

בראשית

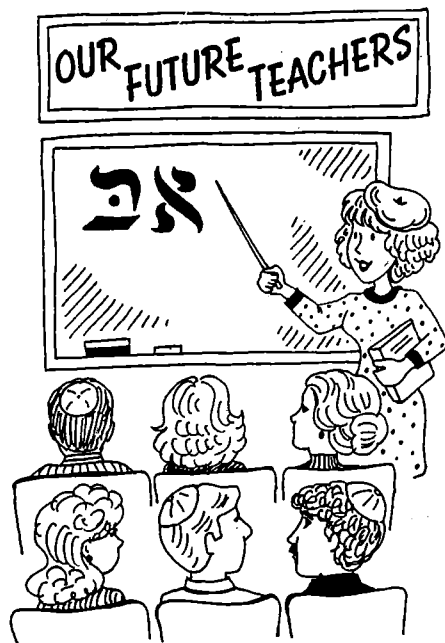
Vol. VII No. 3

BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

Nisan 5754/March 1994

FROM BEGINNER TO TEACHER

by Stephen L. Gardner



Twenty years ago my wife and I made a decision that had monumental implications for our lives and for those of our children. We were both the essence of modern day, American Jews: we kept a kosher home but ate everything imaginable outside of the house and only attended synagogue three days a year. When we moved to the community in which we still reside we were warned by countless residents that the local school left something to be desired. In the two years preceding the enrollment of our oldest son in kindergarten, the "war stories" about the schools grew in horror, leading to the decision I referred to above: to enroll our son in a Hebrew Day School.

In the last year or two that our son was in the Hebrew Day School, he developed a close, personal and warm relationship with his Rebbe (Jewish Studies Instructor), who encouraged him to attend synagogue and to consider attending a Yeshiva High School. The former was easily implemented, as Saturday morning was my time to perform weekly household chores (going to the dump, preparing wood for the wood stove, etc.) so the time commitment did not interfere with other family activities.

(cont. p. 3)

EXODUS, ONE STEP AT A TIME

by Paul Levy

The Exodus was the birth of the Jewish nation, an event unparalleled in human history, and a prime example of Divine intervention on a tangible and large scale. For those of us who have "come back" to Judaism, or perhaps discovered it for the first time, we can look upon the Exodus and the celebration of Passover with particular awe. As the Torah teaches us, the Exodus was by no means a Divine revelation for every Jew. Shortly after this momentous event, there were many who reverted to idolatry, who questioned Moses, and G-d, and who quickly forgot the strong hand that delivered them from Egypt.

In our generation, we can also see Divine intervention, from events as momentous as the establishment of the State of Israel, to those small,

(cont. p. 2)

"SHMURA MATZAH"

Retold by Rabbi Yitzchak Rosenbaum

The story is told about Rabbi Yisroel Salanter, the founder of the Mussar (self criticism) Movement, who was known far and wide for his meticulousness with the mitzvot (commandments).

As was, and is, the custom, great Rabbis often had their Passover Matzah baked under the special supervision of their own students. Rabbi Salanter was no exception. When his matzah baking day arrived, he called in three of his most trusted students for last minute instructions. The other students milled about the Bet Medrash, wondering exactly which special Chumrot (stringencies) their sainted Rabbi was concerned about. Would it have something to do with the mixing of the flour and water, or did it involve the kneading of the dough, or perhaps a special way

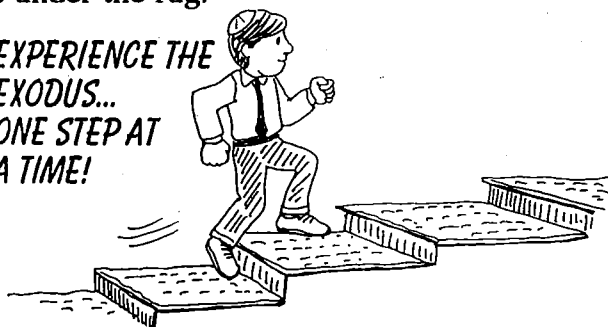
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EXODUS, ONE STEP . . . (cont. from p.1)

personal circumstances and situations that lead us back to our religion. And yet, even with this knowledge, we too, are susceptible to straying from the proper path, seduced by the modern idolatry that we face on a daily basis; idolatry of technology, as well as idolatry of the media and its keepers. Sadly, we are subject to the influences of a society that turns criminality into celebrity, and protects deviant and criminal behavior, at the expense of law abiding citizens. All these factors tend to reduce us as humans, and pull us away from Torah values and practice.

If we recognize this, we can begin to appreciate the value of the tangible Mitzvot (commandments) that the Torah demands of us. For in the tangible Mitzvot, such as the observance of Passover, we find one of the truly unique aspects of Judaism. Judaism is a religion of action. Tangible-measurable action, that, when observed correctly, permeates every aspect of our lives. The full observance of Passover is a demanding Mitzvah which can literally turn our homes upside down. The commandment to remove "chametz" from our homes, means we can't just sweep it under the rug.

EXPERIENCE THE
EXODUS...
ONE STEP AT
A TIME!



Furthermore, performance of this Mitzvah has an added bonus of improving us as individuals. When we approach every aspect of our lives in this same careful manner, we become immune to many of the negative forces that surround us.

No person can fully comprehend all the Mitzvot of the Torah. Therefore, the question always arises: How can one fulfill a Mitzvah that is not fully understood? Here again, Divine intervention takes place. By practicing the Mitzvot (such as the observance of Passover) G-d grants us as much understanding as we are able to accept. Through the performance of the Mitzvah we are often enlightened as to its purpose in our lives.

It was nearly two years ago that I first attended the Beginner's Service at Young Israel of Flatbush. It was the first time in over twenty years that I attempted to expand my knowledge and practice of Judaism. At first I was pleased that I could still read Hebrew

(barely). Then, as my Hebrew improved through attendance at the Beginners Service, I began, every so often, to attend services in the main synagogue. I wanted to gauge how I was progressing, and to understand those portions of the service that were not included in the Beginners Service.

Soon after last Yom Kippur, I decided to attend "regular" services each Shabbat. Although I still cannot keep pace with every prayer, I am comforted by the fact that each week I understand a little more. The depth of our religion is such, that no matter what stage we are at, there is always another step within our grasp. G-d provides us with the insight and the opportunity to take that step. We need only take it.

Paul Levy, a graphic artist, is a graduate of the Young Israel of Flatbush Beginners Service.

"SHMURA MATZAH" (cont. from p. 1)

to heat the oven? No one knew exactly, but they were all certain it was something very holy and unique.

And they were right, but not in any way they could anticipate. When the senior students came out of the *sanctum sanctorium*, their friends gathered around them to hear their sainted Rabbi's holy words. "What did he say?? What did he say??"

With a glow in his eyes the oldest of them responded, "The Rabbi reminded us to be very careful with all the laws pertaining to the matzah baking, but above all, we must be careful with the widows and orphans who are employed in the bakery. We must not speak harshly with them, but rather we should be as kind and considerate as possible, for their tears are close to their eyes, and G-d forbid that they should cry because of us."

That year the Matzah tasted especially good to Rabbi Yisroel and all of his students.

Rabbi Yitzchak Rosenbaum is the Program Director of the National Jewish Outreach Program.

DON'T BE A
HALF-BAKED
MATZOH!



FROM BEGINNER TO TEACHER *(cont. from p.1)*

Over the course of his last year at the Day School, his secular studies principal asked in a casual conversation, what our plans were for our son's high school education. We naturally replied that we expected him to attend the local high school. This led her to ask if we had ever considered a Yeshiva High School. (This would mean that our son would have to attend a dormitory school, as our small community has no Yeshiva High School.) While we confessed that we had not, when we asked our son about that option, it was clear that he had, for he responded, "You mean I can?"

Our synagogue's Rabbi (by now we had joined), played a very low key but supportive roll. Whenever our son came home from Yeshiva, he was given as many honors as could be arranged on a Saturday morning, and slowly but surely we too began attending synagogue with him. I still did my Saturday chores (now in the afternoon), but Saturday morning was spent in synagogue along with our entire family.

The above arrangement continued, until one fateful Friday night. We were driving to a friend's house for an evening of small talk, refreshments and TV. As we neared an intersection, my wife and I looked at each other, and in unison stated, "this feels weird."



We drove home quickly, and from that moment on we engaged in a process of learning and growing that has been continually exciting, enriching and inspiring.

Two years ago, our present Rabbi took a risk and asked me to use what I had learned in the past few years, and begin teaching NJOP's Level II Hebrew Course. By last count, I have taught it 3 or 4 times, and each has been a wonderful experience and growth opportunity for me. Each time I have learned

something new, and have attempted to impart, to those learning with me, a love for the beauty and majesty of our faith. I confess that I have often strayed far afield from the textbook provided for the course, but questions always lead to new learning. My students have been intellectually curious, and vigorously crave added insights into the faith of their fathers. How often questions would be posed in the form of "I remember my father or mother used to . . ." and they would go on to recount an observance or ritual practice of our religion, that somehow had become embedded in their memory banks, and that had been uncovered by a passing word or sentence in one of our sessions.

In order to share with others the beauty of our religion, it has been, and still is, our practice to invite someone from our small town to a Shabbos meal each week. Since our Hebrew classes have been relatively small, my wife has expanded this custom and now, towards the end of each course, invites the entire class for a Shabbos meal. At the meal, all our learning comes together, as we actually begin to practice what we have learned. (This is, of course, in addition to TURN FRIDAY NIGHT INTO SHABBOS, which our synagogue offers twice a year.)

While we do not have hard data to prove that we have affected anyone's life in a spiritual way, we are convinced that we have added a little bit of fuel to the ember that is the "Pintele Yid" burning inside each of us. If we have done nothing more than to make that fuel readily available, so that some day, the glowing ember bursts into flame, then we have indeed accomplished something special.

Stephen L. Gardner is a school psychologist and teaches the Level II Hebrew Reading Crash Course at Congregation Ezerath Israel in Ellenville, New York, where he is also President.

MY JEWISH ESSENCE

by Sharon Esther Lampert

Anti-Semitism is a weed.

The weed is found in Jewish gardens.

Jewish gardens have Jewish plants.

Jewish plants are identified by Jewish roots.

Jewish roots are grounded in Jewish traditions.

Jewish traditions nourish Jewish plants with Jewish nutrients.

Jewish nutrients are Jewish spiritual messages that pass from generation to generation in the form of Torah, rabbinic interpretation, legal codes, poetry, precept, parable, prayer and song.

Jewish spiritual messages transmit a steady stream of life sustaining and enhancing instructions that allow Jewish plants to survive, thrive, and flourish in the midst of wars, invasions, exiles and persecutions.

Inherent in the instructions is G-d's gift to the Jewish people.

This gift protects Jewish life through time.

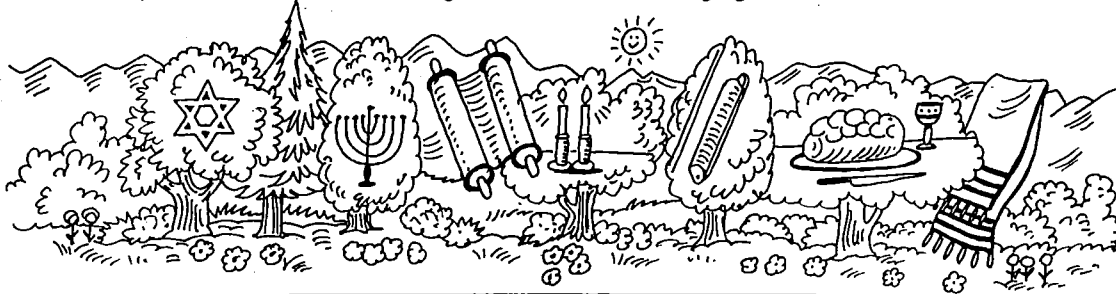
This is the Jewish gift to the world as witnessed by the history of the world.

This gift is indestructible as its power is its essence.

The essence of the gift has the power to transform the world.

It is the gift of choosing life.

Sharon Esther Lampert is a member of the Beginners Service at Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun in New York.



Illustrations by Florie Freshman

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 programs of the NJOP, please write or call: 485 Fifth Avenue, Suite 212, New York, NY 10017, (212) 986-7450.

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