

בראשית

Vol. XIII No. 2

BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

Kislev 5760/December 1999

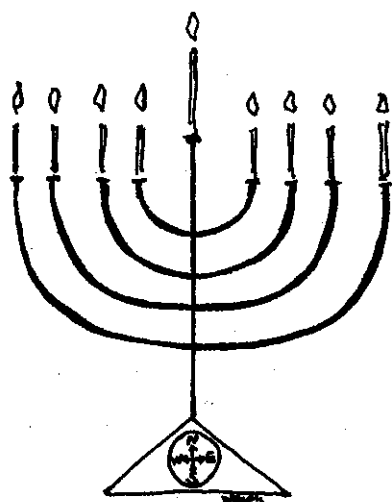
THE SOUTH SHALL RISE AGAIN

by Rabbi David Schwartz

One ritual that has always united our splintered people is that when we pray, we all face Jerusalem, the metaphysical portal through which our prayers ascend to heaven. For most of our history this has meant facing east during prayer. Yet, the Talmud teaches us that "One desiring wisdom should pray tilting southward and your sign is...the Menorah was in the south." When the Temple stood in Jerusalem the Ark containing the two tablets was situated in the inner sanctum at the Temple's western end. Still, our tradition views the Temple's Menorah, abutting its *southern* wall, as the conduit of Divine wisdom.

When developing a program for beginners' prayer, the essential question is: How does one *begin* to pray? Our needs are so comprehensive and our desires so ambitious that we often don't know *where* to begin. On those rare occasions when we successfully prioritize our "wish-list" we feel vaguely unsettled about our personalized "top ten." In the communal solitude that we call prayer, we encounter the timeless and the transcendent. During prayer, we forsake human interaction and the competitive pettiness that fuels conspicuous consumption. The notion of squandering our private audience with the Almighty by begging for the corner office or an uptown look at downtown prices evokes a sense of existential

(cont. on p. 4)



"WISDOM COMES FROM THE SOUTH"

LET US GO TO THE HOUSE OF THE LORD

by Linda Leshnik

One thing I was always good at, actually better than almost all of my friends: listening. When Carol sat down next to me at the table in the company cafeteria, I was certain that I wouldn't finish the last few pages of my novel during this lunchtime. Carol had just come back from a vacation in Morocco and was clearly eager to talk about her adventure. I put the book away and started doing what I do well, though to tell the truth, without much enthusiasm. After all, exotic dining doesn't mean much to me, but that is Carol through and through. It didn't take long for me to realize that Carol had a much more serious matter on her mind.

She had had a long night with just snatches of sleep on the flight to London, where she changed planes and continued on to Casablanca.

The Moroccan sun, more dazzling than hot, stayed with Carol and her husband throughout the 90 minute trip to their hotel in the rented car, making the drive more tiring than necessary. "I'm getting old," Carol thought at the registration desk. "A shower and a bed is all I care about right now. Then I'll be ready to take all those colors, unaccustomed smells and bustling crowds." The hotel room was tiny, but it overlooked a small courtyard with a century-old Moorish fountain and filigree

(cont. on p. 2)

TOWARD THAT "GREAT SHABBAT"

by Shayna Medwed

It's Shabbat, and I'm walking Hannah Greenfest, Israel Bonds' first \$100,000 fundraiser, to her afternoon class. Her 80-year-old hand holds my elbow as we walk up the long Azza Street hill in the sun. Suddenly, I don't feel her grasp. "You know, darling," I hear as I see her straighten up with an ice cream wrapper in her hand, "I can't stand garbage on the streets of my Yerushalayim." And this is why I come to her. Not for the gefilte fish she makes every week - ten kilos from the shuk to grind and cook for her "six *mishpoches*" (needy families), not for the vegetarian dishes which she "just creates," not even because she is the mother of our close friend in America. I come to Hannah Greenfest to sit in the lap of my history, to catch some sparks from the fire of her spirit so that I will also bend for the garbage on these holy streets.

"I was the last of nine children. The only one left. My brothers would throw me out of the basement in Russia because they were afraid I'd tell the police about their Zionist meetings. But, by a child, something remains. I remember them singing *Leshanah Haba B'Yerushalayim* (next year in Jerusalem) and *Hatikvah*. They never lived to even know that we have Eretz Yisrael.

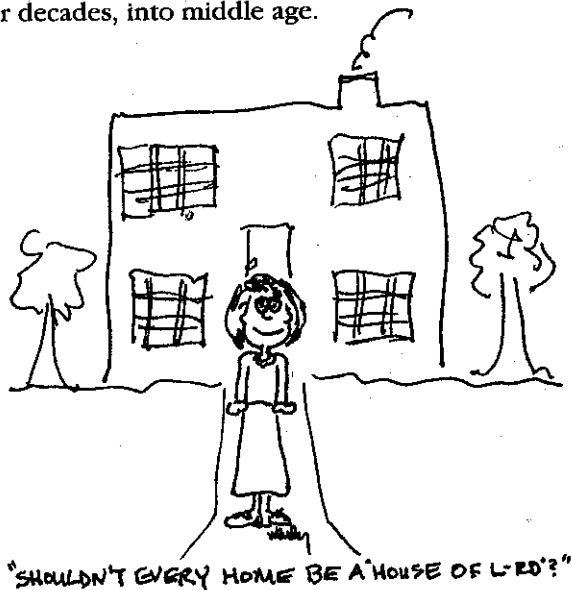
(cont. on p.3)

LET US GO (cont. from p. 1)... stone masonry that spoke to Carol: "This is why you are here." Along the old, crumbling wall, vines made their way up to the second floor and little colorful flowers populated the cracks. The fountain itself was surrounded by a ring of blue flowers. "I'll have a closer look at all this after my nap," Carol thought and fell asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.

She woke up with a start. The voice that spoke in her dream was still resounding in her ear. What was it? The words were vaguely familiar and so were the rhythms - something from the Bible.

She tried to remember the context. She was rushing to a meeting in Manhattan, irate drivers were honking their horns and streams and streams of people flowed past, jostling her. Suddenly, the scene changed - Carol was in a clearing in the forest and a voice called out: "I rejoiced when they said to me 'Let us go to the House of the Lord.'"

Carol had never been, as she calls it, "religious." Her parents had no interest in Jewish observances, although they did send her to a Jewish Sunday school, more as a concession to convention than anything else. For Carol, they were seven wasted years of Sundays; whatever flames of piety might have been burning in her young breast flickered and died from want of nourishment. More and more, the secular world exerted its pull. After graduation, friends and career, mostly career, absorbed her. No time, no interest in Shabbat, and G-d was far away. She had made her choice, and this was the way she had lived for decades, into middle age.



Carol arose quietly and picked up her wrist watch from the dresser: 11 pm. She had slept right through dinner time. Her husband was still fast asleep, but she felt wonderfully rested and unusually alert. She sat on the window sill, looking down onto the courtyard, allowing the soft warm breezes to pass through her hair. The moon was full and its yellow-green light gave the flowers, ancient walls and oval fountain an eerie appearance.

"It's time to make a reckoning," she thought. "My hourglass has more sand on the bottom than on the top now. How much room have I made in my life for G-d? Not even a crack as small as those in the walls of the courtyard. It's as if He weren't there at all for me. But He is, and tonight, somehow I know it." "I REJOICED WHEN THEY SAID TO ME, LET US GO TO THE HOUSE OF THE LORD." Where does that phrase come from?

Was it something Carol had buried deep inside her for decades, now making its way into her upper consciousness? But the source was not important, it was the message that demanded attention, and it was crystal clear: "Let us go to the House of the Lord."

At this point in her account, Carol was positively radiating excitement she spilled a glass of ice tea, making a soggy mess of her tunafish sandwich. "I saw scenes from my past flash by like slides in a projector that had become manic," she continued. Her childhood, school years and a period as a teenager when, for a brief moment she had opened the door to G-d, only to close it again quickly in order to get on with the serious business of life. The slide projector clicked faster and faster. She married, no time, no place for children in her pursuit of a career and the quest for happiness and material security. "And what does that all amount to", she asked herself, looking out onto the Moorish courtyard? "It's a fool's game, always supposing that happiness is just around the corner. Life is here and now, and the bottom of your hourglass is filling up very quickly. You've always given too much attention to your bodily needs and consistently neglected your soul."

"Let us go to the House of the Lord." The path was always there, Carol had just not seen it. She would change that now.

Carol immediately began looking for the source of her text when she was back home. An acquaintance, Yeshiva trained, told her it was most likely a line from a psalm. It was, indeed, one of David's: the Song of Ascents, Psalm 122. Carol recited it to me in its entirety with the intonation and shadings of a skilled actress. Her recital was in English of course, but she laughingly said, that at her birthday party next month - she'll have the Hebrew down pat. And of course, the party won't be on Saturday, as planned, but on Sunday instead.

"Does that mean that you're seriously going to become Shomer Shabbat?" I asked Carol. She replied that she liked the idea, although she wasn't sure what that involved.

I was silent for a moment, debating with myself how to best continue our discussion. I knew that I couldn't provide satisfactory answers to all the questions that would pop up if we began to go into practicalities. There was also the issue of kashruth. This was no longer a casual lunchtime conversation; it was a call for help. I told Carol about NJOP and the excited look that lit up her face reminded me of my son's expression when, on his twelfth birthday, he woke up to find his own stereo next to his bed.

Some days later, I called Carol to ask how things were going on her homeward journey. She had enrolled in one of the National Jewish Outreach Program Hebrew study programs and was marking her calendar with all kinds of Jewish learning events. Living in Manhattan, as she does, presents her with opportunities unmatched elsewhere.

I had to ask her one question, though. What about Bernie, her husband of twenty-five years? A journey of the kind that she is undertaking has all sorts of implications for him and their relationship. Carol told me that they had spent a lot of time in the last days discussing the matter. Not only does he support her fully, he is also quite ready to brush up on his very rusty Hebrew.

Linda Lesbnik is a freelance journalist for European newspapers and is a member of the Beginners Program at Congregation Bnai Yeshurun/Jewish Learning Experience in Teaneck NJ

TOWARD (cont. from p. 1)... And I live here in Yerushalayim. My sons, let them live and be well, want me to come live with them in America. I tell them, 'Don't ever mention that to me again.'

You know, darling, after Hitler killed my loved ones, I was very depressed. It wasn't just six million - to me it was the ones who gave me life. My brother stopped going to school so I could finish gymnasia in Russia. If they ever saw me reading a book that was not right for a little girl, they explained so beautifully why I shouldn't read it, that to this day I could never look at such things.

"My Leo, my oldest son, was in the Navy. He used to send me his checks. So hoping and praying he'd come home alive, I put them in the bank. I wanted him to finish college. When he came home, he refused the money. 'Mama,' he said, 'when everyone was gambling, I wanted you to have it. You couldn't even give it to me for a wedding present. Now why don't you buy yourself a new fur coat?' Well, you know darling, when you are depressed, a new fur coat means nothing. I said, 'Look Leo, I have an old fur coat.' 'Then Mama, buy new furniture.' Again, when you are depressed, furniture means nothing. So he got mad at me. 'Mama, you're giving up life!' 'No' I said, 'being that we now have Israel, I'd like to go and see it' 'Mama,' he said, 'take that money and go.' 'That I will'. I didn't even know it was in me to say. It just came up out of me, just like that.

"I took my Irale, who was four, my baby, and the first boat that left America for Eretz Yisrael, we were on. I was here for four months. I walked all over this land, looking at every new little tree that was planted. And I'm telling you there was nothing here. What we have today could not be without the help of the Almighty - absolutely impossible. We are a little country surrounded by enemies. What Israel has accomplished in the last 40 years is a miracle from G-d.

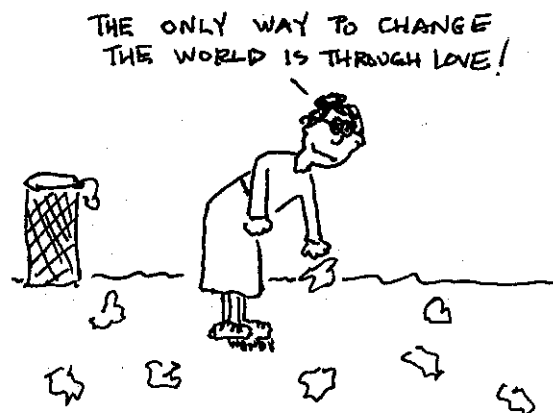
"You know, I received Israel Bonds' first 'Aishes Chayil' Award in the United States. Not just Brooklyn or Manhattan. I raised \$100,000 in bonds for Israel. When it came time for the award, they looked into the records. It was tied between me and a very wealthy woman. The bonds she sold were big ones. Mine were from \$25 to \$50. People didn't have the money to pay all at once so they would give me \$5 a week. I was here six more times, especially for Israel's Bar Mitzvah and for Chai, her 18th birthday. After the sixth time I said to my Jack, let him rest in peace, that's it. I don't want to go back to America. He always encouraged me in my work. We were married fifty years. Our last fourteen years we spent together in Yerushalayim.

"And now, we Jews are fighting among ourselves, and some of us want to make movies in Yerushalayim on Friday night. Shabbos? In your own home you can do whatever you want. I will not interfere. But my G-d, in Yerushalayim you should have Friday night movies? Once a week you cannot skip? This hurts me very much. I'm very aggravated about it. How dare you complain and make such a fuss. After struggling thousands of years for Yerushalayim - who do you think gave it to you if not the *Ribono Shel Olam (G-d)*? A handful of people could accomplish this themselves? When I was here the first time we had nothing. No food, no water, I lived on bread and tea for four months.

"For us Jews to fight among ourselves, it's a terrible thing. You don't throw stones on Shabbos. This is how to teach people about the holiness of Shabbos, by throwing stones at them? This reminds me of a story, I don't know if I ever told

you. The rabbi who I knew as a child... he knew my father...he was in shul and a man came to say *Kaddish*. He didn't go inside. He's standing by the door and the *shames* walks over to him and says, 'Please come in.' He won't move, and he says to the *shames*, 'I want to say *Kaddish*.' So the *shames* goes to the Rabbi and tells him that there's a man over there who wants to say *Kaddish* but won't come in.

"So the Rabbi walked over, I knew him very well, since he ate by us in Brooklyn for a year after his wife died until he remarried. So as soon as he gets to the door the man says, 'Rabbi, I smoke on Shabbos.' The Rabbi made believe he didn't hear, and he asked him to please come in. 'But Rabbi, I smoke on Shabbos.' This went on about ten times. Finally the Rabbi took him by the arm and brought him in. He helped him with his *Ma'ariv* (evening service) and he helped him with his *Kaddish*. After he got through davening he said, 'Look darling, I'll ask you now, for the honor of G-d and for the honor of Shabbos - stop smoking one day. It will be good for your heart. If you can stop altogether, it would be even better.' The way he put it to him, beautifully, not throwing stones or saying get out of here. He spoke to him like a father to a son. And you know, darling, he became a religious man. He wouldn't touch a cigarette, and he wouldn't work on Shabbos. He was a tailor and he used to open his shop on Shabbos. But since then, he didn't. Why? Because of the way the Rabbi spoke to him, what he put into him. He gave him warmth, beauty, he gave him G-d in the true sense. We need to teach Jews about Shabbos.



After *seuda sblisbit*, the sky turns dark. The first stars of the week appear. Someone delivers a check for Alyn Hospital, for "the crippled children who I must help." The neighborhood cats come to the door for their scraps of gefilte fish. I watch Mrs. Greenfest clean her candle holders and place fresh candles inside, "For next Shabbos, may we all live and be well." And this is why I come here. Not for the *mitzvah* of comforting a widow. Not because I miss my own parents, or because I know she misses her sons. I come to Hannah Greenfest to watch her clean her candlesticks. To see her 80-year-old fingers place in fresh new candles, as she waits for the Great Shabbos. May she and all of us live to speedily see it come.

Editor's note. Hannah Greenfest passed away last year in her beloved Jerusalem. This article was originally published in 1988 in Counterpoint magazine, and is reprinted with the permission of Hannah Greenfest's family.

THE SOUTH (cont. from p. 1)... nausea within us. Benevolent monarchs try to provide all the unique needs of *their* kingdom, and the sweet singer of Israel, King David was no exception. David the King taught *his* subjects how to pray. In Psalm 27 he says: "I have asked *one thing* of the Almighty, It I will request: That I dwell in the House of the L-rd all the days of my life to behold His sweetness and tour His Palace." Rav Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin questions the apparent redundancy. Having said that "I have asked (for) one thing" why repeat "It I will request"? Just go ahead and ask for your "one thing." The *Kohen* of Lublin answers as follows: The sad truth is that most of us would sooner tour Buckingham palace than the L-rd's. If we were left with one solitary request, it would be to hit the Powerball or be in on the I.P.O. of the next Microsoft. We figure that *then* we could dwell anywhere *we* pleased "all the days of our lives." King David, aware of our human frailties, including our warped priorities, teaches us that the first, nay, the *one* request a Jew makes is: Let me pray for the right things, teach me to yearn for gold and not for glitter. My one request is that "*Oh'ta Avvabkeish*" that It (an inner spiritual life) be what I ask for.

Chanukah celebrates Jewry's triumph over Greek Hellenist cultural imperialism. It is our national declaration of independence from oppressive foreign mores, value systems and longings and its *Leitmotif* is the Menorah. This is only natural, because a Jew prays for Torah enlightenment towards, and through, the Menorah. What could better manifest a potent, liberated, Judaism ascendant than the conduit of Torah wisdom itself?

The contemporary cultural tide of Shul abstinence attests to our "problem" with prayer. Even at well attended services, prayers are often leadened with hollowness and rote. Among the many reasons for these phenomena is that we sense something awry with our prayer priorities. We wish that we aspired to spirituality yet we know that, for the moment, we don't. What we may not realize is that our lack of appetite for spirituality is a symptom of a profound alienation from our "better halves."

If we felt the Zohar's teaching that "the people of Israel and the Torah are one," on a gut level, our prayer priorities would change dramatically. It is a most basic human need to gain self-awareness and to realistically assess one's strength and potential. In the current state of metaphysical affairs we are like some schizoid Clark Kent who, to the best of his knowledge, has never met Superman.

Things weren't always this way. When Solomon succeeded David as king, G-d told him to request whatever he desired. Wisely, he prayed for wisdom knowing that everything desirable is subsumed within wisdom. Through his G-d granted Torah wisdom, he attained the pinnacles of wealth, fame and power as well.

In the Chanukah prayer addendum, *Al Hanisim*, we thank G-d for the miracles He performed for us "In days of yore and in our own time." The hallmark of sincere gratitude is the *quid pro quo*. We can best demonstrate our gratitude by performing a miracle of our own. This Chanukah we ought to gaze into our Menorahs with Solomonic wisdom. In the warm glow of those pure, sanctified and enlightening lamps, sleep spiritual colossi dreaming of being aroused from their overlong slumber. In the upward vaulting flames, we recognize a metaphor for the yearnings of our "heart-of-hearts," and in the shadows that it casts, we see our own reflections. Then, eyes misting over and images running together, the miracle of miracles occurs: In a brilliant flash, we find new clarity and we know that all our visions have fused into one. Seeing, *really* seeing, the Menorah, we realize how all that is good, all that we desire, inheres in the light of the Torah.

A one day oil supply burning for eight. The miracle of the lights was about transcending finite limitations. So, in its highest sense, is Jewish prayer. While directing our minds and hearts to the east, we must allow the priorities of the Menorah to well up within us. The south must rise again.

Rabbi David Schwartz is on the Rabbinic staff of the Jewish Heritage Center of Queens and Long Island. He currently leads the Sunday Beginners Service at the JHC's Kew Gardens House Headquarters.

Illustrations by Wendy Dunn



Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Rabbi Yitzhak Rosenbaum, Beryl Levenson and Amy Gugig of the National Jewish Outreach Program, Inc. 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 programs of the NJOP, please write or call: 485 Fifth Avenue, Suite 701, New York, NY 10017, (212) 986-7450, e-mail info@njop.org.

Readers: This is your newsletter, and we'd like to hear from you. Article contributions are always welcome.



200 AMSTERDAM AVENUE
NEW YORK, N. Y. 10023

DATED MATTER