

BERESHITH
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בראשית

THE BIGGEST MITZVAH IN FIVE SHAVUOT MINUTES

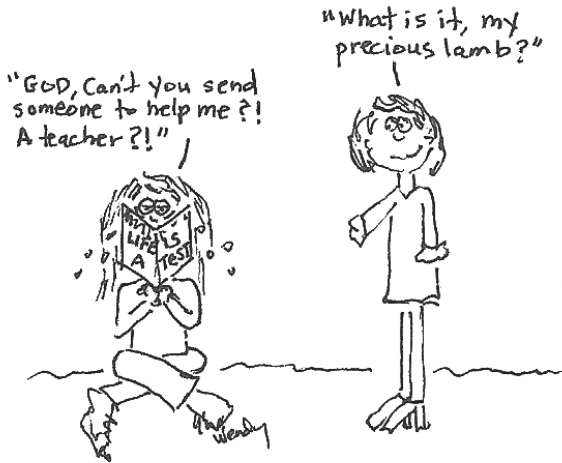
Shira Nussdorf

My first real experience with Shavuot was as intense as if I had been spotted playing street ball by George Steinbrenner and offered a Yankee contract. At the time I thought I was a hot shot Torah student who asked good questions during classes and went to Rebbitzin Esther Jungreis' lectures at Hineni religiously.

When I first started keeping Shabbat and kosher, I'd go to the Chabad of Harlem on 118th Street. Everyone assumed that I was going there because it was close to my apartment, and I could walk home from services. The real reason was Rebbetzin Goldie Gansbourg's salads! I loved being a part of a Jewish community, especially on Shabbat and *Yom Tov* (when I got to eat huge home-cooked meals for free.)

At Chabad, I vaguely remembered many of the *davening* (prayer) melodies from when I would go to synagogue as a child with my father. As an adult and a teacher, however, I was too embarrassed to ask anyone for help to relearn the prayers. And so, to avoid actually having to

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TORAH STUDY--LIFE'S ELIXIR

Rabbi Ari Burian

A college student was counting down the days to the moment he had been anticipating for four years--his last final exam. This exam would mark the end of all the hard work and effort he'd invested in college. On the big day, he sat down in the classroom, breezed through the exam and walked out with a feeling of liberation. An hour later, he realized that he had lost his wallet. He backtracked everywhere that he had been, but without any luck.

For three days he worried, unable to take even one moment to enjoy the excitement of finishing college. After three days, he met with the campus rabbi for a weekly Torah lesson. The rabbi told him about a special prayer, that, when paired with giving charity, is believed to help one find lost objects. After this brief tangential discussion, the two men studied Torah together for an hour. Within the next hour, before the rabbi could even send him the prayer, the student received a call informing him that his wallet had been found! Someone had turned the wallet in to a university dormitory, and all the money and credit cards were still inside. The student was amazed by the incredible "intervention" in finding his lost wallet.

Although he did go on to enjoy the thrill of finishing college, that young man could not help but

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SHAVUOT, THE HOLIDAY I HARDLY KNEW EXISTED

Jason Schwartz

When I was first asked to write an article about Shavuot, I thought to myself: Of all the holidays on the Jewish calendar, Shavuot is the newest one to me. In fact, looking back at my youth, it was practically non-existent. Maybe if someone in my family happened to see a calendar on that specific day, my mother would make some cheese blintzes--but only because she happened to know of the tradition.

For most "almost-secular" Jews, food often serves as the masking tape that binds us to our Jewish identity. In fact, I could probably guess what holiday was being celebrated by the food (or in the case of Yom Kippur, lack of food) that was placed in front of me on the dinner table. I wouldn't even know what Shavuot was if it weren't for the cheese blintzes and the dairy dinner. However, this article isn't about *where* I came from, but rather it is about *how* I arrived at the place where I am today, and what Shavuot means to me.

My ascent into Jewish life is almost counterintuitive. It all began after I finished high school (during which time my Jewish practice was at an all-time low). I was in the middle of my first year of undergraduate studies when I met the girl of my dreams. It seems as if we had everything in common: we liked the same music, we shared common

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LIFE'S ELIXIR (cont. from p. 1)... wonder how it all happened. And in those thoughts, he noted an interesting fact. He realized that even though he had not used the well-known prayer and charity remedy for finding lost objects, simply learning Torah had brought about the same results.

Studying Torah is often seen as the remedy for all of life's ailments. Unlike "The Amazing Professor Brown Miracle Potions" sold to naive crowds everywhere in the last century, Torah truly is an effective elixir. Torah study is equated to the performance of all 613 Mitzvot, and, therefore, one can attain the merit of having observed the entire Torah with every word studied.

With this in mind, it is easy to understand the palpable excitement in the Jewish world when preparing for the holiday of Shavuot, the day on which the Torah was given on Mount Sinai. The preparation begins long before Shavuot. In fact, it begins during Passover. The Torah therefore requires every Jew to verbally count each day from Passover to Shavuot, a total of 49 days known as the Counting of the Omer. Interestingly, the count is not a "count down"--the way children might count when eagerly awaiting the last day of school or the seconds before a buzzer marks the end of a sports game. Rather, it is a "count up," beginning with day one and counting up to day 49. Why count up? Isn't it more dramatic to count down to zero, than to count toward the seemingly arbitrary "Day 49"?

To understand why the counting is done in this fashion, it's important to look at other situations in which a person counts up. When a person goes on a diet, they always express the number of pounds they've lost by counting up. When someone decides to quit smoking, they speak about the number of days since their last cigarette. Counting down signifies an excitement, but counting up signifies working toward a goal. It's true that the Jewish people are excited to celebrate the giving of the Torah, but, more importantly, they recognize the value in the days leading up to Shavuot, and use these days as an opportunity to prepare themselves for the monumental event of the Mount Sinai experience.

The number 49 represents not only the days toward the goal, but also the 49 levels of spiritual purity to which a Jew hopes to ascend during this time. The group of seven weeks also represents a completeness of seven fundamental character traits that a Jew

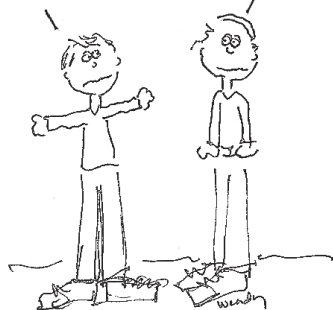
wishes to master during this opportune time. So he counts up, demonstrating his effort at each level of self improvement, just as a person is proud of every pound lost while dieting.

But even after all the self growth that the Jewish

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"What can I do, I lost my wallet?"

"Study Torah and give charity!"



"TORAH STUDY - THE ANSWER TO ALL LIFE'S QUESTIONS!"

THE BIGGEST MITZVAH (cont. from p. 1)... *daven* myself, I'd play with the kids on Shabbat. I figured that since I wasn't much good at praying, the best thing I could do was distract the children so the "real" religious people could better connect to Hashem. I don't think anyone noticed that I never actually said the silent *Amidah* but rather used the time to take the little ones out into the hallway. "What a *tzaddeket* (righteous woman) Shira is," they'd say. I truly believed my job was to help other people pray!

One day, my friend Suzanne asked if I wanted to go with her to Gateways for an outreach event on *Shavuot*. I was familiar with the Gateways program because Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis of the Hineni organization in New York had announced that she was going to speak there. Suzanne suggested that I go with her and serve as a counselor, "You get paid a set rate for the days, for teaching the kids while their parents go to all the *shiurim* (classes), plus free-five star accommodations and the most amazing gourmet kosher food. But, the big money is from babysitting in the evening. The parents go learn all night, and you just sit outside the door in case the babies wake up."

My phone interview for the job was with Mrs. Troppe, creator of the Gateways Camp, whose husband was one of the managers at B&H Photo. "I've been learning Torah for about a year, but I think my first exposure to religious Judaism came from being in your husband's camera store," I told her. I was in! I borrowed some really nice modest clothing and an inspirational book, *Life Is a Test* by Rebbitzin Esther Jungreis, to accompany me at the holiday event.

The Gateways program was great! I would've worked for free just for the food. But there was one thing that bothered me. During the day, when I led the children's groups, I was able to entertain the children sufficiently for them to forget about drawing or listening to their CDs. But, I was embarrassed that I myself could not pray. So, when it came time to lead the morning blessings, the best I could do was pass out tickets to the loudest *daveners*. I decided, then and there, that I'd use my *Shavuot* learning time to work on my prayer skills. Sure enough, later that evening, while sitting in the hallway listening to the tossing-and-turning of a sleeping toddler, I took out my Artscroll *siddur* (prayerbook) to *daven*, beginning slowly with *Adon Olam*, then *Ashrei*, and *Yigdal*. These I could recite with no problem because I remembered the melodies. But, I stumbled through the Hebrew prayers that didn't have a recognizable tune. I was extremely frustrated and disappointed with myself. Wasn't I the leader of Torah Time for Tots? Alone in the hallway on Shavuot, I closed my *siddur* and really began praying.

"Hashem," I said fighting back tears, "You've been my long lost friend for years. Can't you send someone to help me? An encouraging teacher who will start from the beginning ... I feel so fake. I make the girls say *Modeh Ani* every morning, and I don't even know what it means. I want so much to be a good Jew, but I don't know how to." I started crying, hiding my face in the book, when I heard someone coming. It was the slow walk of an older lady who paused to cough. As I waited for her to pass, I wept a little onto the pages. When I pulled the book away, I noticed that I had grabbed *Life is a Test* and that it was open to the chapter in which Rebbetzin Jungreis (cont. on p. 3)

THE BIGGEST MITZVAH (cont. from p. 2)... explained how the Jews in her concentration camp blew the *shofar* on *Rosh Hashana*, even at the risk of losing their lives. I cried even more, feeling terribly guilty. How could I complain about the difficulty of *davening* in a free world when I had access to some of the world's greatest rabbis one floor below?

Just then, Rebbitzin Jungreis herself came into the hall. I stood up so my legs wouldn't be in her way. "What is it my precious lamb? Is everything alright? Do you need help?" She asked, when she heard me sniffing.

I wanted to tell her everything, but in comparison to the troubles she had surviving the Holocaust, mine seemed trivial. "I was just reading your book, Rebbitzin," I said very quietly, so as not to wake the baby in the room behind me. "It's very inspiring. I only hope one day that I can use the tests life gives me to teach others. I want to be a writer and speaker just like you."

"You should be a writer and a speaker just like *you*. May Hashem help you use the power of *your* voice to help people."

"Thank you" I said. "Where is your friend Barbara? Aren't you always with her?"

"As a matter of fact," she said, "I'm looking for her. She isn't feeling well."

"Rebbitzin, I think she just passed me in the hallway. Wait right here I'll get her." I started to run, "Oh, and if Shimmy wakes up I'll be right back, I'm babysitting for him." I raced down the hallway and around the corner.

"Barbara?" I called out, "the Rebbitzin is looking for you."

I brought Barbara back and reunited the two old friends.

"You see how quickly you acted to do a mitzvah? May you always use your tremendous energy to help the Jewish people." She smiled at me with those kind eyes.

"I was just praying that one day I could really help *Klal Yisrael* (the People of Israel). But that wasn't a big mitzvah, Rebbitzin."

"Even the littlest mitzvah can be a big deal to someone else. I was bringing Barbara her medicine" she said, "and if you hadn't helped me, she might not have taken it on time. And whenever someone gives you a *bracha*, you should always say *Amen*." She gave Barbara her pill just as Barbara sneezed.

"Bless you," I said.

"Amen," she answered. We all laughed.

I couldn't believe that only five minutes before, I had been begging God for a teacher to help me with the basics, and here was one of the greatest teachers we have today reminding me how to accept a blessing and thanking *me* for helping *her*! I thus learned two of the most important lessons of Torah...Hashem hears your prayers, so it is in your best interest to connect to Him by using your voice to speak from your heart, and that even the smallest mitzvah is an opportunity to help someone in a big way.

Shira Nussdorf is the creator of Mitzvah TV, an online program dedicated to presenting Jewish culture in a creative way. She is the founder of Ladies First, a performing arts company that produces workshops and shows for Jewish women. She currently learns at Neve Yerushalayim and runs several Torah programs for children on Shabbat in Tel Aviv. Original songs from her debut album, Come To Class, have been featured on radio stations throughout Israel. She's still single, if you know a cute talmid chacham.

SHAVUOT, A HOLIDAY (cont. from p. 1)... friends, we both had twin siblings, and more. It seemed as if we were meant to be together! The only thing missing was a common religion, and, at that point in our lives, we didn't feel like that was a problem. We were young, open-minded and willing to see where the relationship would take us.

After the passing of my *Zadie* (grandfather), I traveled to Israel for my first time on Birthright. (My *Zadie* was very supportive of my relationship; he trusted that I would make the right decisions for myself.) During that trip to Israel, I decided to try to connect with my Jewish heritage--starting off with the only way I knew (through food). I came back from Israel a kosher-observant Jew, well "kind-of" kosher.

My girlfriend was remarkably understanding of my decision to no longer eat non-kosher food, although I'm not sure she really knew what that meant. Quite frankly, neither did I!

We never really talked about conversion. In the back of our minds, we both thought conversion might be a possibility, but we never knew how to approach it. It wasn't until we found ourselves living in Germany that we really started giving conversion much thought.

In Germany, I had my first Jewish religious experience since my Bar Mitzvah. I met Jews who originated from all over the world, and the one person who made the biggest impression on me wasn't even a Jew yet, he was a German who was converting. His passion, dedication and desire to lead a Jewish life inspired both me and my girlfriend to study and learn what Judaism was all about. I found it ironic that I had lived in Thornhill (the primary Jewish neighborhood in Toronto) my entire life and had never even talked with a religious Jew, but, while living in Hamburg, Germany I befriended several. After our year abroad, we returned to Canada and continued our Jewish education. My girlfriend is now well on her way to becoming a Jew through a proper conversion.

My path to Judaism seems strange, almost bizarre. It started by falling in love with a non-Jewish girl and moving to Hamburg, Germany, a city with only a single synagogue. But this indirect route allowed us to see how Jews from various walks of life incorporate Judaism into their daily lives. This has helped us discover what type of Jews we really are.

Now how does this relate to Shavuot? On Shavuot, we celebrate the giving of the Torah to the Jewish people at Sinai. It was at that moment that the Jewish people became a distinct nation. Shavuot is a time for study and reflection. For me, Shavuot is a time to mark my advancements in Torah study and Jewish education from the previous year.
(cont. on p. 4)

HAMBURG AIRPORT

"It's bizarre! In Germany we found out how important Judaism was to us!"



LIFE'S ELIXIR (cont. from p. 2)... people attained during this 49 day period from leaving Egypt until Mount Sinai, on the very last day they made one big mistake. According to tradition, on the morning of the day that the Jewish people were expecting to receive the Torah, on the 50th day, they overslept! Imagine the Boss looking down, ready to give a precious gift after seven weeks of hard work, and the whole team is still in bed, late for the meeting! As descendants of those first Jews who experienced Mount Sinai, it is our fate to relive this experience and see it through properly to the end. Therefore, the custom developed that on the night of Shavuot, Jews around the world stay up all night studying Torah, so that on the morning of Shavuot, when we commemorate receiving the Torah, it's as if the entire Jewish nation is standing ready. This time no one will still be in bed! Having completed the 49 steps toward self improvement and spiritual development, we study Torah all night to show G-d the excitement and anticipation we now have after these seven weeks of spiritual growth.

When Jews look for a lost wallet, they turn to the Torah. When Jews look to rid themselves of any of their bad habits, they turn to Torah. And, most importantly, when Jews celebrate the relationship between G-d and the Jewish people, they do it through a selfless, sleepless night, forever showing the love and devotion that the Jewish people have for the very special gift of the Torah.

Rabbi Ari Burian is part of the Jewish Education Team (JET) at the University of Illinois.

SHAVUOT, A HOLIDAY (cont. from p. 3)...It is easy to see why Shavuot is a lesser-known holiday among the more secular Jews. Even though it is a Torah-based holiday, there are no specific *mitzvot* (commandments) on Shavuot. Perhaps, however, there is a reason that no mitzvahs are commanded for us on that day. After all, for the Jews in the desert, it would almost seem unfair to prescribe *mitzvot* for them to fulfill on the very day on which they received the Torah. But what of our generation, since we have already received the Torah? Well, just as the Jews in the wilderness had to spend time to learn and understand the Torah, our job on Shavuot is to do the same.

Learning Torah, especially devoting all day and night to it, can be a daunting task--especially for a beginner. My plan, this Shavuot, is to open up my *Artscroll Stone Chumash* and study all night with a simple goal: find something new and fascinating, something I didn't know before. (Although, I have to admit that at my current stage of Jewish knowledge, this isn't *that* challenging. As the years progress, this task will hopefully become more and more difficult.)

Shavuot is about the thing that truly unites the Jewish people--the Torah. But, you must admit, that cheese blintzes do definitely enhance the experience!

Jason Schwartz was born in Toronto, Canada and currently resides in Montreal. He graduated from the University of Toronto and is a Ph.D. Candidate at McGill University specializing in particle physics.

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