart attack a couple years earlier, so frankly, I was scared. He was not in the house for weeks, while my life continued as usual.

I was attending the North Shore Hebrew Academy at that time. Since students were returning from summer vacation, we were mainly learning about the High Holidays of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. Having come from a non-observant family, my parents were traditional and wanted to give me the Jewish education they never had as children. At that time, I didn't know how auspicious this season was for Jews.

(cont. on p. 2)

A BEGINNER IN ISRAEL (cont. from p. 1)

...how to learn, how to pray, how to keep kosher, keep Shabbat, and observe all the wondrous and holy days of the Jewish year.

The Jewish New Year is always an awe-inspiring time. But this outgoing year, 5782, has been a very special year, for me and for many Jews who live in Israel. You see, this year has been a *Shemittah* year.

So, as we approach year's end, a *Shemittah* year here in Israel, I'd like to share some thoughts with you.

First: what is *Shemittah*?

Shemittah is like Shabbat for the land of Israel. A time when we are commanded to let the land rest. That means no planting, no pruning, no gardening or farming.

The effects of *Shemittah* are not widely felt in America. However, here in Israel, it is an everyday concern.

For one: there are no bananas.

Try explaining to three kids under the age of six why they cannot have the world's most popular fruit – why bananas are missing from store shelves and from their school lunches.

Come to think of it: Why are there no bananas?

MUSICAL INTERLUDE

“Yes! We have no bananas.”

#1 novelty song of 1923, Irving Cohn & Frank Silver (Jews!)

YES! we have no bananas; we have no bananas today.

Just try those co-CO-nuts,

Those walnuts and doughnuts,

There ain't many nuts like they.

We'll sell you two kinds of Red herring,

Dark brown and ball bearing,

But, YES! we have no bananas; we have no bananas today.

The truth is, there are bananas in the world. And there could be bananas in Israel--both on the farm and on store shelves.

But at the time of this writing, here in Israel, we have no bananas.

Why is that?

In the Torah (Leviticus/Vayikra 25:3-6) it is written that, for six years, we shall sow and reap our fields and gather in the produce, but on the seventh year, the Land of Israel shall have a complete rest – a Sabbath. It is called the *Shemittah* year.

That's right. The Land of Israel, like the Children of Israel, is blessed with the gift of Shabbat.

On Shabbat, we Jews rest. Why? Because *Hashem* rested, and commanded us to do as He did.

What happens when we do what *Hashem* does and says?

We come closer to Him.

What happens when we come closer to *Hashem*?

We become holier.

“You shall be holy unto Me, for I, G-d, am holy, and I have separated you from the nations to be Mine.”
Leviticus/Vayikra 20:26

As you know, the Land of Israel is the “Holy Land.”

When Jews come to Israel today – either for a visit or to live here and raise a family – they experience the holiness of the Land.

When Jews first arrived in the Holy Land, after trekking through the wilderness for 40 years, the seven-year *Shemittah* cycles began. With the addition of Jews, and Torah mitzvot like *Shemittah*, the land of Israel began to flourish – from a barren and desolate desert, to a land that flows with milk and honey...

...and trees and hedges and beanstalks that have taken over our front yard, and the giant creeper vine with purple flowers that have taken over our backyard (and the neighbor's orange tree), and the many many families of hummingbirds that are living in its flourishing foliage.

It is an open miracle that, in a land where it only rains two months a year, where, by the laws of nature, it should be a barren desert: when the laws of *Hashem* are observed – when the Children of Israel and the land of Israel – Holy People and Holy Land – come together to observe the commandment to rest – we flourish.

In fact, there are quite a few farmers, even those who are not religious, who claim that after observing the *Shemittah*, and allowing Eretz Yisrael to celebrate its Shabbat, the land responds by producing in heaps!

May the new year bring you peace, prosperity and holiness – and bring us all closer to *Hashem*.

Akiva Moshe ben Avraham lives in Bet Shemesh, Israel with his wife and three children.

ELUL: GETTING CLOSE TO G-D (cont. from p. 1)

My dad's hospitalization happened during the month of Elul (the final month on the Jewish calendar). According to teachings of rabbis throughout history, this month is the time to prepare for the upcoming “Days of Awe,” and the holidays of Rosh Hashana (the Jewish New Year) and Yom Kippur. The focus of this period is supposed to be on “*Teshuva*” which, in Hebrew, literally means “returning”. While some call it repentance, returning and reconnecting to G-d is precisely what is prescribed by the Jewish sages as a means to correct mistakes we've made, and raise ourselves to a higher spiritual level for the new year.

(cont. on p. 3)

ELUL: GETTING CLOSE TO G-D (cont. from p. 2)

As a ten-year-old boy, even in a Jewish school, my focus that September was probably more about who was going to play in the World Series. In fact, I can now remember the tumult in my home when Sandy Koufax wouldn't pitch in the first game of the 1965 World Series because he was Jewish! While not being religious, Koufax declared he could never pitch on a High Holiday. Now this was a teachable moment, and, the truth is, I learned about the significance of the Days of Awe from a baseball player rather than my fourth grade Rabbi! Clearly, if being Jewish was important, observing these holidays should be a priority, especially for a young boy whose religion had been baseball.

"WITHOUT FAITH ('EMUNAH') - A CONNECTION TO G-D, I DOUBT IF I'D BE HERE TODAY!"



Fast forward to September 2022, I know now why I am reflecting and remembering those particular Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur holidays. It's not because of Sandy Koufax.

In the past three years, I found and married my soulmate, but was immediately confronted with the most challenging health crisis of my life. After 45 years of battling the insidious Crohn's Disease, doctors uncovered severe fallout from living with the disease: a failing kidney, damaged intestines, and a tumor that turned out to be colon cancer. In addition, I also contracted COVID not long after recovering from an 8 hour surgery, weeks of chemotherapy, a temporary ostomy, two more follow up surgeries, and months of recovery. Despite these challenging medical issues, we were grateful that all of this was discovered and addressed as we "honeymooned" during lockdown. I was the same age as my dad was when he had the heart attack in Elul 1968!

There's no question that without a direct connection to G-d, I would have either had a breakdown or gone insane during the past three years. Having "*Emunah*" (faith) is a necessary ingredient in navigating both the mundane and serious issues of life. Without faith/*Emunah*, and my connection to G-d, I doubt if I would be here today.

I have been a card-carrying "*Baal Teshuva*" (literally "Master of Return") since the late 1980s after finding

Rabbi Ephraim Buchwald's Beginners Service at Lincoln Square Synagogue. My path to Torah and Judaism did have a jump-start in childhood, but it's never been a straight line. After years of learning and much trial and error, I understand now that Hashem wants us to get close to Him.

The Yom Kippur after my dad's heart attack, in synagogue late afternoon, my uncle approached me and asked wryly if my chest hurt from pounding it non-stop during the prayers. On Yom Kippur we ask G-d to forgive our mistakes and begin anew, and on that day I tried my best to ask for my dad's full recovery. Today, I understand that praying with intensity can move mountains because I've been there and done that!

This year, I pray that we all use this special time before Rosh Hashana 5783 to draw closer to Hashem and move mountains for a great year ahead.

Neil Baim, who is married with kids, and lives in Port Washington, NY, is still a "Beginner" in the pursuit of Torah and mitzvot. As Rabbi Buchwald always says: "We are all (still) Beginners."

MY ROSH HASHANA NARRATIVE (cont. from p. 1)

The prayers do not fit the script that I am *expecting*. We are being *judged*, we should be talking about sin, confessing our sins, beating our chests. But no! It is not there. You will not find it. In fact, it is *forbidden*, yes, forbidden to confess sins on Rosh Hashana! Likewise, since we are being judged, should we not be asking for what we need - for life, health, prosperity? But again, no! In the hours-long prayers that we say, there are few references to personal requests. And even those that we do find are late additions to the davening, not an essential part of it.

What I do find myself saying is, "*HaMelech!*" "The King!" Time and again, I am describing the grandeur, the omnipotence and the omniscience of G-d, declaring "*Avinu Malkeinu*, Our Father, Our King." And as I recite and sing the beautiful liturgy, which so poetically weaves history, philosophy and scripture together, I begin to appreciate His Eminence and involvement with humanity, and with me. I am inspired, my faith is strengthened and I begin to feel very comfortable. "But, wait!" I say to myself, "Don't lose focus! You are being *judged* today!" And it is then that the epiphany takes place. Indeed, what is my judgment all about? Since the makeup of our prayers is the key, and it is, for the prayers of each holiday express that day's essence, the judgment must therefore primarily concern how I crown *Hashem* as King over the universe, and most importantly, over me! Spending quality time at shul contemplating this,



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MY ROSH HASHANA NARRATIVE (cont. from p. 3)

...strengthens my devotion, and a certain confidence regarding judgment begins to take root.

There is more. As I continue to *daven*, another realization takes place. An additional theme in the Rosh Hashana liturgy is the longing for the future, when all of humanity comes to recognize G-d. "And *Hashem* will be the King of the entire land. On that day G-d will be One and His Name will be One." Here too I consider that if I am spending a good part of my day of judgment praying for the Messianic time, it must be that a significant aspect of that judgment measures how well I am doing in bringing about that era. "Could it be," I wonder, "Me? Little me? Expected to bring about *Mashiach*?" Am I understanding the implications of the *davening* correctly? Yes! Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, in his commentary to the Rosh Hashana *davening*, entitled "*Rinas Chaim*," says that each and every one of us has such a role. This is how he articulates it: "... it is Israel's historic function to bring creation to perfection and to nudge it towards ultimate fulfillment by means of their good deeds. This function is spread among all Jews up to the time of *Mashiach*. Each

ROSH HASHANA SERVICES



individual has a specific part to play. This is much like a single link in a chain of generations. Now, when a single link does not perform as it should, then there is a dislocation in the functioning of all the generations.

Therefore, each individual is considered within the context which must take past, present and future into consideration. This because his actions must be judged beneficial or harmful within the structure of sanctity which is built by the combined labor of all generations..."

That is heady stuff! By the time I walk out of shul on that incredible day, I am energized. I have revitalized my fealty towards my Creator, and I realize more deeply how important I am. "Today is the birthday of the world." Indeed, and with it, each and every one of us is reborn. We renew our standing and mission in the

world.

Best wishes for a wonderful Rosh Hashana and for a *K'tivah V'Chatimah Tovah!*

Chaim Leiter lives with his wife and family in Marlboro, New Jersey, and has served as the rabbi of Union Hill Congregation for the past 18 years. His weekly Divrei Torah can be viewed at unionhillcongregation.org.

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Illustrations by Wendy Dunn