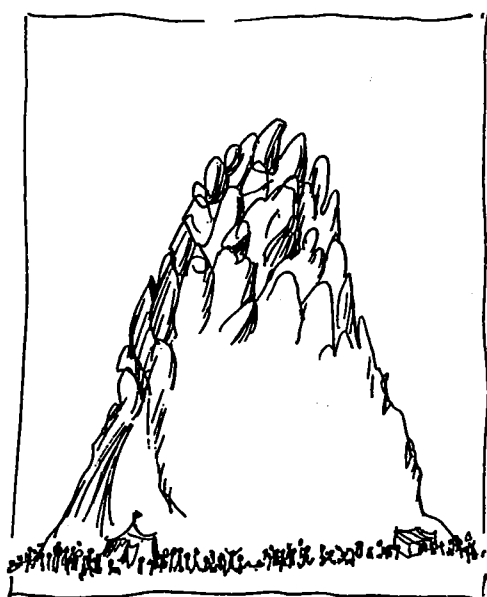


ברשת

Vol. VIII No. 4

BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

5745 Sivan/June 1995



1½ MILLION "BEGINNERS" ARE ENCAMPEDED AROUND MT. SINAI, WAITING FOR THE TORAH TO BE DELIVERED.

THE FIRST BEGINNERS CRASH COURSE IN TORAH

by Rabbi Herschel Billet

Approximately 3,300 years ago, on Shavuot, the first crash course in Basic Judaism was offered. The setting was very different from current NJOP programs. The event took place in the Sinai Desert, at Mount Sinai. There were several million people of all ages physically present, and Moses himself was the teacher who conveyed the Torah to all the students in attendance. The skies were dark and heavy clouds covered the mountain. Thunder and lightening shattered the stark surroundings. G-d's presence was almost palpable and added an electrifying ambiance to the outdoor desert classroom where the Torah was revealed to the Jewish people.

Although we live in an age of technology within the galaxy of
(cont. p. 3)

SONG OF THE SEAS

by Miryam Wohlgemuth

My father drowned. Twice. Once when the kelp net off the California coast pulled him under, twice when the Coast Guard floundered and dumped what was left of him back in the sea.

I was eleven. G-d had gone. And left me with the guilt of being the one left alive.

So I drowned myself in sickness. The doctors said it was all in my head: a virus, "encephalitis," colloquially called "water on the brain." I almost died, but didn't. I owed my life to G-d. And hated Him for it.

I hid from Him for years behind piles of hours of highpowered work. Decade after decade, I built myself a fortress strong enough to withstand any attack. Except an internal one. G-d stopped my world long enough to show me all the busyness couldn't

(cont. p. 2)

GESHER TSAR ME'OD (A VERY NARROW BRIDGE)

by Melanie Notkin

My mother died. At the exact stroke of destiny, when my chariot turned into a pumpkin, my mother transcended from life to death. And I became a woman. Not that I wasn't headed in that direction, a month shy of my twentieth birthday. Still, I felt like a young, spry hare, when somehow, while I was looking in the mirror, or struggling with calculus, real life came up from behind me and beat me at a race I hadn't realized I had actually entered.

My mother, Margaret Ruth Notkin, of blessed memory, died on Erev Shabbos of heart failure. The doctors mentioned words like quadruple---- and cardio---- My mother simply likened herself to the Tin Man; she needed a new heart. And so, on that Friday night, when Jews around the world were singing

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SONG OF THE SEAS, (cont. from p. 1)

silence the gasp of my soul.

In less than a year, three young friends died in sudden succession. Heart failure, brain tumor, gun-to-head suicide. I couldn't sleep. My self-made world might vanish the moment I let it out of my sight.

Not surprisingly, the yoke of life's make-shiftiness soon began to choke me. I left my lawyering job in L.A. and came to New York looking for transcendence. I tried my hand at fiction, hoping to find something lasting. I must have given G-d an opening. He, at long last, came looking for me.

This time His knock was soft and steady: an NJOP flier in a health food store, a Shabbos dinner at the teacher's house, a kiddush at the shul, a book by Heschel, a book by Frankl, a book by Steinsaltz, two by Soloveitchik. His music was what really snaked its way into my soul: the minor-key melodies with magic foreign words Dad used to belt out Friday nights. I felt as if I'd finally come home.

One small problem: it wasn't my home.

My father was Jewish. My mother wasn't. She converted with a Reform rabbi. I grew up believing we were Reform Jews. I found out later I was neither Reform nor Jewish.

In the wake of my father's death, I rejected any Reform relationship with G-d. Capitalizing on life's happiness (weddings, births, and bar mitzvahs), Reform Judaism seemed concerned only with making Jews "feel good" about being Jewish on the surface, while offering no substantive means for grappling with life's suppressed sorrow.

Later on I learned about the law: halakha. The law said Jewish genes come from the mother and mine had none to give. Because my mother's conversion wasn't according to halakha, the law orphaned me all over again, taking away what was left of my father's spirituality.

So there I found myself, deserted in the world of Orthodox Judaism, learning all about a family I'd never belonged to, coming "back" to a house with no room with my name on it. Unlike my baalei teshuva friends who banded together, I had to make my way home myself. The effort broke my back. I was humbled, humiliated, and liberated.

At first I thought the right rabbi would be the road and went looking for a man who'd build a bridge to G-d through all my pain and anger. But months and months of looking for a go-between got me nowhere. All the men I met with had neither time nor tolerance for my grievance. I was turned away time and time again until I felt I had no one to turn to.

But G-d.

So, after all the years of silent rage, I started yelling and screaming and crying and pleading. And guess what? He listened. Once I went to G-d, rabbis came to me. But by then I'd finally learned G-d alone could father.

In almost no time, G-d delivered: I was on the verge of mikvah before I knew it, frightened like I'd never been. I'd come so far but, still, after all that had happened, could I trust enough to go under?

Only by bringing Torah in with me. Every Shabbos we sing in shul, "the Torah is a tree of life to those who grasp it." The tune that goes with the Hebrew words always makes me shiver. I started singing it every day, begging G-d for the strength to surrender to the water and still come up alive.

The day of my conversion I brought my siddur with me to hold the words and sing them before going under. The rabbis questioned me intensively, retesting the strength of my resolve. When they were satisfied, we got in the car to go

to the shul where the mikvah was. The car was littered with all sorts of kids stuff: shoes, balls, papers the teachers send home before Shabbos. I reached down and picked up the first thing laying at my feet. It was a picture of a tree drawn in fine lines for coloring. On the top it said in Hebrew, "the Torah is a tree of life to those who grasp it..." I smiled. G-d had been singing beside me all along."

The water itself was disarmingly warm. I said the blessing, held my breath, went under Audrey, and came up Miryam. The name Miryam, which was my father's mother's, means bitter sea. But this time, like Moshe at Marah, I'd found the G-d-given tree that turns bitter water sweet.

Miryam Wohlgenuth is an Assistant Attorney General for the State of New York and is a graduate of the Beginners Service at Lincoln Square Synagogue.



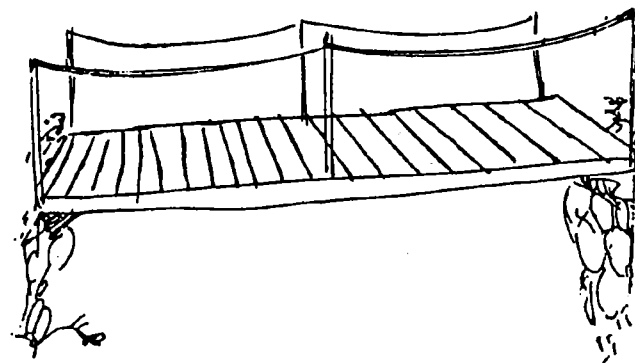
IT IS A TREE OF LIFE
TO THOSE WHO GRASP IT

GESHER TSAR ME'OD (cont. from p. 1)

*Boachem L'Shalom, Malachei HaShalom....
Tzaitchem L'Shalom, Malachei HaShalom.....
(Welcome Angels of Peace,..... and Leave in Peace,
Angels of Peace,) my mother left in peace. And my
own journey began.*

The *shiva* was a difficult experience. By every right and privilege, as my mother's only daughter, I was now *Ba'alat Habayit*, Mistress of the Home. And yet, my mother's generous friends and relatives were taking over *my* kitchen, *my* home, displacing me, my brother, and the salt and pepper shakers. Mourners are not supposed to get up or greet visitors during *shiva*. But these were my guests; would they like a sugar coated cheese bagel? A slice of chocolate cake? But I wasn't allowed into my kitchen for seven days, so by the time *shiva* ended, I didn't know where anything was anymore. And all the king's horses and all the king's men, couldn't put all the pieces back together again.

The fairy tale was over. That moment of transcendence came in the same type of moment that made Lyndon B. Johnson the President of the United States of America. It was unexpected and shocking, the kind of shock when you are on the subway and



you realize you must have fallen asleep and you end up in Brooklyn, and you've never been to Brooklyn before, and the whole world takes on a new perspective. It was at the *shiva* that I started to find my way back home.

Reiner, whom I had always thought of fondly as one of my mother's funnier friends, sort of like the Seinfeld or Letterman of middle-aged, mother-type women, mentioned that since my mother was gone,

and my mother's mother was gone, "there was nothing now between me and G-d." Shocking. She wasn't trying to be funny. In fact, those were some of the most inspirational words, the truest words, I had ever heard.

Looking at the world from this new perspective meant understanding it in an entirely different way. A year later, I understood that losing my mother *z"l* (*zichrona l'vracha*-of blessed memory) didn't just mean graduating to automatic womanhood, taking on the responsibility of the household. It meant finding myself responsible for all my actions, good, bad, as well as the mundane. "Nothing between me and G-d" meant that G-d would judge me for *me*. And so, a year after I became a woman, I found myself becoming much more observant.

It would have been wonderful to ride in the back seat of my mother's magic carpet for many more years. It would have been quite satisfying to just be the daughter of an *Aishet Chayil* (Woman of Valor). However, instead of living off my mother's reputation, I have begun to strive toward it.

My world is not exactly as I had envisioned it as a child. Yet, I have discovered new opportunities on my journey. I am now beginning to bridge the gap between me and G-d. And along the way, I am finding my mother.

*Melanie Notkin is Community Coordinator for the
National Jewish Outreach Program.*

THE FIRST BEGINNERS,(cont. from. p.1)
cyberspace, we can not create a replica of the Sinai experience even on a small scale. But we must realize that, for each individual Jew, a Sinai experience is attainable. Despite the differences between our modern setting and that of Mount Sinai, things really have not changed that much. Time and space become irrelevant factors when we realize how close we really are to our ancestors who were there.

The product that is being taught in our modern crash courses is essentially the same Torah and Hebrew language from the time of Moses. Not one letter or law has changed. Of course, the relevance of the ancient Torah to changing times has been adjusted to meet the needs and realities of each generation. But the rules and principles remain the same.

The language, the laws, and the customs are very durable. They have emerged unscathed even after

(cont. p. 4)

THE FIRST BEGINNERS,(*cont. from p.3*)
3,300 years. An H.G. Wells Time Machine has never really been created. However, the Hebrew language and Jewish tradition is the closest thing to it.

Through Torah study and Hebrew conversation we are all transported through time and space to meet our fellow Jews, past, present and future. The language and the message is always current...and relevant!!!

If surviving as a Jew is important to an individual or their children or grandchildren, then the Sinai experience and its legacy is the closest we can come to owning an insurance policy. NJOP is dedicated to helping any Jew who wishes to experience Hebrew, Torah, and Sinai realize their dream.

Of course, Moses does not make personal appearances for us. Our classrooms are well lit and do not have thunder, lightening, and dark clouds. Our sessions do not feature several million students per class. G-d's presence is not visibly felt. But our teachers are students of Moshe Rabbienu, Moses our teacher. And our message is as electrifying and uplifting. And we have already reached tens of thousands of Jews all over the world. G-d's presence can be felt inside many of our students. And if we maintain our level of dedication, who knows what might happen on Shavuot 5755.

Rabbi Herschel Billet is Rabbi of the Young Israel of Woodmere and the founder of its Beginners Programs.

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Illustrations by Stu Hample

בראשית

Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Beryl Levenson 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 the programs of NJOP, please write or call:

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