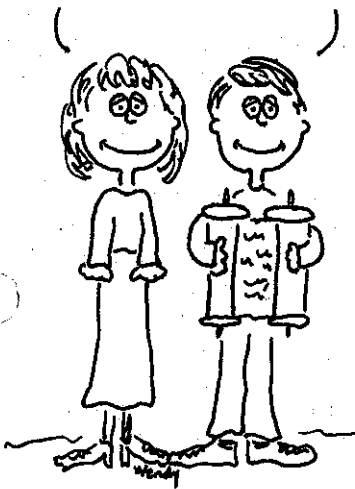


בראשית

GROWING IN JUDAISM IS A PROCESS...

60 MINUTES = 1 HOUR
 24 HOURS = 1 DAY
 7 DAYS = 1 WEEK
 7 WEEKS = SHAVUOT



MAKING OUR DAYS AND WEEKS COUNT

by Rabbi Yigal Segal

The holiday of Shavuot, the Festival of Weeks, commemorates our receiving the Torah on Mount Sinai and the birth of the Jewish nation. This event was the climax of a process of spiritual elevation which began almost two months before, when G-d brought us out of Egypt. In fact, our Rabbis teach us that each day leading up to the receiving of the Torah, raised us one more level of spirituality above the decadence of Egypt. This is the reasoning behind the mitzvah of Sefirat HaOmer, the counting of the days between Pesach and Shavuot, which shows us the importance of each day in the process of our purification.

The commandment to count the Omer has one detail, which, at first glance, is quite puzzling. After the first seven days pass, you must count both the day and the week of the Omer. For example, on the tenth day, we say, "Today is the tenth day which is one week and three days in the Omer." Why is it that we must count the day itself and also indicate the week we are in? Isn't counting the day enough to know how far we are from Shavuot?

The Torah in Leviticus 23:15-16 shows the double nature of counting the Omer.

"You shall count from the morrow of the next day (Passover), from the day you bring the Omer of the waving, seven weeks, they shall be complete. Until the morrow of the seventh week, you shall count fifty days, and you shall offer a new meal offering to Hashem."

(cont. on p. 2)

WHY WOULD A NICE CHINESE GIRL BECOME JEWISH?

by Tzipora Bracha Jung

About thirty years ago, on a Saturday morning, my friend Greta and I were sitting on the stoop in front of 620 West 172nd Street in Washington Heights. It was the summer and we were both bored, so we sat there watching people go by. Most of the people that walked by were all dressed up. We noticed that none of the woman carried pocketbooks, purses or anything else. I couldn't understand at that time why, if they weren't going shopping, were they all dressed up and walking about in the street? And, this happened every Saturday. Then I learned that Jews go to temple on Saturday, and Christians go to church on Sunday.

As I watched them walking by, I noticed a peacefulness, a serenity, a brightness, a genuine happiness, a specialness that each and every one of them possessed. I wondered, what could it be that made these people seem this way? The time, I knew that on Sundays, when my family and I went to church, we wore our "Sunday best." (cont. on p. 2)

THE SENTENCE

by Yosef Begun

Yosef Begun, one of the foremost Soviet Prisoners of Zion, recounts how the learning of Hebrew led him to become a formidable Jewish activist in the Soviet Union of the 1970's and 80's. His third and final trial, in 1983, was a KGB reprisal for his activities of disseminating Jewish culture and teaching Hebrew. Mr. Begun now resides in Jerusalem.

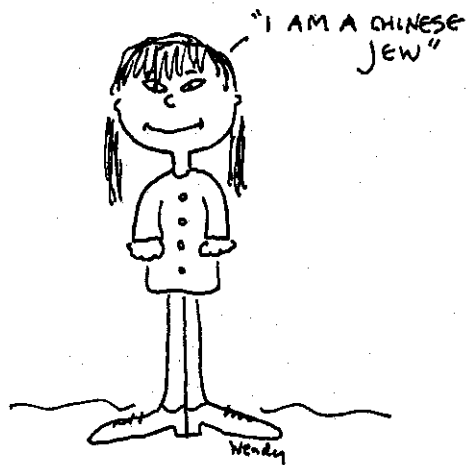
"Mi atta?" (Who are you?) This was the first sentence I ever read in the Hebrew language. The words seemed to reach out to me from the across the centuries as I sat like a first grader in the Moscow apartment of Lev Grigorievich Gurvich, a 70 year old Jew who was to be my first Hebrew teacher. Who was I, indeed? A 34-year old Ph.D radio electronics engineer at the Moscow Research Institute. A self hating Jew who, under the oppressive conditions of Soviet life, knew nothing about Judaism. For us Soviet citizens, it was considered "reactionary and anti-Soviet."

(cont. on p. 3)

WHY WOULD A... (cont. from p 1) But we carried pocketbooks and purses, and even went shopping. I also noticed that there was a difference between the Christians going to church on Sunday, and the Jews going to temple on Saturday. It seemed to me that the difference was the Christians didn't have that "shine," the peacefulness, the serenity, the brightness or the specialness. It was then that I knew that there was something special about the Jews, and that I wanted to be part of that specialness.

We were the only Chinese family living in that area of Washington Heights. All of my friends and neighbors were Jewish. And, in my early 20's, when I moved to Riverdale, once again, most of my friends and neighbors were Jewish. One day, riding the Metro-North train to work, I met Laura. It was September of 1992, and Laura invited me to a free Rosh Hashanah service at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. I accepted. I didn't know what to expect, but as I sat through the service, I felt very, very comfortable. Soon after the Holidays, Laura asked me if I would accompany her to Hebrew classes. When I learned that there was a Hebrew alphabet, I thought to myself, "How hard could it possibly be to learn the Hebrew alphabet?"

CHINA SHALOM



In my younger years, I was able to read and write Chinese, and we do not have an alphabet. I gladly accepted Laura's invitation. Thank G-d, and thanks to the National Jewish Outreach Program ("NJOP"), learning to read and write Hebrew was fun. Some of the Alef-Bet even looked like Chinese characters!

Laura and I began shul hopping, attending seminars and classes three to four times a week. The more that I learned about Judaism, the more excited I became. I became a "Judaic addict."

In September of 1993, I once again joined Laura at the Rosh Hashanah Beginners Service. After services, I approached the Rabbi to inquire about conversion. The Rabbi told me to call him in his office, and so I did.

That October, I went to Israel for three weeks. The land of Israel and its people ignited a spiritual fire that continues to live within me to this day and I was more determined than ever to convert to Judaism. The same week that I returned from Israel, I received a letter from the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale inviting me to a "Turn Friday Night Into Shabbat" program, that very Friday! I believed that G-d was providing me with this tool to speak to the Rabbis, and I was going to use it. I signed up immediately.

I had learned on my trip to Israel that part of a Rabbi's responsibility is to discourage people from converting to Judaism. I therefore told the Rabbi that I wanted to convert to Judaism now, and since there was no Jewish man in the picture, he didn't have to waste his time trying to discourage me.

(cont. on p 3)

MAKING OUR DAYS... (cont. from p. 1)

What is the significance of counting both days and weeks?

One way of understanding this, is that the Torah is teaching us a lesson about patience. In our time, especially in America, we live in a "fast food" society. Our desires must be satisfied instantly. Do you remember when you dropped a letter in the mail instead of faxing it?! Everything has to happen so fast, that now we need to know who is calling on the phone even before answering!!!

The Torah tells us that we can't expect things to happen so fast. Some things take days to happen; others longer. For example, a non-Jewish woman who is interested in conversion attends my Beginners Service on Shabbat. One week, she came in very upset. A friend, also studying for conversion, was having some problems, and she felt that the only organization that could help her friend was the Jewish Family Service! Her question was, can the conversion process be accelerated so the friend can benefit from these services as soon as possible? After explaining to her that the JFS would probably help her friend anyway, I told her that growth in Judaism is directly connected to what you are willing to sacrifice and how hard you will work to get closer to Hashem. You can't buy Judaism at McDonald's all wrapped up and ready to eat, whether you are born Jewish or not. It takes days and weeks of study and practice. The Torah is telling us through the mitzvah of Sefirat HaOmer that some things take weeks and not days. Patience and hard work will ultimately lead you to your goal of accepting G-d's Torah with a full heart. We might want it to take days, but it may take weeks, and we have to cope with that reality.

A different twist on this idea of days-versus-weeks, is the feeling of progress we like to associate with any project in which we are involved. In particular, a spiritual struggle is easier to deal with when you experience a sense of advancement. Growth keeps us excited about our efforts, and renews our commitment to strive for our highest goals.

However, a human being constantly suffers setbacks. Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, Shlita, a master teacher of Jewish ethics, compares the psyche of a human being to a heartbeat. If you have ups and downs, you are alive. If you are flat with no changes, you are dead. Also, when you are experiencing a down period, always remember that it is followed by an upturn.

It is impossible that a human being will always be "up" or constantly moving in a positive direction. There might be days where you feel that you just didn't get anything done. That's when we should take a step back and see that maybe Monday was a bad day, but the rest of the week was great. Measure your time differently and you will feel encouraged and not discouraged. There were fifty days between the Exodus and Sinai, but, there were also seven weeks. If you have some bad days, look at the week's accomplishments. Don't let yourself be tempted to fall into a deeper rut because you expect the impossible. Always look at your accomplishments in whatever framework of time that will show the progress you have made toward your goals--spiritual or otherwise.

A Beginners Service is traditionally held once a week, and so much can happen in the days between. If, occasionally, not much happens in those days and it is getting you down, use the service as a benchmark to see how you did grow in some way during that period, and commit yourself to greater things in the days and weeks to come. Remember, patience, hard work, maintaining a positive attitude will bring us all closer to Hashem, and to the Torah He gave us on Sinai.

Rabbi Yigal Segal leads the Beginner's Service in Baltimore, MD at Congregation Shomrei Emunah and manages an assisted living facility for the elderly in the days between services!

WHY WOULD A... (cont. from p. 2) He immediately introduced me to the Associate Rabbi, as both Rabbis planned to meet with me to discuss the conversion process. It didn't take me long to figure out that it was impossible to get two very busy rabbis to meet with me. I therefore suggested that the Associate Rabbi and I would meet, and he would summarize the meeting to the Senior Rabbi. The rabbis agreed to this and we planned to meet on December 29, 1993. During the six weeks that passed, while waiting to meet with the Rabbi, I became even more thirsty for information about Judaism. The more I learned, the thirstier I became. Like eating ice cream, the more you have, the more you want.

I began attending classes and seminars, reading three to four books a week about Judaism and attending different shuls. On Friday night, I attended services at Bnai Jeshurun, a Conservative temple on the Upper West Side. On Saturday, I attended services at Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, an Orthodox shul. On Sunday, I attended classes at Adath Israel, a Conservative synagogue in Riverdale. By the time that I met with the Associate Rabbi, there wasn't much left to discuss. Our meeting lasted 15 minutes.

As I learned more and more about Judaism, I knew that I had made the right choice, and that I was on the true path to Hashem.

Exactly nine months later, on the day after Simchat Torah, September 29, 1994, I "dunked" in the Mikvah and "joined the tribe." Just a side note, my Mikvah experience was an awesome spiritual explosion.

In closing, I wish to underscore that as Jews, each and every one of us has an opportunity to make a strong and deep impact on others, whether or not we are conscious of it. Each of us can have a positive influence on others by sharing just a little spark of Judaism with them. I don't feel that my friends and neighbors had planned for me to "join the tribe." But by sharing with me their traditions, their culture, their language and their love for Judaism, they made me want to be a proud member of the Covenant.

And that is why a nice Chinese girl became Jewish!

Tzipora Bracha Jung is a graduate of the Beginners Service at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, is a New York State licensed massage therapist, and an administrative assistant at Yeshiva University.

THE SENTENCE...(cont. from p 1) Any connection to Jewish religion and tradition was impossible, as was learning Hebrew or Yiddish. To apply for an exit visa to Israel? At that time, in the mid-60's, the idea was as remote to me as going to the moon.

"Ani Yosef" (I am Yosef). I read in response. "Good," my teacher nodded encouragingly. With this simple sentence, I declared myself a Jew. And with the help of Lev Grigorievich, I began to take my first--not so simple--steps toward my destiny...

The Soviet regime of the late 1950's, in its efforts to stem world criticism of its anti-Jewish policy, had begun to permit a certain degree of "Jewish culture" in the Soviet Union: a Yiddish newspaper, Yiddish theater, and foreign films that touched on the Holocaust, about which we knew nothing. Watching scenes in which Jews were persecuted by Nazis, I began to feel an affinity for "my people." I even made some attempts to learn Yiddish, but there were no textbooks, no teachers. . . It was at that point, in 1965, that I met Lev Grigorievich, at the home of an old woman where small groups of elderly Jews used to gather. I was immediately drawn to this modest old man whose depth of knowledge and open devotion to the Jewish people were overwhelming. Feeling comfortable in that enclave of fellow Jews, I told him that I was interested in finding out more about my Jewish roots and mentioned that I wanted to learn Yiddish.

"Why Yiddish?" he asked. "Why not Hebrew?"

"What is Hebrew?" I said.

Like most assimilated Soviet citizens of my generation, I

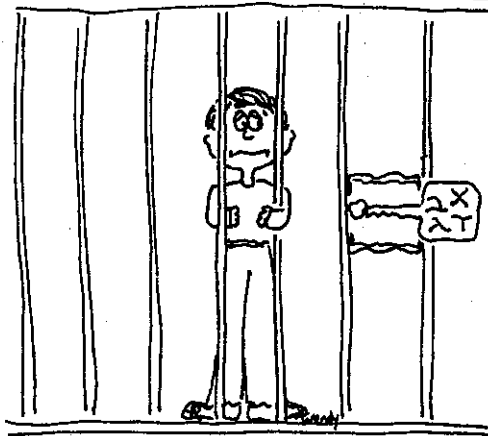
thought that this "antiquated Jewish language" had disappeared thousands of years ago and that only historians and philologists would be interested in it.

Lev Grigorievich was born before the turn of the century. When the Bolsheviks took power in 1917, he was a brilliant student at the renowned Volozhin Yeshiva, preparing to become a rabbi. But under the Soviet regime, Jewish life ground to a halt, so the would-be "rebbe" ended up working all his life as an engineer in Moscow. When I met him, he was retired and alone. His wife had left him, and his only son had married a non-Jewish woman, which caused Lev Grigorievich great pain. He lived a very rich internal life, through Judaism, Israel, and his love for the Jewish people. For these reasons, I believe he had a strong desire to transmit his knowledge and passion to the younger generation. And so for both of us, our meeting was a fortuitous one.

Lev Grigorievich lived in a five story communal building. His small room consisted of a large metal bed, a small table, a chair, and a shabby armoire that contained more Jewish books than clothing. From out of a drawer he took a small Hebrew book entitled "Mori." It was a beautiful sounding word. It means "my teacher." Switching on the radio so the neighbors would not overhear us, he began to teach me the *aleph bet* of the language of my people. With the infinite patience of a loving parent, he would repeat each phrase until I understood. With every lesson, I began to feel more of a bond with this strange language of my distant ancestors. After I had mastered several lessons, he opened the Tanach (Bible) and invited me into the mysterious world of Jewish antiquity. Although it was almost frighteningly anachronistic in the modern technocratic world, the Books of the Sages became increasingly attractive to me.

1967. The Six Day War. The miraculous victory of Israel over its massive enemies inspired me, and I started to look for ways to establish more of a connection with the country that I had begun to regard as my homeland. Everything in Russia that had seemed so important to me before--a workplace, a career, etc.--suddenly mattered less. They say that he who seeks shall find, and it was in fact through Hebrew that I found my way back to the Jewish people.

THE KEY TO GROWING AS A JEW



One evening after work, I took the bus home with a Jewish colleague. During our conversation, he told me that he was studying Esperanto. It was not customary to talk about Jewish affairs among Jews, but feeling safe with this man, I told him that I was also studying a special language. Slipping my little Mori textbook out of my pocket, I whispered, "I am studying Hebrew." Much to my surprise, he replied, "That's wonderful. So am I!" As fate would have it, he belonged to an underground group of Jews who had connections with Israel, read Jewish books,

(cont. on p. 4)

THE SENTENCE...(cont. from p 3) studied Hebrew, and demanded exit visas to Israel. I had found the route that I was looking for.

In 1971 I applied for an exit visa. I was refused, and became one of the many Soviet "refusniks." I became very active in the Jewish movement--publishing material on Judaism, secretly disseminating it to fellow Soviet Jews, conducting clandestine conclaves of Jewish culture and traditions, and teaching Hebrew--all under the relentless pursuit of the KGB. During the seventeen years I was in refusal, I was arrested three times and spent ten years in prison and in Siberian exile. One of the "crimes" for which I was arrested was the teaching of Hebrew. The following is an extract from the proceedings of my last trial, in 1983, at which I was sentenced to 12 years of imprisonment and exile:

While following the instructions of foreign Zionist centres...directed at causing the disintegration of the Soviet regime from within, Begun...with the intent of subverting and weakening the Soviet regime, kept and circulated in the years 1974-1982 anti-Soviet literature...and other materials containing slanderous fabrications defaming the Soviet State and social system--all this under the guise of disseminating the Hebrew language and drawing Jews to their national culture...

This was my last trial connected to my Hebrew activities in the USSR, which had begun almost 20 years earlier in the shabby one room apartment of my first Hebrew teacher. He had taught me well. Lev Grigorievich was a Jew who knew no fear. He

frequented the Israeli embassy, filled his home with Hebrew magazines which he distributed to fellow Jews, and listened regularly to his short wave radio for news about Israel. The Soviets may have disrupted his life, but they never broke his spirit. Lev Grigorievich died several months before my release, at the beginning of 1987, when I was among the first group of political prisoners to be released by Gorbachev as a result of his new policy of perestroika.

I arrived in Eretz Yisrael on January 20, 1988. Had it not been for the dramatic political changes in the USSR, I would have served my full 12 year sentence until 1994. Had it not been for my Hebrew lessons with Lev Grigorievich, who opened the door for me to the culture and tradition of my people, I might have served a much longer, more destitute, sentence: a life long existence as a non-Jewish Jew.

It is gratifying to note that hundreds of his former students are now living in Israel. The tragic irony is, that this man, so devoted to Israel, never lived to breathe the fragrant air of Eretz Yisrael. I can't help but think of Moshe Rabbetnu, who was also denied the reward of entering the Promised Land. But, as we all know, great epochs in history generate great personalities. Among the many well known and virtually unknown heroes produced by our tumultuous time, there is a place for Lev Grigorievich. I will always remember him as a valiant, proud, wise Jew. Blessed be his memory.

Illustrations by Wendy Dunn

בראשית *Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of 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.*

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