

BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter
for Beginners,
by Beginners

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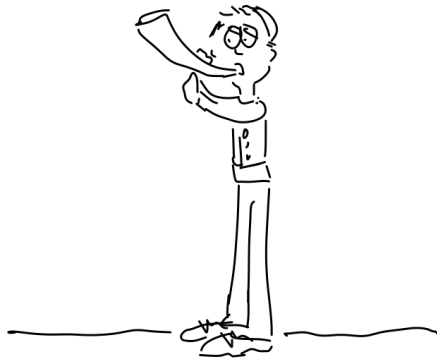
בראשית

CAN YOU CRY?

Rabbi Marc Mandel

When I was studying at the rabbinical school at Yeshiva University, I would try to spend Shabbat near Lincoln Square Synagogue so that I could watch Rabbi Ephraim Buchwald lead the Beginners Service. I firmly believed that this was an integral part of my rabbinic training. I wasn't the only one doing this. There were many people who attended this service to observe Rabbi Buchwald in action, because we knew that this was something unique and we wanted to see it firsthand.

Today, many synagogues have adopted similar services that utilize Rabbi Buchwald's approach and techniques. In educational circles these days, it is common to talk about "teachable moments." Teachable moments are spontaneous, unplanned situations that create a fertile environment for learning and understanding. There were many teachable moments at the Beginners Service. As we approach the High Holy Days, I believe we (cont. on p. 2)



"A TEACHABLE MOMENT"

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 (cont. on p. 3)

THE BEGINNERS SERVICE – A PLACE TO GROW JEWISHLY

Jeff Zulman

In the fall of 1989, a fresh-faced South African landed in New York to take up a position as an Associate at Goldman Sachs. Whilst a Brooks Brothers suit and a good haircut may have been enough of an identity for some, I felt I needed more validation, as a foreigner in a strange new land. I had never encountered "Modern Orthodox" Judaism before. I was a product of a traditional Orthodox family in South Africa – meaning that we kept Friday nights and major festivals and would not eat pork – but that was largely it. My travels to Israel had led to a short stint in a "Black hat" Yeshiva environment, and whilst that stimulated my interest, it did not feel like home.

Then I stumbled upon Rabbi Ephraim Buchwald and his Beginners Service which had begun at Lincoln Square Synagogue in 1975 but was still a sellout affair, often with standing room only. Here somebody was willing to take me by the hand (figuratively and literally) and unlock the code behind how and why we prayed and the significance and structure of the Shabbat and Yom Tov (cont. on p. 2)

CAN YOU CRY? (cont. from p. 1)

...are blessed to have many opportunities for teachable moments. It could be the sound of the shofar, or a powerful sermon, or the poignant words of the *Machzor*, or a walk to the water for *Tashlich*, that impacts us during the High Holy Days.

For me, as a young boy, my teachable High Holy Day moment occurred when I witnessed the *Chazan*, the cantor, cry during the *Mussaf* service on Rosh Hashana. Maybe it was because I had never seen an adult cry, or maybe it was because I was shocked to see someone cry so emotionally in front of hundreds of people, that I was so impacted as a youngster by this incredible scene. The Talmud in tractate *Rosh Hashana* tells us that the sound of the shofar resembles the sound of crying. It's ironic, but many people report feeling less sad after crying. Crying serves as a catharsis, allowing deeper emotions and true feelings to emerge into awareness. When we cry, we are vulnerable, but we also become more ourselves, more real, more genuine. Crying helps us to communicate what we're feeling in a way that language cannot. Sometimes people need to feel worse before we can feel better, and crying helps to get us there.

Besides being called Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year has several other different names. It is referred to as *Yom Hadin*, the Day of Judgment, *Yom Teruah*, the Day of Sounding the Shofar and *Yom Hazikaron*, the Day of Memory. Our identity and self understanding are dependent upon memory. While we can't live in the past, remembering the past can help us live in the present. Memory is often linked to crying. Without memory there can be no regret and no feelings of loss for the past or hope for the future. During the High Holy Days, we are encouraged to recall our memories so that we can move forward on our life journeys. Our memories are powerful tools that help us live in ways that we might never have imagined. They provide the fuel that enables us to make each year a new and better year than the one before.

Sometimes crying can be viewed as a sign of weakness, but the message of the shofar is quite the opposite. Our rabbis teach us that the sound of the shofar is intended to wake us up from our slumber so we should repent. "When the lion roars, who doesn't fear?" Perhaps we are the lions, and when we hear the sounds of the shofar and cry, we are not weak, rather we gain the strength of a lion enabling us to overcome our fears of the future and mightily succeed in building a better life for ourselves, our family and our community.

I would be remiss if I didn't take this opportunity to thank NJOP for all their support they've provided during my rabbinic career. No matter which country I serve as a

rabbi, NJOP is always there to help and support the work that makes serving the Jewish people so meaningful. It is through the creativity and vision of NJOP that every community rabbi and leader have the ability to accomplish and produce meaningful spiritual growth for the Jewish people, wherever they are. May *Hashem* bless NJOP and its staff, as well as all *Klal Yisroel*, the Jewish people as a whole with a *Shana Tova U'metuka*, a happy and sweet New Year.

Rabbi Mandel serves as the rabbi for Congregation Beth Tikvah Ahavat Shalom Nusach Haari located in Dollard des Ormeaux, Québec. Rabbi Mandel attended Yeshiva University for both his undergraduate studies and rabbinical school, and has served congregations in Tennessee, Maine, California and Rhode Island. While in Maine, he earned a Doctor of Ministry Degree in Congregational Life, and while working in California, he was the Hebrew translator for Steven Spielberg's Shoah Foundation. Rabbi Mandel met his wife Jackie at the J2 Kosher Pizzeria on Broadway in New York, and they have been blessed with wonderful children and grandchildren.

THE BEGINNERS SERVICE –

A PLACE TO GROW JEWISHLY (cont. from p. 1)

...services. There was no prerequisite to have a Jewish education, as mine ended largely at my Bar Mitzvah. On the contrary, this form of "outreach" spoke to exactly those with an appetite to learn, but perhaps not the traditional Jewish day school or Hebrew school education. I was hooked! Now getting to shul on a Shabbat morning was a race to ensure I could secure a seat. The only thing more coveted than that was a place at Rabbi and Mrs. Buchwald's Shabbat table.

That service and that community became the nucleus of my social life – Shabbat meals, visits to hospitals to perform *Bikur Cholim* (visiting the sick) and my dating life - all grew out of this Service. You can imagine my horror when I was asked to leave – I was forced to "graduate" into the Intermediate Service.

The grounding that I received at LSS and in the Beginners Service stayed with me through life and my postings to England and finally to Australia where today I am a full card carrying *Shomer Shabbat* Jew with a family of four. That goes hand-in-hand with running a finance company and participating in triathlons, enjoying the arts and embracing a wider world. My grounding of seeking to balance adherence to traditional Jewish laws and practices with engagement in the modern world found its source in a small room upstairs in the back of the Lincoln Square Synagogue. Today the *kiruv* (outreach) world is

(cont. on p. 3)

THE BEGINNERS SERVICE –
A PLACE TO GROW JEWISHLY (cont. from p. 2)

...alight as more and more people learn what it is to be a *Ba'al Teshuvah*. These initial flames were kindled for so many in the Beginners Services – revolutionary in its time and universal in its appeal.

I was 23 then. This fall, my daughter of 22 starts at Columbia University. Perhaps she too will venture down the Upper West Side of Manhattan and experience its diverse and vibrant Jewish community and spend a Rosh Hashana service sampling the 2023 version of what Lincoln Square Synagogue has to offer. Rosh Hashana is a time of renewal; a time to take the old and make it new again. I can't think of a more fitting place to do that than in the Beginners Services at LSS.

Jeff Zulman wears three hats (and most often a baseball cap or kippah): Managing Director of a specialist cashflow funder; Principal of corporate advisory firm; and founding partner in an American based Property Investment fund. But most importantly, he is a husband and father of four, a hapless chorister and hopeless cyclist.



I AM SORRY (cont. from p. 1)

...on Sundays and in the early 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

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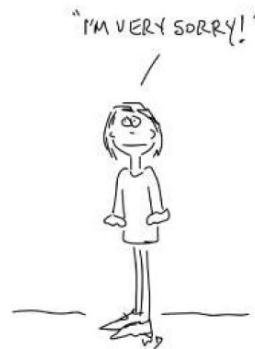


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I AM SORRY (cont. from p. 3)

...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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Words of Torah for everyone! To receive Rabbi Buchwald's exciting and provocative weekly e-mail message, please send an e-mail to: ezbuchwald@njop.org

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Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Larry Greenman 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: 1345 Avenue of the Americas, 2nd Floor, New York, NY 10105-0014 646-871-4444, e-mail programming@njop.org or visit www.njop.org.

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