

ברשת

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BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

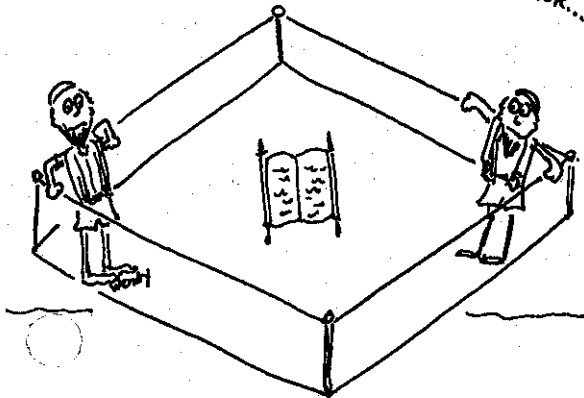
Sivan 5760/June 2000

STRUGGLE ON SHAVUOT AND BEYOND

by Rabbi David Kalb

THE STRUGGLE FOR TORAH

/ IN THIS CORNER...



Shavuot is the time when Jews celebrate *Matan Torah*, the giving and receiving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, 3312 years ago. In order to celebrate this experience properly, it is recommended that every Jew attempt to relive the revelation by re-accepting the Torah. But how does one go about re-accepting the Torah?

Let us look back at our birth as a people, back to the origins of Judaism. The story of the Jewish people begins in a very strange way. In Genesis 12:1, G-d comes to Abram, the first Jew, and says: "Go for yourself, from your land, from your relatives, and from your father's house to the land that I will show you." We have no explanation of how Abram comes to G-d and becomes a Jew. The Torah just tells us that G-d instructs Abram to leave his country, his family and his parents' house. We hear no statement of theology, nothing about miracles, no proof of the existence of G-d. All G-d tells Abram is to travel.

I would like to suggest that when G-d tells Abram to travel, he is telling him not just to go on a physical journey, but to embark on a spiritual pilgrimage as well. When G-d says, *(cont. on p. 3)*

TORAH-PHOBIA

by Arnold Mann

I have always suffered from Torah-phobia.

Every time I am called upon -- not to read, or to remove the Torah from the Ark, but just to touch it as it passes, to kiss it, like everyone else -- I freeze. It's absolutely pathological. When I first attended the Beginners Service at Beth Jacob Congregation, I nearly passed out when Rabbi Brian Thau brought the Torah around.

I have often wondered what it would be like to be trapped in an elevator with a Torah for days.

I have also often wondered where my Torah-phobia comes from. No doubt it's from some deep feeling of inadequacy, having never been Bar Mitzvah, not being able to read -- or even lipsynch -- like most, and memories of being bullied out of Sunday school because I was the new kid in class. And then there's the feeling of extreme hypocrisy when I even think of kissing the Torah as it passes, an extreme sensitivity to a lack of something inside myself -- the feeling that is just not there. The kiss becomes an empty gesture, and I have never been good at empty gestures.

I used to think I was alone, until Rabbi Brian asked me to write something for the Beth Jacob *(cont. on p. 4)*

I BRAKE FOR SHABBAT

by Kevin Trapp

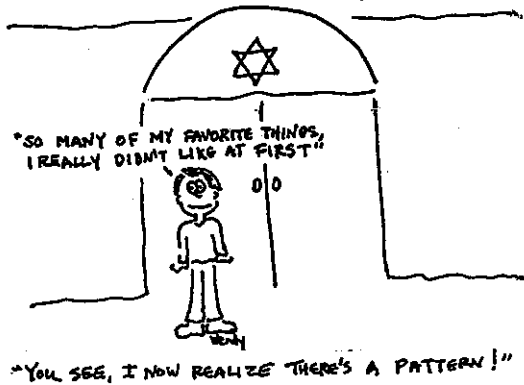
I am Jewish because my mom has a Jewish last name, and I have a meal with her relatives sometimes. My mom likes to fast once in a while. It helps her dieting. She's Jewish on the days when Jews don't eat, or on the days when you have to park way down the block to get into the synagogue. I'm Jewish on the days that Jews do eat, and whenever I want to irritate a guy telling Jewish jokes.

About 6 months ago, however, things started to change for me. A friend of mine convinced me to try spending Shabbat with a family in the city. Shabbat came in early, so I had to race to get to the house. I wove in and out of Friday afternoon traffic and broke every traffic law so I could spend my first weekend as a religious Jew. I had heard that on Shabbat all work stops, and that you can't drive, turn on lights, watch television, or do just about anything else that I would do on a normal day. But here I was, making myself crazy so that I could be there on time to stop.

At the house, I was surprised and shocked. Where did all these kids come from? *(cont. on p.2)*

BRAKE (cont. from p. 1)... What is going on with those kids' sideburns? Are all those old bearded men on the wall grandfathers of somebody? More kids? I quickly changed clothes, waved goodbye to my wallet and keys, and walked to shul with the rabbi, my host.

When we got to the shul I was again surprised. Is this prayer or speed reading? Why don't they stand still? If you have strings hanging from your pants, why don't you get new ones? If you can't turn off lights, why are there lights on? What is that faint smell of rotting dead meat?



The answer to the "lights" question was given by a rabbi who said, "We're Jewish, not Amish." The answer to the meat question was the word that I have had the most trouble with: Chulent. But Chulent does not deserve the time it would take me to look it up in a dictionary. And if anybody is reading this before their first Shabbat experience, I want to say one thing: Don't fall for the "You haven't tried MY Chulent!" line.

As the prayers continued, I tried to pay close attention to the words of the prayers. Assuming Hashem was G-d, I noticed how grateful the writers of this book were for really simple things that I had always taken for granted. They were thanking Him for their own minds, for their own ability to see, and for everything in nature around them. For some reason I started to cry. Embarrassed, I found myself sobbing in a room full of people I didn't know. Immediately they all tried to make me feel at home. None of them asked what was wrong, they just introduced themselves, and asked me where I was from and how I found the Jewish Learning Exchange. I froze -- They weren't going to get me! They weren't going to suck Kevin Trapp into their clan. So I played the hard-edged, skeptical guy, until I remembered one important fact: I came to them, they didn't come to me.

I didn't quite understand why I was crying at the time, but now I do. In the past, on Friday night I used to go out and pretend to be someone who I wasn't. I drank and smoked and tried to fit in with the people who lived a life that was a bit too fast for me. I thought I had a problem because I couldn't stay out past 2:00 AM; because I couldn't just walk up to the ladies and introduce myself; because I spent my money on other things besides clothes, cars, haircuts, and cologne; because I looked too cute, kind, and innocent. As I was sitting in this elementary school cafeteria in a suit talking to G-d, I discovered that I didn't have a problem. It was okay to feel that life should be a little different, a little nicer, and a little more meaningful. I was

wasting my time trying to fit into a place where I didn't belong. Maybe I was right, and all these people in these bars and clubs had the wrong idea of what it means to live.

Until this first Shabbat, I thought that Judaism meant the Holocaust, racism, guys with guns going into dance centers, and strange adults humiliating their kids by making them wear yarmulkes in public. The word "Jew" to me meant tragedy, boring family rituals, a strange alphabet that only my late grandfather could read, and canned salmon...my grandmother liked canned salmon.

The next morning I attended the Beginners Minyan at the Jewish Learning Exchange. At the Beginners Minyan I met Rabbi Friedman. Thank Hashem that this guy, at least, owned a razor. Just when I thought I had finally met a regular guy in this synagogue, Rabbi Friedman took out a diagram that showed the exact order that my prayers should be in. If I didn't follow prayer "A" with prayer "B", Hashem just wouldn't listen. And within each prayer there were more rules. Maybe I was a long way from understanding why we had to say certain things in a certain order and in a certain time, but at least now I was a little more prepared when I went back into that room with the bearded men who wouldn't stand still.

Rabbi Friedman and his Beginners Service were a great help for me in those early days. He continues to be my guardian now that I am in my "beginner" days. He convinced me that it was possible for a person at my level to become a part of this community, if that was what I wanted. I wasn't sure, but I knew that I was going to give it a few more chances. That Friday night, I felt so out of place that I thought it would be my first and only Shabbat. By the time Shabbat ended that Saturday evening, I knew I had to try to visit this strange world again - and soon.

Rabbi Friedman explained to me that although I grew up learning nothing about Judaism, the fact that I had it inside me meant that it was all there waiting for me. My strange quirks, my hang-ups, my anxieties, and my one-way conversations to the ceiling above my bed were all normal. They were just a Jewish soul shouting to be recognized. The one Jewish cell that I had left inside me was enough to get me started on a road that just might change my life.

I am still very much involved in Judaism and in learning Torah. I still go to the Beginners Minyan, I learn with Rabbi Friedman weekly, I have been keeping Shabbat for 5 months, I bounce up and down in the shul, and it almost feels normal to walk the streets on Saturday with no wallet and keys. To all the people who did not have a pleasant experience on their first Shabbat, please give it another try. Give it two other tries. You see, I now realized that there is a pattern. My favorite songs, my favorite hobbies, my favorite foods, my favorite television shows, and my favorite friends have all had one thing in common: I really didn't like them at first. The word "Shabbat" was really an uncomfortable and unsettling word for me during those first few weeks. Six months later, I am begging for Chulent by Tuesday.

Kevin Trapp attends the Beginners Service at the Jewish Learning Exchange of Los Angeles and is a 7th grade history teacher at Van Nuys Middle School.

SHAVUOT (cont. from p. 1)... "*Lech Lecha*," (Go for yourself), G-d is telling Abram, go out to discover meaning in this world -- go out and discover what it means to be a Jew and to have a relationship with G-d.

When we begin such spiritual journeys or when we make such discoveries, we become involved in struggle -- intellectual struggle, emotional struggle, spiritual struggle. Historically, this same struggle was experienced by the next generation, when G-d commands Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac (Genesis 22). After all, how could G-d have asked such a thing of a father or of a son? According to the *Zohar*, Isaac was thirty-seven years old when G-d commanded Abraham to sacrifice him, and Abraham was 137. Obviously Isaac, a grown man, must have accompanied Abraham willingly. Reading the story metaphorically, the sacrifice isn't just a physical one, but a spiritual and intellectual sacrifice as well. Just as Abram had his struggle, the *Akeida*, as this story is called, represents Isaac's journey and struggle to find out what it means to be Jewish.

Nowhere are the themes of struggle and seeking to have a relationship with G-d more evident than in the life of the third patriarch, Jacob. As we see from Genesis 25 until the end of the book, Jacob struggles throughout his life. Before they even emerge from the womb of their mother, Jacob struggles with his twin brother Esau. In adulthood, their battle continues, sparked by Esau's hatred of Jacob, a passion born out of anger at the loss of the birthright -- the loss of his position as the leader of the family. On the surface, all these events unfold as physical struggles, but each of these physical struggles can be seen as metaphors for Jacob's spiritual strivings.

This concept becomes most evident when Jacob wrestles with what the Torah identifies as an *ish*, a man, interpreted, by many, to be an angel of G-d. This implies that Jacob had to wrestle with what it means to have a relationship with G-d. And from this struggle, Jacob emerges with a new name: Israel -- the one who wrestles with G-d. It is this name that the Jewish people acquire, Israel, because we must also follow this legacy and struggle to understand what it means to have a relationship with G-d.

We experience this same struggle in the story of *Yetziat Mitzrayim*, the Exodus from Egypt. When G-d took us out of slavery, why did we have to wander through the desert? Why didn't G-d just take us out of Egypt and bring us directly into the land of Israel? Why forty years?

In Numbers 15:41, we read: "I am the Lord your G-d who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your G-d. I am the Lord your G-d." In other words, G-d did not take us out of Egypt just to free us from slavery. He wanted to begin a relationship with us. It was during our travels through the desert that we formed our relationship with G-d. And it was during this struggle on this spiritual journey, that we created our unique bond with G-d. This idea of a Jewish people journeying, struggling, is continuous. It continued throughout Jewish history, and

it continues to this day.

Every day we struggle to understand Judaism through the commandment to study Torah. When we recite the blessing for learning Torah, we say: "*v'tzivenu la'asoke b'divrei Torah*," we acknowledge G-d who commanded us to "busy" ourselves in Torah. We must involve ourselves, exert ourselves, in the study of Torah. According to my teacher, Rabbi Abba Bronspiegel, such language denotes the fact that when we fulfill the mitzvah to learn Torah, we must struggle.

Rav Bronspiegel used to say, "You boys think you will become a *lamdan*, a scholar, by studying Torah while sitting back in your chairs, eating a nice, big piece of cake and drinking a nice, tall glass of Coca Cola. But you will never become a *lamdan* unless you toil, unless you struggle." This is the only way people can grow spiritually.

And, we must grow constantly. One must never say, "This is what I am, and this is what I do. I'm not going to change. I'm not going to grow. I'm not going to do anything differently from what I do now. I'm not going to challenge myself."

The Gerer Rebbe, one of the great Chassidic Rabbis of Jerusalem, once met a young man who was learning at a yeshivah called Ohr Samayach (which caters mainly to *Ba'alei Teshuvah*, those who have not always been observant). This young man, however, was not a *Ba'al Teshuvah*, he had been raised in a religious household. When the Gerer Rebbe met the young man, the Rebbe asked, "What do you do?"

"I'm learning at Ohr Samayahch, but I am not a *Ba'al Teshuvah*," the young man said.

"*Farvosnit?* Why not?" the Rebbe responded in Yiddish. The Rebbe's point was that we all should strive to be *Ba'alei Teshuvah*. It does not matter how we grew up, or what we are like today. All of us have to struggle constantly to strive and to grow in our commitment to Judaism and in our relationship with G-d.

So, struggle is good, struggle is important, and struggle is absolutely necessary. This is how, on Shavuot, we re-accept the Torah as individuals and as a people. If we commit ourselves to struggle, grow and take part in a journey to discover what Judaism is about, then on Shavuot it will be as if we ourselves are standing at Sinai receiving the Torah, just as we did thousands of years ago.

Rabbi David Kalb is the Rabbi of the Beit Chaverim Synagogue in Westport, CT, where he leads a broad range of Beginner programs.



TORAH-PHOBIA (cont. from p. 1)... newsletter and I replied, "How about something on Torah-phobia?" and he said, "Great." I had struck a chord. I know now that there are others.

Franz Kafka, the German writer, had a terrible case of Torah-phobia. He wrote about it in his Letter to His Father: "...when the Ark of the Covenant was opened...it was also very frightening for me...because you once mentioned in passing that I too might be called to the Torah. That was something I dreaded for years."

His Bar Mitzvah was no relief -- "just a ritual that demanded no more than some ridiculous memorizing, in other words, it led to nothing more but some ridiculous passing of an examination."

Kafka later went on to write The Trial, in which the guilt-ridden Joseph K spends the last days of his surrealistic life trying to gain access to "The Law," to clear himself from the unknown crime he stands mysteriously accused of by the unknown forces, only to be told in the end that the gates of the Law will never be opened to him. Talk about Torah-phobia!

Meanwhile, there I was, the newcomer at Beth Jacob's Yom Kippur Beginners Service, with Rabbi Brian approaching with the Torah. The closer he got, the more I wanted to run.

People were stretching to touch, to kiss the Torah-- women with their prayer books, men with their tallitot-- and I stood back, my hands pressed behind me. My mouth went dry and my hands grew clammy. I started sweating bullets.

It got closer and closer, drawing everyone to it as it came. But I wasn't going to touch the thing. I wasn't going to kiss it. I hated it. I hated the Torah like I've never hated anything. #%!**!!#* -- Torah! Leave me alone!

Then Rabbi Brian did something I didn't expect. Instead of pushing the Torah on me, he reached out his hand and said, "Welcome." And I reached out and took his hand.

I've been to the Ark a half-dozen times since then, and I'm getting used to it.

Arnold Mann is a graduate of the Beginners Service at Congregation Beth Jacob in Beverly Hills, CA, and is now a member of Congregation Am HaTorah in Bethesda, MD. He is a contributing writer for Time Magazine and USA Weekend Magazine. He maintains that, even after all these years, he still suffers from a minor case of Torah-phobia.

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Illustrations by Wendy Dunn



Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Rabbi Yitzchak Rosenbaum, Beryl Levenson and Sarah Rochel Reid 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 NJOP, please write or call: 485 Fifth Avenue, Suite 701, New York, NY 10017, (212) 986-7450, e-mail info@njop.org.

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