

BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter
for Beginners,
by Beginners

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בראשית

THOSE WONDERFUL STRANGERS

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

During the more than 30 years that I've conducted the Beginners Service at Lincoln Square Synagogue, I've had the privilege of meeting the most remarkable people. We've had some noted Broadway actors, TV producers, musicians, composers, top-flight newspaper and magazine editors and writers, and many other wonderful people -- all of whose stories would fill many intriguing chapters in a book that I've been planning to write for the last two decades.

Most of these "Beginners" are Jews of various ages who have not had the good fortune to receive meaningful Jewish education in their youth. There were, to be sure, a small number of formerly religious Jews who had dropped out and had come to the Beginners Service to explore the possibility of returning to observance. Some of them came back because their prospective spouses were not Jewish and were studying for conversion. In the process of their significant other's conversion, they too learned to appreciate the heritage that they had previously rejected. They now take their studies much more seriously than before and have re-embraced their heritage with great fervor and love.

(cont. on p. 2)

GOOD-BYE AMERICA

Miriam Leah Droz

When I was younger, attending the Israel Day Parade was a religious ritual for me. I went every year, wore blue and white, and made sure to have a plastic flag to wave. In fact, I observed the Israel Day Parade with much more fervor than many of the other holidays, fully engaged and joyful, rather than inattentive or confused. It may be sad that this was my perception of "important" holidays, but I still consider myself to have had a good Jewish education. After all, I did graduate high school feeling proud to be a Jew -- and with an ingrained knowledge that Israel is the Jewish homeland.

So if, as an adult, I now consider moving to Israel, I wonder what that says about the "American Dream," at least for me.

Here I am, a privileged American, contemplating emigration...away from the very land whose soil and torch welcome so many. I, an American, turn elsewhere to realize my dream. Would any history book believe it?

As others flee to new homelands to relieve (cont. on p. 3)

IS THIS A NO DRIVING HOLIDAY?

Anna Gotlieb

"Is this another no driving holiday?" she asked. I could hear the resignation in her voice. She's gotten used to my not answering phones on certain days. Not stopping by to say hello. She's adjusted with some humor to my frantic adherence to certain rules and regulations -- though she readily admits, she "could not live" the way I do.

And yet, I think she would have liked the cheesecake and the blintzes. Not that it was either one of these that gave me so much joy. It was neither the eggplant parmesan nor the baked stuffed shells, nor the driving rain that beat against the window panes as my husband, son and several friends sat around the table studying through the night. Nor was it the hot chocolate served at two a.m. It was not the brilliant sunshine that flooded the streets as we walked to shul in the morning while others readied themselves to go to work. It was not the little shul itself, nor was it the people who filled the rows of seats on Shavuot. It was not (cont. on p. 4)

WONDERFUL STRANGERS (cont. from p. 1)...

With the festival of Shavuot upon us, we can't help but think about the story of the extraordinary proselyte Ruth and her dramatic decision to join her fate with that of the Jewish people. According to tradition, Ruth was a princess, the daughter of Eglon, King of Moab. Her Jewish husband had died, and Ruth joined Naomi, her late husband's mother, who was returning to Bethlehem where they were certain to be subjected to resentment and rejection. With the most memorable words, Ruth dismisses the challenges she faces and says to her mother-in-law, Naomi, "Where you go, I will go.... Your people shall be my people, and your G-d, my G-d.... Only death shall separate you and me."

Over the past three decades, I have met many "Ruths" and their male equivalents (the name "Onkelos" comes to mind, the famous convert of the first century C.E. who wrote the most important Aramaic translation of the Bible). These remarkable people chose to cast their lot with that of the Jewish people, for no reason other than they were attracted to the word of Hashem. Some of them, from the former Soviet Union, where intermarriages were commonplace, had Jewish fathers but non-Jewish mothers. Despite the frequent anti-Semitic confrontations that they experienced in their youth, they were eager to convert in order to be part of the Jewish people and Jewish destiny. Others were born to non-Jewish parents and raised in non-Jewish homes, and were attracted to Judaism because of their close relationships with Jewish friends or Jewish mentors. Still others were seriously into comparative religion, had checked out other faiths, and felt a special attraction to Judaism.

One of the most remarkable letters that I have ever received came from the parents of a convert to Judaism who was a graduate of Princeton and Oxford.

Dear Rabbi Buchwald,

This comes to wish you and your family a Happy Chanukah and to share with you our joy in all that you have done for our son, Shlomo (not his real name)! We are very grateful to you and to the Beginners class at the Lincoln Square Synagogue for welcoming him, nurturing him and converting him to Judaism, with which he feels so very much "at home." I had the same feeling when I, attending your service, participated in the prayers and songs and heard the lessons and partook of the delightful lunch afterwards. I can understand his joy and his peace and his love for Torah. Thank you so much. Shalom.

I wish I could say that I have received many such letters of gratitude from *Jewish* parents, whose children became observant as a result of the Beginners Service. But I must admit that I have never received even one!! I have, to be sure, received my fill of hate mail from irate and resentful Jewish

parents whose children have become more observant.

Although not based on hard statistics, there seems to be a momentum, although minuscule at this point, of extremely thoughtful and highly educated non-Jews who are attracted to Judaism. These are highly accomplished, sophisticated, young people who have really no reason to be drawn to the people of Israel, other than the spark and fire that is within them.

It is not at all surprising that our rabbis say that all converts -- past, present and future, were at Mt. Sinai, where the Hebrew people were betrothed to G-d and finally became the Jewish nation. When I think back to the converts I've encountered over these many years, I find myself invariably saying, "That person clearly has a Jewish *neshama* -- a Jewish soul." To my mind, it's not at all preposterous to think that these sincere converts to Judaism were indeed at Sinai. It makes no difference whether they are from Thailand, Korea, Germany, Romania, Russia, or South Africa. They were all with us, like one person and one heart.

The one mitzvah that is most often repeated in the Torah is "*V'ah'avtem et ha'ger*," Love the stranger. Sincere converts to Judaism are hardly strangers. They are our brothers and sisters. Welcome to the *mishpacha* (family).

May you be blessed.

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald is the Founder and Director of the National Jewish Outreach Program.

Rebbetzin Judy Rosenbaum's Awesome Blintzes

Ingredients for Batter

4 eggs
pinch of coarse salt
1 cup flour
1 cup milk
1 capful of oil (approx. 1 Tbsp)

Ingredients for Filling

2 lbs farmer cheese
4 eggs
1/2 cup sugar
1 tsp vanilla extract
cinnamon
raisins
A few Tbsps of flour as needed

BATTER:

Add salt to eggs and beat with a hand mixer (or by hand). Sift the flour into the eggs, mixing well with a spoon. Add milk, and mix until smooth. Add oil. Mix thoroughly, making sure that there are no lumps. Heat a small frying pan with a little bit (1 tsp) of oil spread evenly. Pour a thin layer of batter into the pan, tilting the pan from side to side for an even consistency. Cook on 1 side only until the top is dry and solidified. Gently remove from the pan, turning out bottom side up onto a clean, dry towel. Continue with remaining batter. If the batter becomes too thick, add milk.

FILLING:

Beat eggs and add to cheese. Add sugar, vanilla, cinnamon and raisins. Spoon filling onto each blintz and close by rolling and then tucking opposite ends. Fry both sides until brown OR bake in a greased pan at 350° until brown.

The blintzes may be frozen after filling, and then fried or baked before serving. Yields 15-20 blintzes.

Note: For a non-sweet filling replace sugar, vanilla, cinnamon and raisin with salt, pepper, & onion powder.

GOOD-BYE AMERICA (cont. from p. 1)...themselves from undesirable lives, I have what can be considered an enviable existence: freedom. What can be better than freedom?

I believe that freedom is a wonderful, but neutral, 'help-mate' to other goals. To me, "freedom" is only half a phrase. Freedom, the ability to be or pursue something without restraint -- is purposeless without something to pursue. The "Get Out of Jail Free" card in Monopoly is meaningless if a player is not in jail. If citizens in a free country do not cultivate meaningful goals, a land of free people has the potential to become a land of pointless people. Even worse, when positive life goals are missing, the empty space is often filled with actions that hurt others. In a "free" country, people are free not only to do acts of goodness, but to cause pain or wreak havoc, as long as they aren't breaking the law -- or getting caught.

America is truly a land of golden opportunity for those who have dreams to pursue. For others, it can be a golden opportunity to lead meaningless lives. Freedom is neutral, and that is why its value depends on how it is used.

The ironic benefit of America for many immigrants, however, is that just reaching 'neutral' is a giant step up from their previous experiences in their mother countries. America elevates their quality of life tremendously, and immigrants from these countries find great relief just in being released from their limitations. I am grateful to have never experienced oppression, and I praise America for helping redeem many people from this pain. Nevertheless, I believe that there is something more to life than freedom from oppression. Just as tyrants impose a life of negative meaning on their subordinates, we have the potential to create a life of positive meaning. Better than freedom, is *purpose*.

I have chosen to pursue not the American dream of fairness, but the Jewish dream of making the world a place of goodness and accountability. I have chosen to dwell in a place where our actions will have meaning, where trying harder, learning from mistakes, and helping others will be valued, and where at the end of the day, we will have established a meaningful relationship with our Creator.

Thus, I move forward in the direction of this dream, and I look toward Israel. Knowing that immigration is no "strange fire" for Jews, I look to immigrant literature for inspiration, to pave the bumpy road that lies ahead. However, much of the material written about the immigrant experience in America, the world's model for making the transition from one country to another, does not mirror the experience anticipated in moving to Israel. Immigrant tales tell of the persecuted moving to a place of golden glitter. Emigration to Israel, however, is a case of role reversal -- giving up a golden palace for a life of intensity and likely tribulation.

From whom, then, can an emigrating American Jew draw inspiration? Who has done what the American emigrant does -- leaving a land where life is comfortable, for the Holy Land, where life involves hard work and accountability? We American emigres no longer relate to stories of suffering in the Old Country and redemption in the New. We are leaving a life in which we set our own limits, choosing instead immovable, towering odds against which we risk failure. Has anyone gone before us who can light our way on the long journey and struggle of an immigrant to Israel? Unlike Abraham or Moses, who received direct communication from G-d about when to travel and when to stop, how will

we know when it is the time to go, and what to do when we arrive? These are questions that any Jewish American considering a move to Israel must ask.

Surprisingly, such a model for us may be found in the upcoming holiday of Shavuot, when we read the fascinating story of Ruth, the "Moabite" princess. Like many American Jews, Ruth lived in a world of luxury and privilege. She was a princess (otherwise known as a MAP, a Moabite Arabian Princess) who had everything her heart

desired. Yet Ruth, lacking nothing, decided that a life that lacks nothing is not as important as a life that has meaning. Ruth walked away from the facade of temporary comfort, choosing the long-term benefit of a meaningful life. She saw the deep meaning that was possible through living as a Jew in the Holy Land, and she went, despite possessions left behind and an unknown future. It is Ruth who is a beacon for us all.

Ruth succeeded because she had belief in a value system that works to achieve goals for many, without everyone needing to try to rise to the top of the heap. "If the system works," she said, "I will use it." She struggled to learn a new language and pay the bills. She did not come with bells and whistles announcing her previous stature, nor seek recognition for her choice. She simply came to contribute to the community and to live a more fulfilling life. She could have hesitated and asked for time to consider the choice before taking the plunge, but instead she went at the first opportunity, recognizing that there was no better time than the present.

If I, as an American Jew, decide to make Aliyah, I have my parents to blame (or actually thank) for giving me a pro-Israel upbringing, and a Moabite princess to acknowledge who serves as my guide in striving for a more meaningful life. The only thing left to do is to apologize sincerely to America for leaving, and express abundant thanks to this wonderful country for giving me the freedom to make my choice.

Miriam Leah Droz, a native of Pittsburgh, PA, currently works as a librarian in Newton, MA, and is finishing her MA in Jewish History. Having spent time in New York and Israel, Miriam Leah hopes to make Aliyah as soon possible!



"GOODBYE AMERICA!"

NO DRIVING (cont. from p. 1)...the walk under darkened skies for late night meals shared with like-minded friends, nor was it the holiday lunches eaten with company at their house or ours. It was not the group of us walking together each day, spanning the breadth of the smoothly paved roads. It was not the sound of our voices rising and lowering in unison as we *davened* or the jumble of our good wishes as we parted ways at various street corners throughout the neighborhood.

It was not one of these things in particular, but each of these things and all of them combined, that seemed to give clarity to this holiday.

So the Torah is mine, I found myself thinking over the whipped cream pie and the cheese soufflé. Mine to share with all these lovely people walking to and from shul with me, praying with me, eating meals with me. Mine to share with all the children -- the little children, the teenage children -- gathered with siblings and parents and friends at kitchen tables and dining room tables and backyard picnic tables to reaffirm our connection to one another.

So the Torah belongs to me, I thought, and with it the celebrations. The wonderful, beautiful commemorations, the hours and days set apart from time, the spaces protected from the mundane, the shining, thrilling, mysterious, rich rituals which reoccur.


"A no-driving holiday?"

Yes.

Anna Gotlieb is a writer living in Rockland County. Her children are now grown with children of their own. Anna proudly carries the new title, "Granny Annie."

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To receive Rabbi Buchwald's weekly e-mail message, please send an e-mail to: weekly@njop.org

Illustrations by Wendy Dunn

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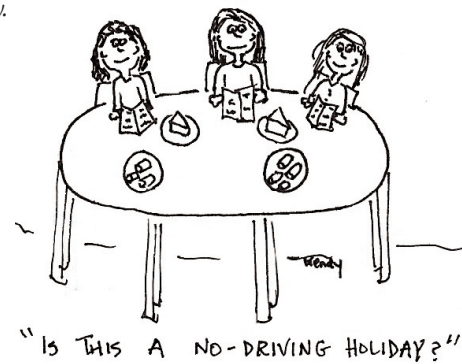
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