

ברשת

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BERESHITH: "In the Beginning"

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The Wicked Son - Is He Us?

by Ephraim Buchwald

The Passover Haggadah describes the four sons. Of course, the most intriguing is the wicked son who asks: What does this service mean? Translated into contemporary jargon, the boy asks: "Who needs all this mindless ritual; kashruth, Shabbat, blessings... it's all a waste of time?" The Haggadah suggests that the proper response to these questions is to make his "teeth stand on edge" by telling him that had he been in Egypt, he would not have been redeemed!

The question which the so-called wicked son asks is also recorded in the Bible, Exodus 12:26 "And it shall come to pass when your children shall say unto you: What does this service mean?" The Bible suggests that every Jewish child will ask this question, not just the wicked son. In fact, the Hebrew text virtually implies that parents should expect such a question, that every thinking Jewish child is expected to ask "why do we need rituals and practices?"

The response in the Bible is, at first glance, different from the Haggadah's response. Exodus 12:27: "And you shall say: It is the celebration of the Passover sacrifice unto G-d!" The response of the Bible to the challenging or doubting child is -- come to my Seder, taste the Passover foods, experience the four cups of wine! You wish to know what Jewish life is all about? Let's not talk cerebrally, let's experience it together emotionally and

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Nuts: Going and Coming

by Rhonda Posner

One Saturday, back in June, I came to the Beginners Service. I really needed a day off from work. I was going nuts. Work then was selling luxury condominiums in Battery Park City.

Now, in residential real estate, Saturday is a big "shopping day" in the market. It was also the time when insider trading on Wall Street was climbing to its scandalous peak, and the stock market really does affect the real estate market. Anyway, pressure to sell apartments was heavy. I had just finished an eight week intensive seminar on "selling techniques and the psychological strategy." Every Sunday morning we had sales meetings.

We had just completed a very successful sellout

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Atlanta Journey

by Donald Miller

"To be, or not to be," is not the question. However, the answer is "to be comfortable!" To me, the Beth Jacob Beginners Minyan in Atlanta provides an atmosphere of comfort while I am learning.

I have always felt that I am a religious person. But, I have feelings of inferiority because of my lack of knowledge of Hebrew, Jewish rituals and halacha, and because I have not had training in the basics and the reasons behind the entire religious process. With all those deficits I imagine I would be a better candidate for a Buddhist monastery. But as luck would have it, instead of the Dheli Lama along came the Atlanta Kollel, and for me there is now a wonderful environment to nourish my Neshama (soul) in a Beis Midrash (study hall) that I can

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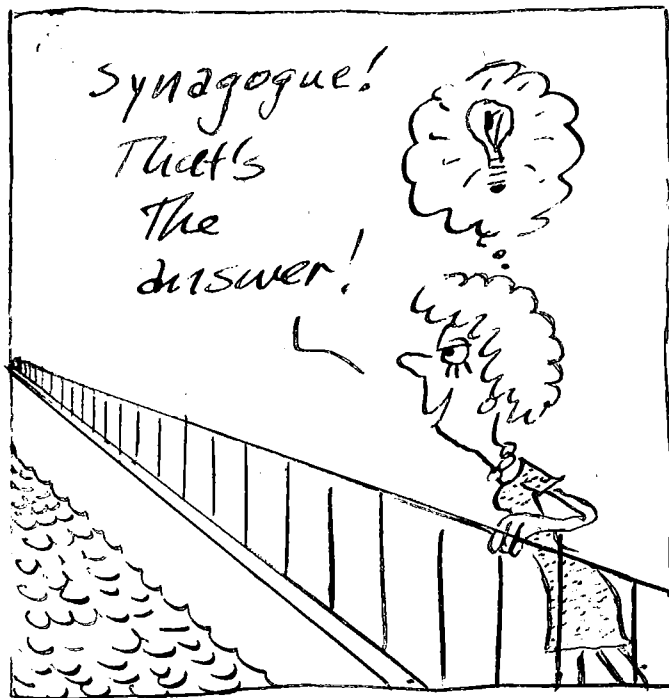
of our first apartment building. We broke every condo sales record in the city. We sold our building out in 10 weeks and we beat every competition in BPC. Commissions would be rolling in in just a couple of months!

Now we were gearing up to sell out our next project. We would be entering Phase II of the Battery Park City site plan. Our agreement for Phase I was met with success. But now the heat was on and the competition would be much tougher.

Rumors of a stock market crash were becoming a reality. Our sales percentages would definitely be affected. And on top of it all we were heading into the summer. Let's face it, people don't spend hot weekends in the city. The whole project could end up being D.I.T.W. In real estate that means "DEAD IN THE WATER."

Now, when the pressure's on me, I slow down, pull back and try to focus on something completely different. I had planned a Saturday off for so long, and this would be the perfect time.

After work I walked a half of a block to the Hudson River and stood at the railing. It was a beautiful evening, and already an incredible sunset: red, orange, magenta, amazing! The water was calm and I stared hard into it (very dramatic, right?) And then I felt this big smile on my face. Ding! Ding! Ding! I know, I'll go to synagogue! That's totally different! Synagogue?



Wait a second. The whole day will be wasted, shot. Oh forget it. Roller-skating would be much more fun. My skates are growing mildew! I don't know. What about that prayer book class you just started taking on Tuesdays; don't you think it's time

you went to services already? OK OK, but I don't know what I'm doing yet. How can I go to synagogue to pray if I don't know how to daven? I'll mess up the whole thing. I'll feel like an idiot! Just forget it. I know, I'll go with a friend then we can both feel like idiots! Oh, get real Rhonda, who are you going to drag to synagogue on a beautiful Saturday. Are you crazy? Forget it. Go skating.

Saturday morning I planned to meet my closest friend Rhonda (there are two!) in front of Lincoln Square Synagogue. Now only a true friend would suffer with me. It was 9:05 am, I was early. 9:10, I'm fine. 9:15, ok where is she? Five more minutes. 9:20, please. Give me a break. 9:25 OK that's it, I have to go in.

I turn around, she walked right by me! "Rhonda, where are you going? Get over here!" "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I was in such a rush, I walked right by," she said. "We're late! 15 minutes late! G-d will definitely punish us. This isn't funny."

We ran up the stairs. We got to the door. We knocked down the envelope that held the "Welcome to Lincoln Square Synagogue" fliers. We both took a chumash (Bible) instead of a prayer book. We couldn't catch our breath. We didn't know where to sit. We both started laughing, we were so nervous. Let's get out of here. We definitely felt like idiots!

Rabbi Buchwald smiled. He knew! He handed us prayer books and said "Shabbat Shalom." Maybe G-d won't punish us.

He was talking about the structure of the prayer service. The Pesukei D'Zimrah, the Psalms of Praise, and the Song of Moses. My Tuesday night class started to come back to me. I never really understood the importance of the Shema. I know that the parchment inside my mezuzah contains the Shema, and that it is the foundation of Jewish ethics and faith in G-d. When I recited it with others the meaning became stronger. "It will be a sign upon your doorpost." Now, I understand!

Someone gave a D'var Torah. How brave, I thought! And then the questions started flying! We reviewed the parsha of the week. I never did that in the Conservative synagogue I went to. This was different. This I liked.

Rabbi Buchwald made the Bible so interesting. He understood the frustration in some of the questions asked. It's frustrating to try to relate to history thousands of years ago, and at the same time keeping it in the context of religion. But it made me think, this is great stuff. The ultimate classic saga. Why don't we turn it into a mini

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series for TV? Then everyone would understand the history of the Jews.

After the Service, the new people introduced themselves, and we prepared for the Kiddush. We recited the blessing over wine and grain. It brought back those warm feelings from the past.

Coincidentally, there was a Beginners luncheon and the Rabbi asked us if we wanted to stay. We did. We made Kiddush again at lunch and I spilled my entire cup on the table, the floor, don't ask! We had to change the place setting. Well, I left my mark: a giant purple one!

Then we washed. For the first time in my entire life I washed my hands and said a blessing. It felt good. Rabbi Buchwald served the cholent. We all ate and sang and talked.



I looked through the glass doors of the building at the people rushing by and the cars speeding up Broadway, and thought I'm in a different world, and I can only thank G-d.

At the end of the meal we recited Birkat Hamazon, grace after meals. I followed maybe every third word, but it didn't matter. Just looking at the words made me feel good. How many times have I eaten a meal and never given thanks? Never thought about being fortunate enough to have food whenever I want it and have money to buy it as well? Who cares about deals, percentages, sales meetings, it's not that important in the scheme of things.

Honoring G-d takes priority. That's how I feel about Judaism now. Our religion is rich. It perpetuates strengthen human values and behavior. It teaches us to do the right thing, not just say the right thing. Our history is extraordinary. It's emotional and intellectual. You know, at Havdalla when we sing "Eliyahu Hanavi," the tears well up. The concept of spending 25 hours with other Jews is an intimate experience. Me and my Jews. I know, you think I'm nuts. Right? No, nine months ago, that was nuts!

Rhonda Posner is in commercial real estate and attends the Beginners Service at Lincoln Square Synagogue.

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relate to, rather than be in awe of.

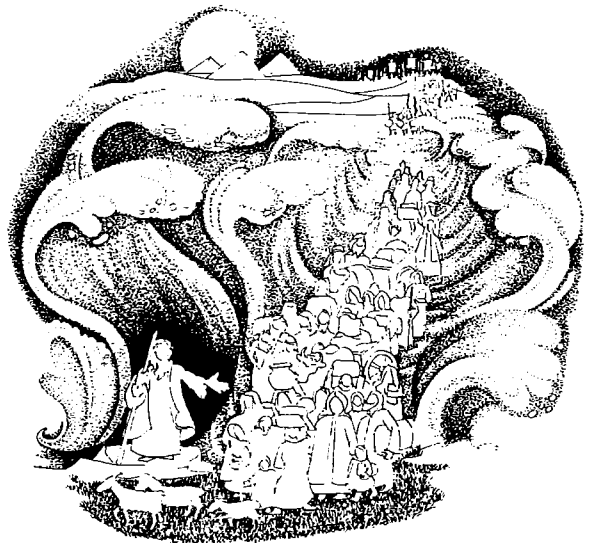
At the Beginners Minyan I am treated to an informal explanation of the prayer service by a rabbi who really teaches for the sake of teaching, and with the open forum style which truly appeals to me. I like the concept, but believe me, I have a long way to go! I do know that I can now daven (pray) in a different manner than I did before the Beginners Minyan came to Atlanta. The kollel has afforded me the opportunity to learn Judaism which I have always subconsciously wanted, but was never motivated to do before.



So I take my hat off (black, that is) to the Kollel, and especially to Rabbi David Silverman, a man who serves HaShem by serving the Jewish community.

I could go on and on, but the bottom line is that the Beginners Minyan provides each Jew with an opportunity for learning and growth which was not available before the Kollel came to Atlanta.

Donald Miller is in the pharmaceutical business and attends the Beginners Minyan at Congregation Beth Jacob, Atlanta, GA.



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then we can converse intellectually! Perhaps this is the meaning of Haggadah's response: Give the doubter an experience that will make his teeth stand on edge!

Many Jewish "doubters" today are not open to intellectual reasoning or discussion about Jewish rituals and traditions. Try as we may to persuade them -- their ears are sealed, unable to hear. The Bible suggests that we reach out to these Jews by inviting them to "taste" Jewish life, experience a Shabbat meal, a High Holiday service, a Purim party. Let Jewish experience open them up, then talk to them!

Pesach is a wonderful time to experience and to share experiences. Let us pray that through the experiences of the upcoming holiday, many Jews will find their own personal liberation, and reexperience the exodus through the beauty of Jewish tradition.

Happy Pesach.

Ephraim Buchwald is the Director at the NJOP and the Leader of the Beginners Service of the Lincoln Square Synagogue, New York.

The Beginners Newsletter

by Beryl Levenson

The purpose of the new "Bereshith" newsletter, published by the National Jewish Outreach Program, is specifically designed to promote communication between "Beginners" attending Beginners Services throughout America. It will be published five times a year, and may be ordered directly through the NJOP office or through your local Beginners Service.

We hope to discuss issues of common concern to Beginners and your direct participation is strongly encouraged.

Beryl Levenson is the Assistant Director of the National Jewish Outreach Program, and Editor of "Bereshith."

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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 programs of the NJOP, please write or call: 475 Fifth Avenue, Suite 1810, New York, NY 10017, (212) 725-1690.

Readers: This is your newsletter, and we'd like to hear from you. Article contributions are always welcome.

Cartoons by Stu Hample

NATIONAL JEWISH
OUTREACH PROGRAM, INC.
475 Fifth Avenue / Suite 1810
New York NY 10017

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