

BERESHITH

"IN THE BEGINNING"

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for Beginners,
by Beginners

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בראשית

A HUG THAT MADE ALL THE DIFFERENCE

Rabbi Baruch (Brian) Thau

In 1993, I was the Associate Rabbi at Congregation Ohab Zedek (OZ) on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. On *Simchat Torah*, I stood in front of a crowd of about one thousand people and said, "Wow, this place is empty!" I was told that my observation was ludicrous because the shul was packed. I responded that while true, there are many people who are not with us celebrating *Simchat Torah* because we have not invited them to join us.

I explained that many of us live in buildings with thousands of Jews who are unaffiliated and none of us even knocked on one door to invite these fellow Jews to enjoy the beauty of Torah and Judaism. Why is that? In my opinion, the reason we have not encouraged other Jews to join us is either because we do not really believe that Judaism is *emet*, truth, or that we do not have proper *Ahavat Yisrael*, a love for our fellow Jews!

I encouraged everyone to knock on their neighbors' doors and invite them to OZ's special NJOP program, Turn Friday Night into Shabbos-TFNIS in two weeks, on October 29, 1993 (The program is now known as NJOP's Shabbat Across America and Canada)!

My request caused quite a stir as people heatedly debated my suggestion, which is exactly what I had hoped would be the result of my sermon.

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THE ULTIMATE CONNECTION OF TORAH

Rabbi Daniel Wolfe

Rabbi Paysach Krohn tells a beautiful story about a Jewish-American medic who was helping Holocaust survivors immediately after World War II.

The medic would go from survivor to survivor and take care of each one's medical needs. One day, toward the beginning of his day's work, he approached a survivor who insisted that the medic get him a *Bava Kamma*, a tractate from the Talmud. The medic looked at him inquisitively and responded, "I would love to, but I am a medic. I give medical attention to all those in need. To get you a *Bava Kamma* would require that I stop work for the day and seek out a *Bava Kamma* in the ransacked yeshivas or synagogues." To this the survivor told him, "The Nazis took everything from me. They took my family, my home, my entire life. The last thing I was doing before they took me away was studying *Bava Kamma*. It is all I have left. Please, just bring it to me." Touched, the medic closed his office for the day and set out to find a copy of this famous Talmudic tractate.

Rabbi Krohn explains that this is what King David was referring to when he wrote in the Book of

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GROWING READY TO RECEIVE

Risa Goldstein

After seven years with a growing family in a two-bedroom townhouse, my family and I moved into a house in our suburban town. Among the benefits of more space, more privacy and a great new location, I was also looking forward to having my own piece of planet Earth for gardening and enjoying nature.

The first spring was glorious, as surprise-after-surprise from the previous owners sprung out of the ground. First were the sprigs of hyacinth--the first taste of spring. The maples stretched magenta leaves over our front and side yards like a red carpet. I knew I had azalea bushes--but who knew they would flower in an eye-popping shade of hot pink? The lilies were gorgeous three-toned purple princesses. The rhododendron unfolded next-colossal blossoms of deep purple and white. The roses by the picture windows were pink and red. The biggest surprise was the peonies--my favorite flowers--which were hidden beneath the ground all winter. They started as determined stalks that looked startlingly like burgundy asparagus before filling in with rich green leaves and then the beloved bobbing balls of pink and white. The last of my little lovelies was the pear

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"I HAVE NEVER MET A JEW WHO PAID IN ADVANCE FOR A MEAL, KNOWING THAT HE WOULD NOT BE EATING!"



GROWING READY TO RECEIVE (cont. from p. 1)

...tree. I knew it was a pear tree because the flowers that bloomed in the month of Nissan had morphed into tiny green orbs that grew steadily throughout the summer. I am not sure which I enjoyed more that year--the actual flowers, or the process of unfolding discovery of my new floral bounty as spring flowed into summer.

Oh that summer! The Northeast was dealt the hottest summer on record since the dust bowl era--and I didn't have central air conditioning. With a newborn and twin toddlers, it took us a very long time to settle into our home, which needed a lot of retrofitting in order to work efficiently. All of this taxed both my brain and my nerves. Every day was a struggle of putting one foot in front of another. I knew that it would pass, that I would feel more in control of the day to day--someday. I just didn't know when. I *davened* (prayed) that it would be soon. Ironically, even the September weather was extreme, with only eight rain-free days in the month. It was close to Rosh Hashana, and I was over my fairytale fantasies of gardening because I knew that I would never have the time or the *koach* (strength).

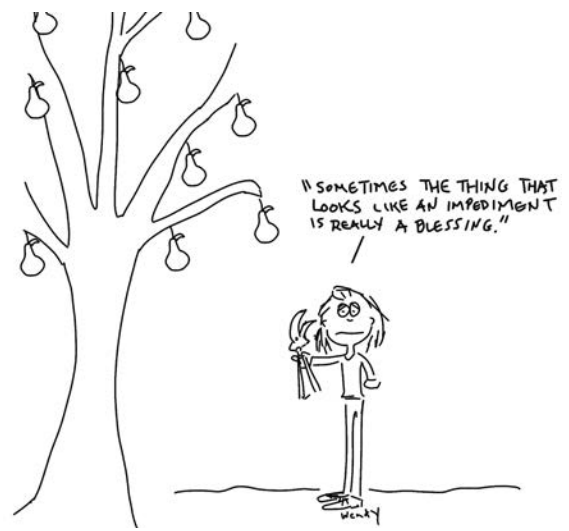
In the fall, the pears were at their peak. However, unlike all my spring discoveries which filled me with delight, these pears were a massive disappointment. I had fantasized about fruit pies and crumbles eaten in the sukkah, made from our homegrown, organic, locally-sourced, cruelty-free pears. Alas, the cruel joke was on me. The pears were hard, dry and occasionally wormy. They littered the driveway, and, unless they were scooped up and disposed of in airtight cans, the pears' decaying smell of cider vinegar beckoned flies to a veritable smorgasbord that I could live without. Needless to say, this tree and its pitiful fruit did not fit into my game plan.

There is a *halacha* (Jewish law) that one may not cut down a living, fruit-bearing tree. Unimpressed, I sought dispensation and was thrilled to find out that by selling the tree to my non-Jewish gardener, I could thereby disown it and he could remove it [but be sure to ask your own local rabbi, or read on, before trying this at home]. But when it came to actually doing it, I had second thoughts. I talked it over with my husband. Maybe we would save the couple hundred dollars and wait until next year to deal with this irksome tree. At least that was the pretext.

The next spring, in the Hebrew month of Nissan, my family and I dutifully made a blessing on our blooming fruit tree [birkat ha'ilanot, a once-a-year mitzvah], without the zeal from the year before, knowing that this tree only produced duds, and was living on borrowed time.

Time passed. We had another hot summer, but somehow we had settled into a groove. We even had a chance that summer to go to the mountains for a cool summer getaway. When we came home, a surprising sight awaited us. The pears on our tree looked.... normal! Like Whole Foods, farmers market, quite perfect and delicious. We plucked a few and were able to make a shehechyanu, blessing of thanks for having the opportunity to partake of the new fruit. Hey, that's the second mitzvah that this tree had brought! We enjoyed our 20 or 30 pears

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THE ULTIMATE CONNECTION OF TORAH (cont. from p. 1)

...Psalms, "The Torah of G-d is so perfect and complete that it soothes the soul."

Here was a man who had lost everything in the most devastating manner possible, and yet the only thing that he wanted was to connect, once again, to the holy Torah.

On the holiday of *Shavuot* we celebrate the precious gift that G-d has given us. The Torah is a constant wellspring of strength and hope throughout the often arduous journey of our lives.

Three years ago, I moved from Jerusalem to upstate New York. While I definitely appreciate upstate New York, particularly the bone chilling winter, there is certainly no comparison whatsoever to the spirituality and connection to spirituality that I felt in Israel. In fact, upon landing in the Holy Land on a recent trip for a mere twenty-five hours to celebrate a family *simcha*, a joyous occasion, I took an intense, deep breath of Israel's pristine, holy air and honestly felt that had I turned around and flown home immediately, the long flight would have been worth it.

When I moved to New York, I consciously realized that I needed an extra boost of spirituality to help me remain a growing, inspired Jew. I therefore took it upon myself to wake up very early each day before synagogue to study some Talmud. I will be honest; sometimes it wasn't easy. One particular morning, I was staring groggy-eyed at a particular passage in the Talmud (in the tractate called *Shabbat*), and asked myself if it was really worth it. I told myself that it probably would be healthier for me to go back to sleep for another hour. But, I resisted the urge and continued my studying.

Arriving at a new chapter only a few minutes later, I realized that I did not know very much about it. As I began reading the lengthy chapter introduction of the English edition on the Artscroll iPad app, I quickly realized that this coming chapter would be about why we light Shabbat candles. I was following along on my iPad when, suddenly, the power in my house went out, and all the lights went out. Being so early in the morning, it was still pitch black outside. After about five seconds of confusion and wondering how to proceed, I realized that I could continue studying from my iPad, which was conveniently shining as brightly as before.

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Shortly thereafter, I came across the following words (exactly where I had left off!): “It is difficult for someone to enjoy the Sabbath when his house is dark and he cannot see where he is going or what he is eating...” My mouth dropped. I couldn’t believe it. The summary was describing that one of the reasons that we have Shabbat candles is for the often taken-for-granted idea that we want to see what we are doing! I couldn’t believe how G-d was putting on a show for me at just that moment to give me a real life example! When I was discouraged and tired, and wondering if my waking up early was worth it, the Torah consoled me and gave me new strength.

As a rabbi, I have a fair number of people coming to me depressed, anxious, angry, or sad about how their life circumstances are unfolding. In response, I often open a volume of Torah for us to study together and witness this same sense of consolation. Studying Torah together enables those who are challenged to walk away reinvigorated, inspired and uplifted.

On *Shavuot*, we celebrate how G-d chose the Jewish people, out of every nation on the planet, to convey His message and to inherit His perfect Torah. G-d willing, by celebrating the Torah through studying it for many hours over *Shavuot*, we can tap into the Torah’s unparalleled words of inspiration.

May we always remember that no matter what we go through in life, the Torah will always be there for us, ready to give us the boost that we so often need.

The article was originally published in the May 2015 Bereshith.

Rabbi Danny Wolfe is the Co-Director of JewPro, the Young Professional Division of The Jewish Experience in Denver, CO. Rabbi Wolfe recently became a "rabbi in residence" for Shabbatot at the Shaarei Simcha Minyan as part of BMH-BJ.

A HUG THAT MADE ALL THE DIFFERENCE (cont. from p. 1)

Two weeks later, on the Friday before the event, a young man walked into my office and asked, “Are you Rabbi Thau?” I answered that I was. He preceded to hand me a check for \$15 for the TFNIS dinner but explained that he would not be attending. I asked the young man his name. He said his name was David. “David,” I said, “I have met a lot of Jews in my life: many who come to eat but do not pay, many who pay and really eat, but I have never met a Jew who paid in advance, knowing that he would not be eating!”

I asked David to sit down and tell me why he wasn't coming to our event. He said, "Well, I live in Alabama and I am here for a short time working as an attorney on a criminal case. I have never in my life been to an Orthodox shul so I guess I don't feel comfortable, and I don't know what to expect. Also," he continued, "my neighbor kept knocking on my door and inviting me to join him. But he was really nice - and because I wanted him to stop knocking on my door - I agreed to attend!"

I am still not quite sure what made me do this, but I got up, walked around my desk and put my arm around David's shoulder and said, “David, you will thank me for the rest of your life if you come tonight.” I repeated this two more times. Was I praying? Hoping? Then he went home. I had no idea whether he would return that evening.

David did come back! He told me later that the hug around the shoulders that I had given him made him reconsider his decision.

David loved the experience. At the Shabbat dinner he met other Jews and realized that they were people like himself, but who kept Shabbat. He was delighted to learn that many were outstanding successes in the secular world as well. He enjoyed the evening so much that he came to the OZ Beginners Service the next day, modeled after NJOP’s Beginners Service, and he came to my house for Shabbat lunch. There too, he saw a family singing *zemirot*, Shabbat songs, sharing Torah thoughts and celebrating the beauty of Shabbat.

David ate at our home for 11 Shabbatot in a row! After the 11th week, David decided that he wanted to put on *tefillin*. Then he wanted to make his kitchen kosher. And the more Torah he learned the more eager he was to take on more *mitzvos*.

A few years later I stood under the *chuppah* with my colleague Rabbi Allen Schwartz, Senior Rabbi of OZ, David, and David’s bride, Elizabeth Kramer. Interestingly, Elizabeth had grown up in an Orthodox family. Her father was rabbi of a shul in Montreal. Her grandfather, Rabbi Simon Kramer, had been my parents’ rabbi at the Hebrew Institute of University Heights in the Bronx!

Fast forward to the present, and David and Elizabeth have five beautiful children. They live a life filled with Torah and are an integral part of the Orthodox community in Atlanta.

As for David himself, he is a successful lawyer. His clients include Former President, Donald Trump whom David represented during the President’s impeachment trial. David was the lawyer who decided to not participate in the trial on Shabbat and covered his head to make a *bracha*, a blessing, when he drank water during the proceedings. His name is David Schoen, and, in my mind, he has made a true *kiddush Hashem*, he has truly sanctified G-d's name!

Did that one hug around the shoulder really have an impact? I think it did!

Rabbi Baruch (Brian) Thau serves as the Executive Vice President of Bayit V'etikva, House of Hope Foundation. He has been a dynamic leader in Rabbinics and Jewish Education (both formal and informal) in synagogues, schools and camps for over 20 years.



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GROWING READY TO RECEIVE (cont. from p. 2)

....and shared some with neighbors. We learned to get rid of the fallen, damaged pears as quickly as possible, which kept pests away. I studied up on pear-tree management and realized that a tiny bit of pruning could help improve the yield, so I pulled out my garden shears and strategically pruned away the unproductive branches.

The next year brought a huge bumper crop of pears. It was bountiful enough for me and my little helpers-in-training to make pear sauce, pear crumble, pear and almond tart and still have more pears left over for lunch boxes. We left a ladder in the yard for neighbors to come by and pick a few pears on their own and make a *shebechyanu* and enjoy. Who knew this erstwhile oppressive and burdensome tree would become such a gift and bring us such joy and richness?

Shavuot is a holiday where we see that patience is needed to achieve big things. It is the culmination of a promise made over 400 years earlier when Abraham was told by G-d that his children would be enslaved, then freed and made into a great nation. The slavery that followed almost completely broke our national will, but G-d brought plagues that were a sign not just to the Egyptians but also to the Children of Israel that the Master of the Universe was in charge of their fate. They slowly began to believe in the possibility of salvation. But, could they really

believe? After all, after 210 years of servitude, they lived and thought like slaves.

In the blink of an eye, the Children of Israel were brought out of Egypt and their enemies were drowned in the sea, at which time extreme joy, inspiration and the heights of prophecy were experienced by even the lowliest handmaiden. But, this experience was fleeting! They were not yet ready to receive the eternal Torah directly from G-d's mouth. There needed to be an additional seven weeks of spiritual preparation before the nation of Israel could receive the gift that G-d wanted them to have. *Shavuot* reminds us to take the long view. Slow, incremental changes make a difference. Our patience and small efforts add up to big things. They can even prepare us to help reveal real greatness in this world.

Sometimes there will be trials. Sometimes the thing that looks like an impediment is really a blessing. But the lesson of *Shavuot* is to get ready! Prepare! Don't lose hope and think that tomorrow will be the same as today. Because when your bumper crop comes, you don't want to miss it!

The article was originally published in the June 2016 Bereshith.

Risa Goldstein hails from Birmingham, Alabama and has transitioned from life as a Georgia attorney to that of a real New Jersey housewife.

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Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Larry Greenman and Rivka Bornstein 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 info@njop.org or visit www.njop.org.

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