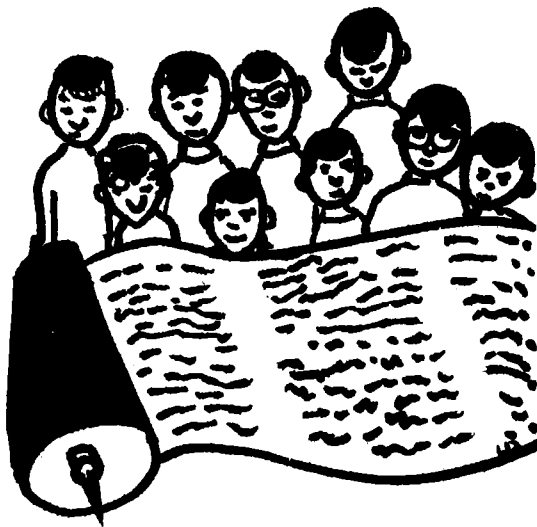


בראשית

SHAVUOT: EXPERIENCING THE TORAH

by Chaim Berger



The holiday of Shavuot has arrived. The late spring air is warm and the world is in bloom. Against this backdrop of physical beauty, we prepare to celebrate the momentous event that gave the Jewish people its inner, spiritual beauty: G-d's revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai--over three thousand years ago--on Shavuot. As we describe it in the holiday liturgy, *z'man matan Torableinu*, Shavuot is the time of the giving of our Torah.

Shavuot brought about the goal of the Jewish people's Exodus from Egypt fifty days earlier on that first Passover: the revelation of the Torah. Our ancestors truly first became a nation at Sinai. The Torah has, through the ages, defined our existence as a people.

As we know, Jewish traditional life is full of beautiful rituals, actions, objects and words which combine to evoke thoughts and feelings, to teach us a lesson or a concept. And now, as we stand at the threshold of the two-day Shavuot holiday, we look forward to performing the holiday ritual which symbolizes the Revelation of the Torah.

(cont. p.2)

ABRAHAM'S TENT IN FLATBUSH, N.Y.

by Hank Bayer

On this first anniversary celebration of the Young Israel of Flatbush Beginners Service, we read the Torah portion which describes how Abraham invited three strangers (in reality angels) into his tent. All Abraham promised was a place to rest, and a bit of dry bread to break their fast. This does not sound like the paradigm of hospitality which we thought Abraham was. Fortunately, the story does not end there. Instead of the small amount he promised, Abraham prepared a feast. Food and drink, enough to feed an army. Abraham believed and practiced the old Jewish saying "Say little, do much." Abraham's generosity and hospitality teaches us that we must share our bounty with others, and make their lives as pleasant as possible. Hospitality is one of the hallmarks of the Jewish people. This theme of caring and sharing was the impetus for starting the Beginners Service at the Young Israel of Flatbush, and is now fully realized at this synagogue.

Further on in the weekly portion we read how Abraham succeeded in convincing G-d to preserve the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, or, at
(cont. p.3)

HANDWASHING AND OTHER RITUALS

by Marjie Ordene, M.D.

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"Holding the cup in your left hand, pour the water over one side of your right hand, then the other side. Then take the cup in your right hand and pour the water over your left. Now dry your hands and recite the blessing. After that, return to the table and do not speak until you have said the blessing and eaten the bread. During the meal keep your conversation away from weekday talk or gossip. Stay in the Sabbath mood."

As the Rabbi gave instructions to a group of twenty students on Friday night, I couldn't help but recall another group of students receiving similar instructions one weekday morning a decade ago. "Holding the scrub brush in your left hand, scrub your right arm and hand with overlapping strokes until every millimeter of skin is covered. Then place the brush in your left hand and do the same." No mention was made of saying a prayer or observing silence, but ten years later, I found myself thinking, it would have been appropriate
(cont. p.3)

SHAVUOT (cont. from p.1)

Surprise! There is none. There is no prescribed symbol, no ritual which specifically commemorates "the time of the giving of our Torah" at Mt. Sinai. Nothing to resemble the *seder* (commemorative meal) and matzah of Passover, say, or the Chanukah *menorah* (candelabrum) which we light to celebrate that holiday's events. Why not?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the prolific commentator and leader of nineteenth century traditional German Jewry, explains that the Torah cannot be reduced to a once-a-year symbolic ritual. The Torah permeates Jewish life all year long, day by day. Like the human soul which permeates the human body and is not carried by one organ, the Torah, he says, is the soul of the Jewish people. Let's put the thought another way. Shavuot celebrates an ongoing experience of the Jewish people, an experience which only started at Mount Sinai, the experience of the Torah. It is ours to experience every day.

Despite the absence of a commemorative ritual, one of the beautiful traditional Shavuot customs is to study Torah at the synagogue throughout the first night of the holiday. Let us look in on what is going on in the synagogue on this night and reflect a bit on the experience of the Torah. Imagine that we are there...

The lights of the synagogue stand out against the late night darkness. As we enter, we may find some people reciting the *Tikkun Lel Shavuot*, a special collection of Torah excerpts, compiled into a Shavuoth night liturgy; a way to sample the entire Torah in one sitting. But, we also find people studying whatever aspect of the Torah they choose. We may find people bent over a volume of the Talmud, or listening to a talk about a passage in the *Chumash*, the Five Books of Moses, or studying a portion of the Prophets. We recall the *Talmud's* teaching which says that the covenant of the Torah was made between G-d and not just those who stood at Mount Sinai, but also all future generations of Jews to come. We are, each of us, party to the covenant of the Torah. Shavuot is our time to relive our acceptance.

Throughout the night the studies continue. People come, some people go home to sleep, and some stay on for the night. The mood in the synagogue is festive, the atmosphere informal. The flow of ideas and discourse is energizing. As the night enters that very dark time before dawn, we can feel the magic of the pre-dawn stillness. We imagine what it must have felt like to be camped at the foot of Mount Sinai, waiting to encounter G-d's presence.

About an hour before sunrise the assembled group begins preparations for the morning service. As we recite the *Sh'ma*, the first rays of the sun signal the dawn of a new day. Soon, morning's light fills the synagogue sanctuary. One can sense the quiet pride and sense of accomplishment that fills the room. We have come, we have learned and we have experienced the Torah. The night has been a special one; but, remember, the Torah is there for us every day of the year.

A parting thought: Why do we call Shavuot *zman matan Torakteinu*, "the time of the giving of our Torah?" Why not just refer to the giving of the Torah? Because, goes one answer, each of us approaches the Torah at our own level. We each have a share in the Torah, and each one of us accepts the Torah at his or her own level and own ability. No one is precluded from starting to study Torah and no one is ever finished studying Torah. You don't have to be a scholar to experience the Torah. It is given for each of us, no matter

what our background, to experience, to grow with, and to love. It is our nation's soul.

May we all have the privilege of experiencing the Torah throughout the year. *Chag Sameach*. A very Happy Shavuot holiday. Enjoy this beautiful time.


Chaim Berger is the Editor and Publisher of Gateways to Jewish Life & Living, a monthly publication which introduces its readers to the experience of traditional Jewish life. Sample issues may be obtained by writing to: The Atid Company, 1-B Quaker Ridge Road, Suite 542, New Rochelle, NY 10804.

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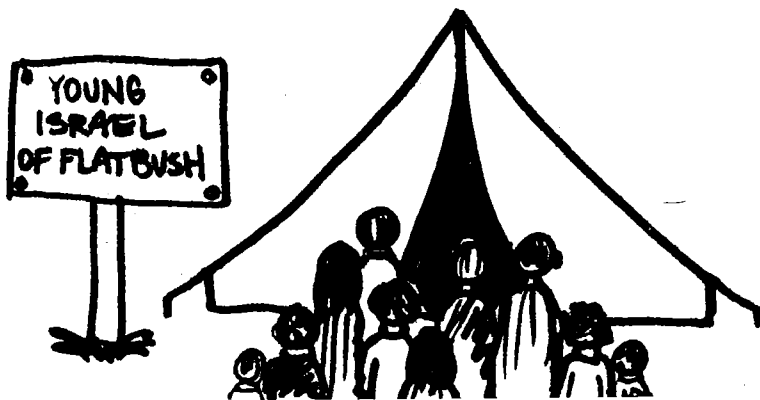


FLATBUSH (cont. from p.1)

least, to save the righteous people there, something G-d was not originally planning to do. Minds are changed in the Beginners Service also. If there is the slightest indication that we have the ability to take a more active role in the services, then, despite our reluctance, we are gently swayed and persuaded even to the point of leading the congregation in prayer. This is something which I had wanted to do for a long time and I am doing it now. I am learning, and what could be better than learning something, doing it, and getting better at it.

We also share, at this Beginners Service, impromptu Hebrew lessons. What does this word mean? Why is the word spelled with an *aleph* instead of an *ayin*? Brief explanations of grammar, Bible and religion. And to this I say *Gam Zu L'tovab* - this too is for the best.

And so, when I come here on Shabbat I am rejuvenated, body and soul. After the spiritually uplifting services which nourish our souls, a delightful Kiddush is served to nourish our bodies. I feel at times as if I am in Abraham's tent with someone ready to serve me another portion of knowledge, along with another portion of cake.



In *The Beauty and the Beast* the sign in the garden read, (and I paraphrase), "Eat only as much as you can within the confines of this garden." But here at Young Israel, there are always *Mishloach Manot* (presents to take home) when our dear leader, Mr. Moshe Sorscher, tells us to go home to read and study those chapters of the weekly Torah portion which he feels would be of interest and use to us.

Our purpose today is to celebrate the first anniversary of this Beginners Service. I am proud that I was here at the inception of this Minyan, listening on the first day, and now, after so many Shabbatot, together with my esteemed colleague, Avraham, we lead the davening and others listen to us.

This is a time for celebration. Many of us have been taken back into the fold, and many more of us now know a little more about Judaism. Today, this celebration, this *Siyum*, is only the appetizer in the course of learning. I invite and encourage others to join us every Shabbat, because in the Beginners Service the order is not necessarily *Na'ase V'nishmah* -- do and then understand, but rather feel comfortable and participate as much as you are able to or wish to. The key is to continue to grow in Jewish commitment and observance until Abraham's tent becomes ours.

Mr. Hank Bayer is in the plumbing contracting business and a member of the Young Israel of Flatbush Beginners Service. This article was taken from his speech at the Young Israel's first anniversary Shabbat luncheon.

HANDWASHING (cont. from p.1)

if it had. After all, I thought, if we say a prayer and observe a silence before eating bread, how much more important it would be before cutting open a human body. At the time, however, it never occurred to me--I was much too worried about accidentally touching something and contaminating myself or worse still, getting yelled at by the scrub nurse or surgeon. But looking back on it, I think how nice it would have been if the surgeons had meditated while scrubbing, observed a solemn silence while being gowned and gloved, and then, after cutting the skin, spoken only in respectful tones, mindful of the gravity of their work.



A year or two ago, an article appeared in the health page of the *Times*, describing a study by anesthesiologists in which it was found that patients under general anesthesia remembered what was said in the operating room, and that those whose surgeons had said they would make a speedy recovery did so. I remember looking back on my own experience in OR and thinking, Oh, no, what did we do? True, we didn't wish the patients ill, but the term "respectful" wouldn't quite apply either. I recall a lot of horsing around, off-color jokes, and verbal one-upmanship. Is it still the same, I wondered, or did that study revolutionize the operating room?

A few years ago, my parents went on a tour called "Jewish Friends of Scandinavia." It was led by a rabbi, and my parents were just about the only non-religious people on the trip. "Everything we did, they said a prayer," my parents told me. "We went on a bus, they said a prayer; we went on a plane, they said a prayer. See? We have the book." They showed me a little book, *Prayers for Travel*. "We never felt so safe."

I was used to these jokes. My father comes from a very religious family. Fanatic, we would say. I imagined they did have a prayer for everything, talking on the phone, doing the laundry, taking a walk... We joked about it, but now I'm beginning to have second thoughts. My friend Dorcas is a religious Christian. Whenever I tell her my problems, she says, "I'll pray for you." I thank her politely. Then one day I was telling her about a very nasty person who came into my medical office demanding care. Dorcas, who counsels patients at a local clinic, told me, "Everyday before I open my door, I say a prayer that whoever walks through that door will bring their good energy with them and leave their bad energy outside." Now there's an idea, I thought.

It's Friday night again, and my friends Nancy and Bob have invited me for the Sabbath dinner. As I enter their apartment, the two kids are running around making enough noise for ten. Seth, age four, is demanding a glass of apple juice, and Jed, seven, wants to know, "When are we going to eat? Amid the noise and confusion, we manage to get to the table, light the candles, and say the prayers. Then, Jed jumps up and shouts, "Let's wash our hands!" Finally, the room is still as, one at a time, we pour cold water over first one hand and then the other, recite the blessing, and sit back down in perfect silence, waiting to eat bread.

Marjie Ordene, M.D., is a holistic family physician and attends Beginners Services at Lincoln Square Synagogue, New York.

S U M M E R P R O G R A M S ' 9 2

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