

# BERESHITH

"IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter  
for Beginners,  
by Beginners

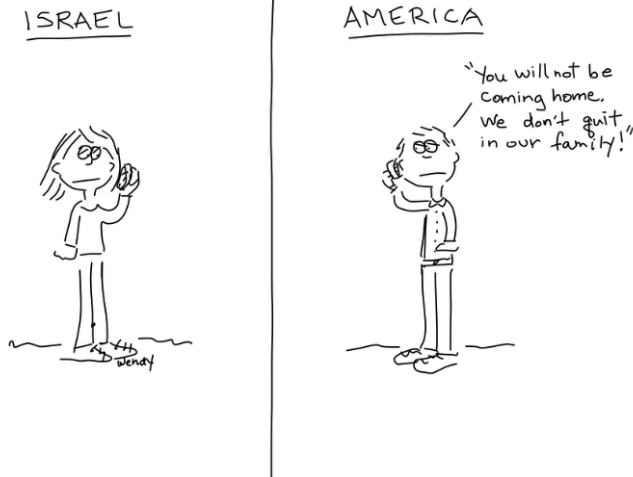
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# בראשית

## A LESSON IN GRIT

Rabbi Yehoshua Lewis



We are taught in *Pirkei Avot*, Ethics of the Fathers, "*Lo Habayshan Lamed*" - The meek student, who is scared or embarrassed to ask questions, will never become a scholar.

Becoming a scholar is predicated on a desire to learn and the humility and persistence to find answers. This was true of the great Rabbi Akiva; The *Midrash* (Avot d'Rabbi Natan 6) tells us that he was willing to learn the Hebrew *Aleph-Bet* with children when he decided to begin his Jewish education at the age of 40. We see this in *Megillat Ruth* as well. Despite her mother-in-law Naomi's efforts to dissuade her, Ruth responds, "...your people are my people," and joins the Jewish community without friends or means, because she knew it was best for her in the long run. This is especially true for *baalei teshuva*, those who return to the observance of their Jewish faith. While they often have achieved high levels of professional or academic success, they nevertheless find themselves

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## SHAVUOT MEANS CHANGE

David Pine

I wasn't supposed to go to Yeshiva.

My wonderful parents, Harry and Rose Pine, of blessed memory, were not religious growing up in the 1930s. Like so many children of his generation, my father went to Talmud Torah to study for his Bar Mitzvah, and once it was over, so was his involvement with Judaism. By the time I was of school age, we were comfortably ensconced in a Long Island suburb, and I was at kindergarten at East Meadow Public School.

Then something happened. My father's father, Max passed away. My father decided to say *Kaddish*, the Mourner's Prayer, for him at the local Conservative synagogue. Going daily to Temple awakened in him a long-dormant feeling toward Judaism as he mourned for his father.

At the same time, I was in public school, reciting the Lord's Prayer daily and bringing home Christmas decorations in December. I know I'm dating myself here, but this was several years before the Supreme Court's 1962 decision striking down prayer in the public schools. The Plaintiff, Steven

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## ASCENDING G-D'S MOUNTAIN WITH SUGIHARA

Dr. Kristina Kayla Cooper Rosen

As we approach the wonderful holiday of Shavuot, filled with the optimism and the re-blooming of Spring, sunshine, hope and cheesecake, I remember again how meaningful this holiday is for converts. In so many situations, when I have only been able to play the bystander in the oft-played game of Jewish Geography, it brings a smile to my face and, yes, a measure of comfort to know that on that first Shavuot, even MY soul was there at Mount Sinai.

Of course, this is a time when we also hear the story of Ruth—as a convert, this is one that is often revisited and referred to. I have to admit, in the many tellings and readings, I always wondered, why is it that Boaz helped Ruth, while a closer relative walked away?

This brings me to the story of Chiune Sugihara.

The vision of a grand musical project commemorating the life of Chiune Sugihara, that I undertook and recently became a reality, was first conceived when I learned of the incredible story of this righteous and humble Japanese man. It

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was a profound realization to know that were it not for his heroic actions of saving thousands of Jewish lives by issuing transit visas against the orders of his government, my husband and our three beautiful children would never have come into existence. My husband's father, Irving Rosen, was the recipient of Sugihara's visa #1628, which ensured his survival. Thus, from the ashes and horror of the Holocaust, he was able to build a family and life.

Given my Japanese ancestry on my mother's side, I understand how deeply Chiune Sugihara would have had to draw from within himself to defy his superiors in a culture where this would go against all of the social mores that culture encapsulates: on the one hand, it was an outstanding act of courage; on the other, in the ways of the Samurai Warrior Bushido code, it was also the simplest act in the world—to just do what is right.

Having chosen to become part of the Jewish people, I also recognize the value of *hakarat hatov*, the recognition of good deeds. I was inspired to recognize this courageous man the only way I know how, through the transcendence of music.

Of course, I understood that when this passion and determination gripped my heart—to bring this incredibly important story forward to a broad audience who had never even heard of Chiune Sugihara, a newly-commissioned modern work of classical music featuring a solo cello, which is my instrument, was not the most obvious choice. However, I knew that with that right combination of personalities, talent, resolve and luck, this absolutely could turn into a successful and meaningful project.

Ever since I was a newly registered student at The Juilliard School, I played a great deal of new music. It became one of the grounding forces of my education, and then career, alongside chamber music and the regular rigors of the standard cello repertoire. I found that exploring and discovering the new worlds of sound and creativity alongside diverse musical personalities, both invigorating and inspiring.

I also come from a family of artists. My father is a wonderful pianist who was studying at Juilliard when I was born, and my mother is a violinist who was acting as concertmaster of the American Symphony under Leopold Stokowski at that same time. My Japanese grandfather, Tomojiro Ikenouchi was a famous composer and perhaps the most influential teacher of composition in Japan to date. His father was the great Haiku poet, Takahama Kiyoshi generally considered to be the greatest Haiku poet of the 20th Century. Even if I have zero talent for composing new works of music or words myself, creativity was something that I was quite used to being around and had a great appreciation for.

In short, although a book, movie or play might seem a more natural way to tell the story of Chiune Sugihara, I thought that music, the universal language, featuring a cello, the closest instrument to the human voice, was in fact, the perfect way to do it and, in fact, was the only way that I could do it.

I was lucky enough to interest one of the legends of the contemporary classical music world, Edna Landau, the founder



Japanese "Schindler" - Chiune Sugihara Public Domain, Unknown Author

and former director of IMG artists, and the manager of such artists as Itzhak Perlman, Josh Bell, Hilary Hahn, Lang Lang etc etc. In our first substantial conversation, after ascertaining that she really might take the project on, I had to swallow very hard and divulge what I knew might be a project killer. I said "Edna. I am so incredibly excited that you are interested in this project. It is like a dream. I have to tell you though, and I know this may make this impossible for you, I am Shabbat observant, so I am unable to perform on Friday nights, many Saturdays and on the major Jewish holidays." Edna, not one prone to histrionics, laughed a deep belly laugh, for a very long time. When she finally could speak, she said. "Yes dear, so am I." I found the ONLY other person in the classical music industry that is *Shomeret Shabbat*! In fact, Edna used to be a member of Lincoln Square Synagogue where her son was even Bar Mitzvahed. Once she agreed to take the project on, with her standing in the industry, I knew that my dreams of making this a truly global project could fully be realized.

With Edna on board, we were miraculously able to convince Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem, alongside The American Society of Yad Vashem to agree to become the global lead commissioners of this work. This was incredibly important to us, as we wanted partners who could not only elevate the project and provide needed funds, but also help bring it to a wider, relevant audience. They were really our dream partners, and when they agreed, it really seemed like there was no stopping the project from happening.

Of course, at this point, we were missing perhaps the most important part of the equation. We needed a composer to WRITE the work. This was not as easy as it sounds. There are many wonderful composers out there, and in fact, I have been lucky enough in my life to work with quite a few of them. We needed someone, however, who was not only a great composer, but someone who has the respect, recognition and reputation in the music world such that orchestras around the world would want to program their work. It also had to be someone who would feel connected to the project. For example, a composer who writes in a style highly influenced by jazz or pop music, no matter how great, would not have been appropriate for this work.

I have often been asked, why did you not just curate a

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Engel, was a Jewish parent in Long Island who objected to his son saying the Lord's Prayer in public school. Sound familiar?

My father was incensed. "Christmas decorations! In my house!!" Somehow, he made peace with it for a while. But when Easter came around and I brought home colored Easter eggs, he had had enough. "That's it!" I remember him saying, "We're putting him in Yeshiva." My mother and father took me to a small building in West Hempstead, the Hebrew Academy of Nassau County (HANC), which was in its seventh year.

Over time, through the influence of my rabbis and teachers at HANC, I became Torah observant and persuaded my parents to become more strictly kosher and Shabbat observant (it helped that I was an only child, and they did everything I wanted). My parents were one of the founding members of the Young Israel of North Bellmore, the first Orthodox shul in the area, and I was its first Bar Mitzvah boy. The Yeshiva training in HANC, and then later in Yeshiva high school, changed the course of my life. I have had the great *zechut* (privilege) to give back, and have been a volunteer teacher for NJOP for the past twenty plus years.

In the 1950s and early 1960s, Nassau County was virtually devoid of Torah education. The predominance of non-observance among American Jews continued to prevail during the early post WWII years, as second and third generation families relocated to suburbia. While many Jews of my parents' generation affiliated with Orthodox shuls and sent their children to the new Yeshiva Day Schools that were sprouting up, lax observance of Shabbat and kosher laws in the home continued.

Over the years, thanks to G-d's help, the growth of Torah Judaism over the decades has proliferated, both on Long Island and in other suburban areas throughout the country.

When our ancestors were standing at the foot of Mount Sinai on Shavuot thousands of years ago, we received the Torah directly from G-d, and then through His servant Moses. The experience changed not just their lives, but turned a ragtag group of former slaves into a nation whose faith, adherence to Torah and closeness to G-d has survived unfathomable tribulations throughout millennia.

We never know what G-d has in store for us or what will change the direction of our lives. But if we imagine ourselves standing at Mount Sinai every day, we will always have a chance at a new beginning.

*Chag Sameach.*

*When he is not teaching for NJOP, David Pine is an attorney and Administrative Law Judge for the NYC Department of Education.*



at the beginner level as they start to learn Torah. And like Rabbi Akiva and Ruth, it's their tenacity that makes them heroic.

Julia is one such example.

Julia, whose parents are first generation Russian Americans, was one of six women who went on the Jerusalem seminary tour that we led this past August and was inspired to continue beyond the three-week trip. Julia enrolled in seminary and arranged to do her clinical internship for her PhD program remotely while taking Torah classes. Finding the beginner level class too basic, she switched into the higher-level class. After her first class, she approached the teacher with some questions, and the teacher's response caught her off guard.

"You know Julia, the questions you have are very fundamental, and were dealt with at the beginner level. Maybe this is not the right class for you?" Not the response Julia was expecting!

She left the class deflated and called her father that night to tell him she was coming back home. She had come all the way to Israel to have her questions answered, and instead of getting a warm reception, the teacher was annoyed that she was asking them!

Her father would have none of it though. "You will not be coming home," he told Julia firmly. "What you need to do is research each of your questions to the best of your ability and find out what has been written about it already. Then, if you have more questions, approach your teacher and ask for time to speak. We don't quit in our family."

Julia stuck it out and was happy she did. She was able to explore all her questions, many of them with that very teacher who almost caused her to leave. And her learning experience didn't end with seminary. Since returning in December, Julia and her father spend hours each week researching the *parsha*, the weekly Torah portion, together and discussing it with one of Mesorah NJ's staff. She has become a more educated, inspired and committed Jew, with her father's persistence to thank!

*Rabbi Yeboshua Lewis is the Founder and Director of Mesorah NJ (www.mesorahnj.com). Originally from Great Neck, NY, Rabbi Lewis learned in Ohr Hachaim in Queens, where he received his semicha, and in Bais Medrash Gavoha in Lakewood, NJ.*

## 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](mailto:ezbuchwald@njop.org)

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program of Japanese and Jewish music that could represent the people and action contained in this story?

I have, in fact, put together a few programs like that. I had a larger ambition though, which was to help in the creation of a work substantial and great enough that it had the potential to last for decades to come—perhaps more, because most unfortunately, Sugihara's story of compassion and what the actions of one person doing the right thing can mean in this world, will need to be told over and over again. In today's days of chaos, unrest, the rise of totalitarian governments and mass displacement of refugees and war, his story has never seemed more relevant. My hope is that this work will find its place in the standard orchestral repertoire and will thus have a life far beyond when we are still here.

This is obviously a heavy load for any composer to carry, but in Lera Auerbach, I believe we found the perfect creator. Lera and I were at Juilliard at the same time, but we had never worked together. I have, however, for many years, followed and admired her work. Internationally renowned, Lera has the unique ability to write beautiful works of incredible ingenuity and multi-layered brilliance that also greatly moves audiences. She also has a strong connection to the subject, as she is not only of Soviet Jewish heritage and her parents had to escape persecution between various different factions, but she was born in Chelyabinsk, a city in the Urals bordering Siberia in the former Soviet Union. It was a town that the Trans-Siberian railway ran through, the same train line that took refugees with Sugihara-issued transit visas to freedom.

A big question for this work was always, how would Lera be able to weave two such diametrically opposed cultures into one musical work. The truth is, Japanese culture and Jewish culture, especially Israel's, where I reside now, and where many of the Sugihara refugees ended up, are often polar opposites. Whereas, in Japan, the entire society is set-up to observe etiquette, politeness and respect of protocol, Israel's is often built around innovation and disruption. As someone with a foot in each culture, I can assure you it can be a treacherous, if not, at times, quite an amusing juxtaposition. How Lera would make these two work together, was something I awaited with bated breath.

Brilliantly, she came up with the concept of using the Japanese art form of Kintsugi to bring all of the pieces together. Officially titled *Symphony No. 6 for Cello, Choir and Orchestra*, in "Vessels of Light," Lera has woven Jewish dialect into her libretto

based on Yiddish poetry. Psalm 121, which is known as "The Travelers' Psalm," only exists as a "Silent Psalm," fractured and broken. The solo cello (with the poem "Violoncello" by Dovid Hofsteyn) serves as the binding glue to repair these broken pieces.

The cello is the equivalent of the golden resin kintsukuroi (金 金繕い, "golden repair") used in Kintsugi, the Japanese technique of repairing broken pieces of pottery and making something even more beautiful than before. The musical representation of this incredible concept is something of awesome beauty. We presented the world premiere in November of 2022 in Kaunas, Lithuania—the very town where Sugihara signed the life-saving visas. Yad Vashem Chairman Dani Dayan attended the performance together with many dignitaries and members of the diplomatic corps from around the world. It was deeply moving for me to wander the very streets where my father-in-law once trod to find a way to escape certain death, and where almost everyone who did not escape, perished. Having the first performance in Kaunas was an unforgettable experience.

After the premiere, the world tour kicked off in 2023 with the Prague Radio Orchestra in the Czech Republic. Our next stop was a sold-out performance in Carnegie Hall on April 19th and in LA on May 18th. We have many more concerts on the books in cities such as Warsaw, Mexico City, Leipzig, Berlin, Dresden, Brussels and many more all the way through the 2025-2026 season and beyond.

I feel so lucky, as it really had been only a dream, and now, incredibly, it is a reality, that we are able to bring this project to fruition and to celebrate the preciousness of life by shining light on an ultimately very simple act of Chiune Sugihara.

So, the question again is, why is it that Boaz helped Ruth, while a closer relative walked away? I believe, like Sugihara, because simply, it was the right thing to do. What were the results of their actions? In the case of Sugihara, there are now over 100,000 descendants of Sugihara refugees—so very many wonderful and beautiful lives. In the case of Boaz? We had King David, and soon we shall have the Mashiach.

May their courageous actions continue to inspire us all.

For more information on the project go to [www.thesymphonyforsugihara.com](http://www.thesymphonyforsugihara.com).

*Dr. Cooper is a world-renowned Concert cellist and is a visiting-professor at Tel Aviv University. She is also the vice chair of the America Israel Cultural Foundation. She recently conceived of, and performed as soloist in, the US premiere of Lera Auerbach's Symphony No. 6 'Vessels of Light' in Carnegie Hall, to honor the heroism of Chiune Sugihara, Japanese Vice-Consul to Lithuania during World War II.*



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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](mailto:info@njop.org) or visit [www.njop.org](http://www.njop.org).

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