

ברשת

Vol. VIII No. 3

BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

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LACE, SILVER, TOBACCO AND CHAMETZ

Retold by Rabbi Yitzchak Rosenbaum

"I DARE YOU G-d, to find even one speck of Chametz!"



The incident occurred in the small Russian town of Berditchev some two hundred years ago. It caused a total upheaval in the town. Their Rabbi, the famous sage and Tzaddik, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, of blessed memory, seemed, at best, to have lost some of his marbles, and, at worst, G-d forbid, to have become a sinner. It was Passover, you see, and, shock of all shocks, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak had been seen and heard going around to various Jews of the community asking if they could provide him with some chametz. But let's listen in on some of the dialogue.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak: "My dearly beloved fellow Jew, I need a favor from you. Now, I know it's Passover, and chametz is hard to obtain, but I still need a few slices of bread in my possession by tonight. Perhaps you can help?"

After the initial shock, our "dearly beloved Jew" replies, "Rebbe, do you expect me to have chametz on Pesach?? Of course I don't. And I don't know any Jew who has it either."

This dialogue, with slight variations, occurred several times that morn-

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PESACH ... NOT JUST A DAY OFF FROM SCHOOL

by Larry Diamond

It was May, the year I'll keep to myself, thank you. It was just a few weeks until my 13th birthday and my Bar Mitzvah. I was reading and re-reading my Haftorah portion because I had to be prepared to speak before the entire congregation. I could read and speak Hebrew at "ramming" speed. If there was an Evelyn Wood Hebrew course, I'd have graduated at the top of the class. And that's what I knew about Judaism ... fast Hebrew, make Grandma proud at your Bar Mitzvah and yes let's get that Pushka filled up! All of this from an Orthodox Synagogue in Brooklyn. Oh yeah, there were also a few holidays when we "got off from school." Passover was one of them. What I once thought was only a day off from school is now Pesach,

(cont. p. 2)

CHOOSING JUDAISM

by Michal Chin

In 1986 I had what was probably my first encounter with formal worship in Judaism at Ramaz Yeshiva, where I was employed as a general studies teacher specializing in remedial mathematics. Prior to this, I had spent a good part of my adolescence in Borough Park. Borough Park, to me, signified observance; most of my friends were observant Jews, so in the process of social interaction I too became somewhat aware of what it meant to "keep Shabbos."

As Borough Park represented observance to me, so my experience at Ramaz represented a new stage in religious awareness. I had been a philosophy major as an undergraduate at Brooklyn College, and later obtained an M.A. in comparative religions at N.Y.U. But none of my studies had prepared me for what I was to encounter at

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"...PESACH" (cont. from p.1)

among the most meaningful and moving holidays we have.

You see, now, after many years, I found out that I am really and truly a beginner. All that speed-reading and Pushka filling is not Judaism. And if you still think it is, have I got a surprise for you. Find a "Beginner's Service", sit down, buckle up, relax and get ready for the ride of your life.

While there's so much to explore, let's just spend a moment on Passover. No, it wasn't all that easy to find out about. You can read about Pesach and you can see it in the movie. Ah, wouldn't it just be grand to believe that Pharaoh was really Yul Brynner and that Moses was actually Charleston Heston. And "Oh," what about Edward G. Robinson, Anne Baxter, Debra Paget and Vincent Price. I did all that but I first began to really understand more about Passover when I attended a lecture on the east side of Manhattan. With charm, dignity and scholarship, this wonderful Rabbi explained everything we needed to understand about Passover, and all I got was "You have to look under the bed for chametz with a lit candle???" I don't have the time for that and anyway, there must be some New York City law about holding a candle under a mattress!

While it is so important to remove the chametz, change the dishes, eat only foods designated for consumption on Passover and "use a candle under the bed,"



if you don't know why you are doing all of these things, you miss the point. We, the Jews, are different. We are the chosen. We exist because of miracles performed on our behalf by G-d. Other culturally advanced societies have come and gone while we are sustained. In the merit of our patriarchs and matriarchs, and by the strength, courage and righteousness of generations before us, we are sustained by G-d. Merely that we continue to exist is a miracle. All that we have to be thankful for is a miracle. Passover is a miracle. No, Passover is the miracle. Our reenactment of Passover from generation to generation fulfills G-d's Torah commandment to "remember."

So, if you don't have the luxury of spending Passover at the beautiful Eden Roc or the Doral in Miami Beach, get out the brown paper, throw out the

bread (don't forget that can of bread crumbs), and be careful when you hold the candle under the bed. Remember, if it was good enough for Cecil B. DeMille, it should be good enough for us. Enjoy the holiday!

Larry Diamond is a businessman in New York and is a member of the Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun Beginners Service.

"...LACE, SILVER, TOBACCO" (cont. from p.1)

ning, and before long, the entire town had heard the startling news. However, the town soon had new information to ponder. It seems that Rabbi Levi Yitzchak had also been active in the non-Jewish community. It was learned from reliable sources, that he had ordered some fine French lace, expensive Persian silver, and pure Turkish tobacco, all of which could only be obtained from Russia's "special" importers — smugglers.

Well, if the people were mystified before, they were completely baffled now. First chametz — now lace, silver, and tobacco. What could be going on in the Rabbi's mind??

Fortunately, we, dear reader, know the answer, since we were privy to the following conversation between Rabbi Levi Yitzchak and G-d.

"G-d, have You still any complaints about Your people, the Jews?"

"And why shouldn't I? I've given them 613 commandments to follow, a beautiful way of life — actually, a perfect way of life, and they still don't always do what I tell them.

"Well, Ribbono Shel Olam," responded Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, "I say that there is no people like Your people, Israel. And I'll prove it! You know, the Czar wants to control his borders. He wants to make certain that his rules are followed and his taxes are collected. To accomplish this he has established a large regiment of border police and soldiers, and set up an intricate system of security fences and customs stations. But, when I wanted lace, silver and tobacco, all I had to do was let a few people know — and I was besieged with offers, no questions asked, and no taxes paid. All the Czar's soldiers, police, and border guards — useless.

But with Your beloved people, the Jews — all You had to do was write in your Holy Torah, "Seven days shall no leavened bread be found in your homes," and, with no soldiers, no police, and no border guards, I couldn't beg, borrow, or purchase a single piece of chametz. Your command alone is enough to make chametz more scarce than diamonds. For this alone, G-d, let this be the last year of our exile, and — Next Year In Jerusalem."

Rabbi Yitzchak Rosenbaum is the Program Director at NJOP.

"...CHOOSING JUDAISM" (cont from p. 1)

Ramaz.

Each day started off with morning davening. As the only non-Jew at the yeshiva, I was given the option of learning to daven, or skipping the service for "personal devotions." Since my own upbringing was based more on the study of Confucius than on any particular religion, I chose to daven. Rabbi Mayer Moskowitz, headmaster of the Lower School where I taught, guided me in learning Hebrew, and presented me with a bi-lingual Siddur. So comfortable was I with the experience of it all that I soon found myself davening at home as well, even on days when school was out. Moreover, I somehow sensed that my prayers had always been heard.

I was not a "believer" at this time, although I had long acknowledged that among all the myriad gods of the universe there could only be one true G-d. To identify Him, though, was not always so easy and straightforward a task. I realize only in retrospect that the key to connecting with Him, to finding Him, is first to reach out believing that He is there; i.e., one must first believe that He exists and trust He hears one's prayers, rather than approach Him agnostically and expect Him to prove His reality to us. It is thus a reciprocal relationship; in faith we pray, but also in the act of praying, G-d responds to reaffirm that faith. For it is not for us to "test" His existence; rather, it is we who are tested.

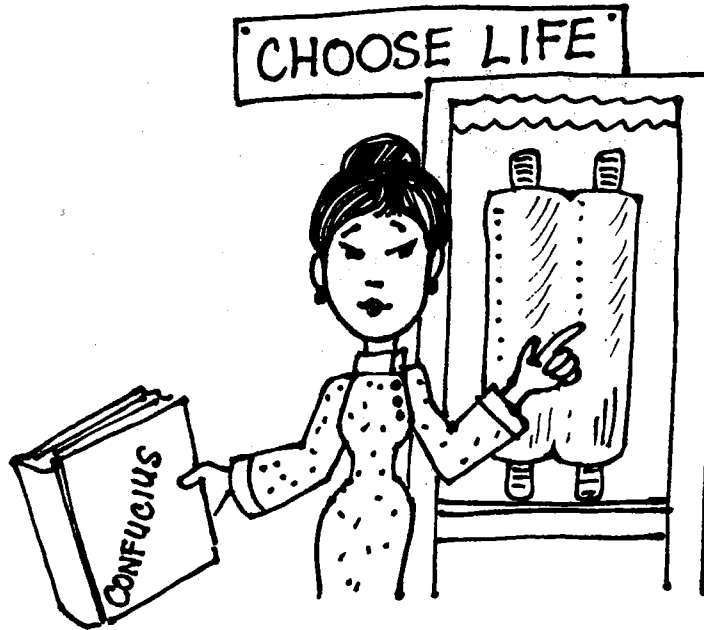
Whether it was mere curiosity or the searchings of a sincere heart, for this believer now (whose long overdue conversion to Orthodox Judaism took place just this past summer) praise and prayer undoubtedly played an influential part in finding G-d through Judaism. I had made a commitment to daven with the children at Ramaz, and there were times indeed when I did not "feel" like it. Yet it was in the act of doing, whether one felt like it or not, that there came the reinforcement. Inevitably, by the time we reached "Aleinu," my own spirits were uplifted, as if G-d had heard our praises and had rewarded me personally for taking part in communal prayers.

It is now 1995. I keep Shabbos, and I keep the

laws of kashrut. Still, the world is full of wonders and mysteries, one of which is whether it is we who choose G-d, or G-d who chooses us. However much I like to believe that I had a free will in the matter, I also know that it would be self-flattery for me to presume that it was in my own infinite wisdom and ability to discern the one true G-d of the myriad religions of the world, that I

had come to accept the G-d of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as my G-d. Instead, I rest content in the thought that I was brought to this point by a gracious G-d, to humbly share in the fate of His chosen.

If I were to offer any words of encouragement to the dubious of heart, I would quote the old adage, saying: "Don't question, just do it."



Michal Winifred Chin is an Associate Professor of Comparative Religion at St. Francis College and is a member of the Beginners Service at the Young Israel of Flatbush.

**ON FRIDAY, MAY 12th
HOW ABOUT
TURNING FRIDAY NIGHT
INTO SHABBOS?**

If you're Jewish, we'd like you to celebrate at a very special Friday night dinner. We're putting together a real Shabbos meal created especially for people who want to know more about Shabbos. Complete with all the rituals. The ones you remember from your parents and grandparents. The ones you remember from years gone by. And some you might have even forgotten about altogether.

There's going to be lots of singing. Maybe some dancing. A lot of questions. A lot of answers. And plenty of Shabbos spirit.

If you're curious about Shabbos, join your many curious neighbors who for the first time in years are going to usher in the Shabbos on May 12th in the same way their ancestors have ushered it in for centuries.

**Come to "The Shabbos For People Who Want To Know More."
Friday, May 12th at 7 P.M.
RSVP by Coupon only, no later than 5 P.M., Tuesday, May 9th.**

For those who live beyond walking distance of the Synagogue, please call for Shabbos hospitality.

Turn Friday Night into Shabbos

I'd like to turn Friday night into Shabbos.

I will be coming alone. Enclosed a check for \$15.00.

I will be coming with _____ just as I did once a \$15.00 per person.

I will be coming with my family. A total of _____ will attend. Enclosed a \$45.00 for the entire family.

Please make checks payable to Synagogue and mail to the attending rabbi at the names and addresses of rabbis and seal the envelope on back.

Name _____

Address _____

Phone # _____

ANIM ZMIROS (A PURIM PARODY)
Sung to the tune of Anim Z'miros (what else?)

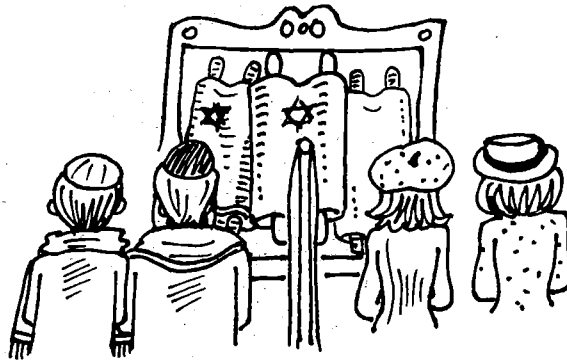
by Diane Frank (now Abramowitz)
and Doug Zaner

Anim Z'miros, I don't know the words
The kids who lead it
They must be nerds.

Five year olds have got it down
Though they sing it way too high
If they'll make me a tape
Then maybe so could I.

Anim Z'miros, I fake it really well
But so does the next guy
So who the heck can tell.

They say it way too fast
For me to sing along
I can't keep up
So I sing the words all wrong.



Anim Z'miros
What was that I heard
Oh, is that what he said
This is so absurd.

I know a verse or two
But it's easier just to hum
Let's go to one I know
How about "Adon Olam?"

Anim Z'miros, I can mumble too
Twelve more verses
Is it almost through?

Each week a different tune
I'm still two words behind
There's always next week
I think I've lost my mind.

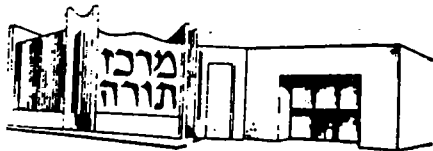
Diane Frank and Doug Zaner, computer consultants by profession, are graduates of the Beth Jacob Beginners Service in Atlanta, Georgia.

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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 the programs of NJOP, please write or call: 485 Fifth Avenue, Suite 701, New York, NY 10017, (212) 986-7450.

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



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DATED MATTER

NOT "YET" RELIGIOUS

By Alan Magill

I was at a Bar Mitzvah recently when someone asked me if I was "religious" from birth.

"No," I said, and with a twinkle in my eye, added, "I became religious at 6 months."

He laughed, but in my joke was the ambivalence towards what it means to me to be "religious," and who and when someone deserves that title.

Today, I wear a yarmulke, I am Sabbath observant, and I aspire to eat only kosher food and follow the laws of family purity.

Growing up in my house, I learned by the examples set by my parents, may they rest in peace, about the importance of keeping your word, respecting others, providing hospitality to the needy, and caring for the sick.

Therefore, today, I find it difficult to answer when someone asks, "Did you come from a religious home?"

To be sure, growing up we didn't observe the Sabbath or eat only Kosher food, but the things that we did do, must have had something to do with religion.

When I became "religious," - a gradual process that began around eight years ago - my parents respected my choice, and pleasantly took part in the religious rituals that I suggested for them (i.e., having a Sabbath meal when I visited from New York, lighting Chanukah candles).

At my father's funeral, a co-worker of his told me that the religious rituals I had brought into the home had meant so much to my father. I fondly recall my father sitting at the dining room table with a yarmulke perched on his head, singing Hebrew Sabbath songs, together with my mother and me, from a transliterated prayer book. Although cancer had claimed my mother's voice box, I still heard her loud and clear as she put her thumb on and off an opening in her neck to make the sounds she wanted.

I see my parents as good people, who were always willing to do more, even though it meant trying to do something a little different from their regular routine.

What I have encountered in the "religious" world in which I now travel, has at times given me pause to wonder about this new "religious" path I have chosen.

People ask me, "What prompted you to take the 'right' path?" What, after all, is that right path?

Is it the path travelled by a "religious man," well respected in the community, who owed me money for work performed for him for 2 months, making promises for payment, not kept, until finally coming through last night, when I saw the check in the mailbox?

Doesn't he read the Jewish law that says you must pay your workers before the sun goes down?

Around 75 suns rose and set before he finally paid me!

More important, he told me he was going to do something, and, on at least two occasions, did not do it. In the so-called non-religious home in which I grew up, if someone gave their word, they kept it.

Or is the right path the one that takes me to a minyan where "religious" men have casual and distracting conversations very close to me while I am trying to concentrate on saying the Mourner's Kaddish.

At one minyan, I had politely asked two men, who had been talking during the Kaddish, if they could please not talk while I said the mourner's prayer. They respected my request that day. The very next week, however, when I said the Kaddish, they were talking again and continued to talk throughout the prayer. And Jewish law says they're not supposed to.

And these are well-respected men in the "religious" community.

Does the right path lead you to Avenue J or Avenue M in Brooklyn (and probably elsewhere) on a Thursday night or a Friday afternoon, where scores of "religious" people double-park and snarl up traffic just for their own convenience? It's the law of the land not to double-park, and Jewish law says that Jews are

required to obey civil law.

This is not intended as put-down of religious people who do not entirely live up to the laws and ethics by which they profess to live. I know that NOBODY is completely perfect. That is the human condition.

G-d knows, and people who know me know, that there is much that I have to work on to live up to even half of what I believe in.

But this examination has given me a new perspective: the "right path" is simply about being ready to grow, about being good people, willing to do more, willing to try something a little different.

That "something" would vary from individual to individual: For one person it could mean lighting candles on Friday night, for another it could mean giving up eating ham, or visiting an elderly lonely aunt in a nursing home, or paying bills a little sooner, or talking a little less in synagogue, or parking in a legal spot, even if it is a block farther away from the convenience store.

So let's drop the monikers. I now see that there are no "religious" and "non-religious" people. We are all in process - not "yet" purely "religious." And may we all be given the strength to try and do a little bit more for ourselves, for others, and for G-d.

Alan Magill is a writer-recreation therapist who is happily married to Miriam Magill. They live in Brooklyn.

