

# BERESHITH

## "IN THE BEGINNING"

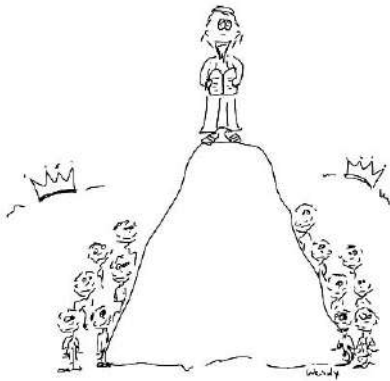
A Newsletter  
for Beginners,  
by Beginners

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# בראשית

"I HAVE GIVEN EACH OF YOU  
TWO CROWNS! USE THEM WELL!"



## THE SOUND OF SILENCE

**Rabbi Aaron Blackman**

There was once a man in the town of Chelm, who decided to go to the mikveh. The people in the town of Chelm were not known to be the smartest, so this man felt he needed to make sure that he would remember who he was after he went for his dunk and was not dressed. So he came up with the brilliant idea of tying a red ribbon around his hand. Upon coming up out of the mikveh he looked down, and to his shock and horror, he didn't see his red ribbon. Looking up, he saw a man who had a red ribbon tied around his big toe. So he rushed up to him and said, "I know who you are, but can you tell me who I am!"

The world has been bathed in an eerie silence which descended upon us between the holidays of Purim and Passover. When we all said, "*Mah Nishtana Halila Hazeh*," "How is this night different from all other nights?" the answer was so obvious that the question sounded rhetorical. In Jewish life, the prize

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## BAAL TESHUVA NERVES

**Louis Glinn**

Shavuot is an amazing holiday. Every Jewish holiday is amazing, of course, but it seems to me that Shavuot has a tendency to always take a back seat to Passover and Sukkot. Perhaps because it is only two days long, or maybe because of the all-night Torah learning sessions, it is exhausting, even under the best of circumstances. Maybe because we come off the high of Passover, and anxiously await Lag B'Omer, when we can shave and cut our hair, and then, all of a sudden, it's Shavuot!

For me, Shavuot is amazing for another reason. You see, I am a "survivor." Not the real kind, of course, but a much watered-down version. I am a survivor of a rare chronic condition that particularly targets a certain group of Jews. Fortunately, I've been able to overcome its symptoms most of the time, although I know it is always lying beneath the surface and can erupt at any time. I guess you could say it is a form of anxiety that I like to call "*Baal Teshuva Nerves*."

If you're a *Baal Teshuva* (a returnee to religious Jewish observance) you know the symptoms, because most of us are impacted. It's the terrifying feeling you get when you're asked to lead prayer services, when you're the only one saying the

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## A TIME FOR PUSHING

**Alex Scott**

My first year of business school was ending and I had just landed an internship on the brand team with Chapstick. This was a huge relief. You need a good internship between the 1st and 2nd years of business school otherwise your prospects for getting a good job after 2nd year are bad.

The internship was slated to start at the end of May and school ended in early May. So, I had a little over three weeks before I needed to be in New Jersey, which gave me time to travel. I was offered a trip to Israel – all expenses paid – that fit perfectly in this three-week gap. The previous year I had gone to Israel on Birthright and fell in love with the country. This trip also had traveling involved, but there were some classes that I had to go to. I liked learning new things, so I figured whatever the classes were, it was worth it for another trip.

When I got to the airport, I found out that the name of the organization managing the trip was Aish.

We landed in Israel, and almost immediately went to the *Kotel* as a group. It was clear that the *Kotel* would be a central focus. The hotel and all the sessions happened within

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A TIME FOR PUSHING (cont. from p. 1)...

10 minutes of the *Kotel*. The next morning, we had our first few sessions. They had classes focusing on the patriarch Abraham, understanding Shabbat, and why the Torah is true. We would have classes in the mornings for a few hours, and then go on some kind of trip in the afternoon.

The classes were good – much better than I had anticipated. The teachers were real, not forceful, and they taught the ideas in interesting ways. As the days went on, I found myself to be more interested in the classes than the trips. The teachers were open to questions and even encouraged them, which ran counter to my understanding of religion. In fact, most of the things I was learning ran counter to my understanding of religion. This forced me to just keep asking more and more questions. I wanted to learn more.

In the middle of the trip, I found out we were taking a break from traveling because of the holiday of Shavuot. We had already had a Shabbat, which was nice, but a little intense with all the singing. When I found out that the first night of the holiday would be a string of classes with many to choose from, I was excited. Actually, the goal would be to stay up as late as possible and just keep going to classes through the night. This felt like a little much at the time, but when was I going to be in Israel again with exposure to these interesting ideas? So, I pushed myself.

The classes at Aish were packed on Shavuot. People of all sorts of backgrounds came in, and Aish brought out all the big speakers. I probably went to the first two classes and it was already around 1AM. There were a few more classes scheduled and then I started hearing about going to the *Kotel* for the sunrise. I was pretty tired, but I already had a certain momentum with all that I was learning and with the energy in the environment. So, I thought, let me try one more. I went to another class and then another, and before I knew it, everyone was walking down to the *Kotel*. I wasn't sure what it was for, and I could barely keep my eyes open at that point, but I pushed myself to go.

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BAAL TESHUVA NERVES (cont. from p. 1)...

Mourner's *Kaddish* in a crowded synagogue, when you learn one-on-one with someone who grew up religious, or when you simply put your tallit over your head and it knocks your yarmulke to the floor. I'm not good enough...I know so little...I hope they can't see the neon "*Baal Teshuva*" sign flashing over my head...I know that they know I'm a *Baal Teshuva*...I obviously pronounced that word wrong! Someone who grew up religious would never have his yarmulke flying off his head!

Yes, we face this constant battle within ourselves, a struggle to feel like we fit in, while, at the same time, assuming everyone else looks down on us. If it's not the ones who grew up religious, then it's the non-religious relatives whom we "betrayed" when we went over to the "dark side." Balancing the feelings of inadequacy against the accusations of betrayal feels like walking the tightrope under the big tent without a safety net below.

Shavuot is emblematic of this dichotomy in my life. Almost 20 years ago, at the urging of our 6-year old son, we decided to move to a Modern Orthodox community to "become more religious," which, not surprisingly, is really hard to do when you have no idea what that really means. But we knew we were moving there to start a religious life. It didn't matter that we were moving on Shavuot, because we weren't becoming religious until we actually moved in, so it must be OK.

Over the years, with tremendous help from God, we have continued to learn and grow (and, yes, we came to realize that moving on Shavuot was not such a great idea), until it became clear that we needed a new community that could adequately support what became our increasingly traditional lifestyle. So ten years ago we moved again, to a wonderful community that is filled with those who grew up religious, and *Baal Teshvas* from all areas of the religious spectrum living in harmony and mutual respect.

In our former community, Shavuot was more about the Torah lectures than the one-on-one learning, and it's easy to hide your inadequacies in a lecture. So, I spent the first several years of my religious life doing my best not to snore during the lectures. In my new community, lectures are offered, but the vast majority of my synagogue learns with a learning partner on Shavuot night.

My fear was palpable, as I tried to figure out how I could participate without that stupid neon sign blinking over my head again. Armed with my ArtScroll Talmud (God should shower infinite blessings upon ArtScroll every day until the end of time), and my sons with their regular all-Aramaic/Hebrew Talmud, we strolled into the crowded synagogue ready to get down to the serious business of learning Torah all night.

Then it happened! The Talmud drops to the floor, and the yarmulke falls off the head when picking it up. I know I shouldn't feel this way, but I was so relieved to see it happen to the FFB (*from* from birth-religious person) sitting in front of me. That Shavuot, was the first time I really sat down to learn seriously and it was the first time in my religious life that I

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BAAL TESHUVA NERVES (cont. from p. 2)...  
realized, that underneath the exteriors, we are really all tied together by the same thing.

God doesn't judge us by where we started, He judges us by where we are going. My rabbi always told me, "You have to always be learning. If you're learning, you're growing. If you're not learning, you're going backwards."

We all share the same Torah and we learn it in our own way and at our own speed. The only one who cares that I'm a *Baal Teshuva* is me, so if they don't care, then I think I will stop caring too.

*Louis Glinn lives with his wife in Highland Park, NJ. They have two sons who are married and learning in kollel, a daughter in seminary, and a one year old grandson. Louis is Senior Vice President and Chief Risk Officer for a bank in New Jersey and learns Torah every spare minute he can.*



THE SOUND OF SILENCE (cont. from p. 1)...  
student in a class is not the one who is able to dictate back the information he learned in the class, but the one who asks the sharpest question, uncovering the deeper message behind the teaching.

I would like to share with you a question asked by a great leader of pre-war Jewry, the Chofetz Chaim. In his later years, young yeshiva students would sleep in the home of the Chofetz Chaim to attend to his needs. One evening, there raged a powerful thunderstorm outside, and the student watched as the Chofetz Chaim rose and went to the window and whispered over and over in Yiddish, "What does My Father want, what are You trying to tell me?" I think this is a question that is presently on everyone's mind in one form or another. Why has the entire world suddenly been incapacitated by a tiny microbe?!

I would like to offer an answer that has been in my heart and on my mind for the past few weeks. According to our sages, the last time the entire world was silent was on the day of Shavuot, when the Torah was given at Sinai. In the Biblical story of creation, on the sixth day of creation, the Torah uniquely adds the definite article, "the" sixth day, to teach us that the entire world was waiting for, and depending upon, the Jewish people's future acceptance of the Torah at Sinai on the sixth day of Sivan.

The world was created with a special purpose that was to be revealed through the Al-mighty's sharing his instructions to humankind (the Torah) through the Jewish People.

Hence, the world fell silent. It was the pivotal moment for humankind. Would the people of Israel accept the responsibility of bringing God's will into the world?

The Torah states that all the Jews at Sinai received two crowns at the time they accepted the Torah. The nature of these two crowns is strange, because it would appear that the purpose of God's revelation was to cause the Jewish people to crown Him. Why were the people crowned? There is a beautiful teaching from Rav Tzadok HaCohen, that these crowns represent the unique greatness that God revealed to each and every Jewish person. Not only did each and every one of us hear God's voice speak "out of the fire" and reveal His will, but simultaneously, He revealed to us our own essence and greatness.

The Talmud teaches, that whenever there is a gathering of 600,000 people, such as there was for the first time at Mount Sinai at the giving of the Torah, a special blessing is recited: "Blessed are You the One who knows all secrets." Each Jew contains a "secret," a "crown," a unique quality of greatness, which cannot be found in anyone else to the same degree or same manner. Hence, the teaching in the Talmud, that the first human (Adam) was created alone, unlike all the other creations, is intended to teach us that we are obligated to see the entire world as being created solely for ourselves. This teaching does not mean that all the roads are ours and the world should bow to our desires, but that the world is waiting for us to discover our crown, to develop it and bring it out into the world, which is desperately lacking what we, and only we, can contribute.

This idea can strike a person as being very odd. After all, we live in a world where we are told that "we are but dust in the wind." No matter how talented we may be, there is certainly always someone with greater talent who excels over whatever talent we might possess. In order for us to discover that unique crown that was revealed to each of us at Mount Sinai, requires something which no class, no website can teach us--the awareness of our unique soul.

Each and every one of us is an "only child" to our Creator, and He is waiting for us to discover our own personal crown and wear them. The only way to find the crown, is like at the original Shavuot, through silence. Our challenge is to dig deep.

"Silence like a cancer grows," only to the one who does not know his own crown, and secretly thinks, that he has none. Unlike our friend from Chelm, we must not so easily forget who we are.

*Rabbi Aaron Blackman served as a Rabbi in London, UK, and has been in Jewish education for 30 years in the high school setting. He is currently serving as a Hospice Chaplain in Baltimore Maryland where he did his training at Johns Hopkins Medical Center.*



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A TIME TO PUSH (cont. from p. 2)

Down at the *Kotel*, I was exhausted, and it was crowded. You could barely move. Everyone was wearing their *talleisim* (prayer shawls) and holding *siddurim*. For me, it was another “experience,” so I pushed myself. At some point, everyone became completely quiet and the sun came up over the top of the Wall. It was an incredible feeling to just be part of that environment, even if I had no idea what was going on.

Back in the US, over the next couple of months, I kept reflecting on the idea of pushing oneself. Going a step beyond one’s comfort zone. I would be in a situation where I didn’t want to go to an event or class or meet with a rabbi, and I remembered what it was like to push myself...that on the other side of the pushing was something meaningful, something truly worth it.

Shavuot is the time for pushing oneself. It’s the day when we stood at *Har Sinai* (Mount Sinai) and heard the words of

*Hashem*. We didn’t know what we were getting into. There is a Midrash that says that *Hashem* had to hold a mountain over our heads to make sure we would go through with it. There’s another Midrash that says that the reason we eat dairy foods on Shavuot is because once we came back from *Har Sinai* where we received the Torah, none of our meat was kosher, so we ate dairy food. We obviously weren’t ready, and didn’t fully understand what was coming, but we pushed ourselves. We knew that on the other side of that push was another level, a higher gear.

Shavuot is a commemoration of *Hashem* giving us the Ten Commandments, but it’s also a commemoration of that moment when we weren’t ready, and we pushed ourselves anyway.

*Alex Scott lives in Edison, NJ with his wife and children. He is the director of an Ambulatory Surgery Center in Northern NJ.*

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**בראשית**

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