

בראשית

Vol. IX No. 4

BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

Sivan 5756/May 1996

THE MOMENT OF TRUTH

by Rabbi Morey Schwartz

Every generation faces one - at least one. A decision must be made, a commitment must be secured, in order for an individual, or family or an entire community to survive.

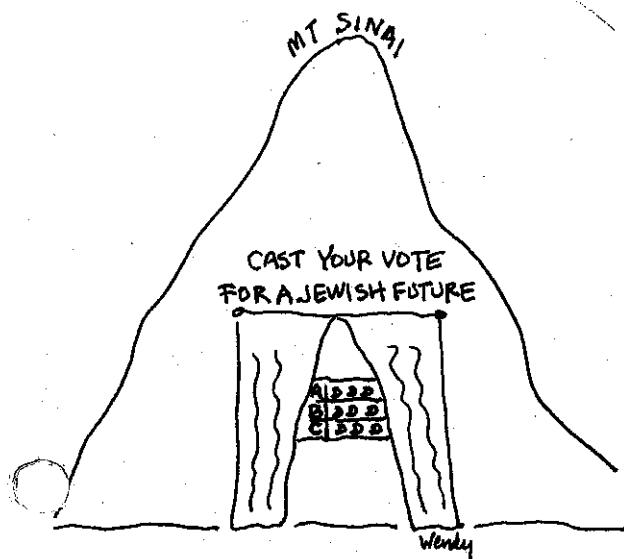
Step into a voting booth. . . a serious decision which will impact the future of your family, work, career, etc.

Sickness. . . choose a doctor. Who will you choose? What will be the impact of that decision on your health, and your life?

Marriage. . . a spouse. . . who will it be? The eternal impact of that choice is immeasurable! That moment when you stand under the chupah is a moment which will change all future moments. . .

If any one nation has had more than its share of these pivotal moments, it is ours, the Jewish people. And among the most powerful such moments was the day we stood at the foot of Mount Sinai more than 3,300 years ago.

(cont. on p. 3)



A STORY OF DEATH AND LIFE

by Michèle Jaffé-Pearce

Discovering the Beginner's Service in London turned my life around. As a 37 year old "atheistic" journalist I had reached a turning point. My parents had died and although they had eschewed religion, I had seen them both off with Jewish funerals. It bothered me, that I could understand barely a word at their services, and that I felt an outsider in my own religion. As the days passed, I felt orphaned not just by my parents, but from my heritage. It was my non-Jewish husband who encouraged me to take action.

As I searched the pages of the London telephone directory for Jewish organizations, the words *Jewish Learning Exchange*, danced before my eyes, I dialed and heard myself ask, "Do you

(cont. on p. 2)

A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

by Shoshana Sloman

Just as the Exodus was a major turning point for our people, Pesach has proven to be a spiritual turning point for me. It was shortly after Pesach several years ago, that I realized I was meant to become Jewish. Then, the next year, right after Pesach, my husband, two-year old son, and I moved into the Orthodox community and began striving to be observant. During that year, my conversion was completed, we were blessed with another son, and I experienced Pesach for the first time as a Jew. As Shavout approaches, and the cycle begins again, I'm wondering what sort of spiritual growth the year ahead will hold.

Shavout was the first holiday my family and I spent as part of the Jewish community. I remember

(cont. on p. 3)

A STORY OF DEATH AND LIFE (cont. from p. 1)

offer courses in Judaism for adults?" A warm voice at the other end assured me that they did. I enrolled for a five week course in introductory Judaism, and when I met the teacher, Ruth Simon, I knew a spark had been lit. I learned more in those five evening sessions than I had in the last thirty years. The mysticism and exoticism that had attracted me to other cultures, I now discovered in my own cultural background, but this time there was a spiritual resonance that opened a door into my soul. I felt I was coming home.

My appetite for learning was fed by the many classes which I took at The Jewish Learning Exchange. Ruth Simon taught me Hebrew, giving such poetic and homiletic insights into the essence of the letters, that I began to disengage myself from journalism and to concentrate on sculpture, which I suddenly found myself wanting to do. Rabbi Rashi Simon offered classes in Jewish philosophy which had me sitting on the edge of my seat. What he had to impart was a thousand times more exciting than going to see a film or meeting friends for dinner. For the first time in my life, I had come across a pair of teachers, who could communicate their knowledge of Judaism because their love of it was so palpable. I saw them as a modern day Abraham and Sarah, whose tents were always open, offering warmth, wisdom and hospitality within.

When Rabbi Simon started his Beginners Service at the New West End Synagogue, it was exactly what I needed. Under his guidance I learned how to follow, participate in and enjoy a traditional Shabbat service. Until this point I had only been to shul twice – once when my parents took me at age 4, and once when my sister had married. My ignorance had acted as a barrier, and now that I had acquired a little knowledge of Judaism, it was tremendously exciting to put it into practice. Every time I heard myself sing in Hebrew, or saw my fingers turning the pages of the Siddur, I felt anchored inside. I liked celebrating the festivals as part of a community, and slowly I began to incorporate the practices of doing *mitzvot* and not speaking *lashon hora* (evil), into my everyday life.

It is now four years since the Beginner's Service

began, and I still cannot tear myself away. Every week when Rabbi Simon examines and explains the messages contained within the Parsha of the week, I learn something new. It is quite extraordinary how he endows every word with meaning. I can only liken it to having a spiritual pilot who takes his group on a journey through doors that normally remain closed. How far we go, depends on the nature of questions asked, and the time available. My one criticism, and that of most other attendees, is that we always run out of time.

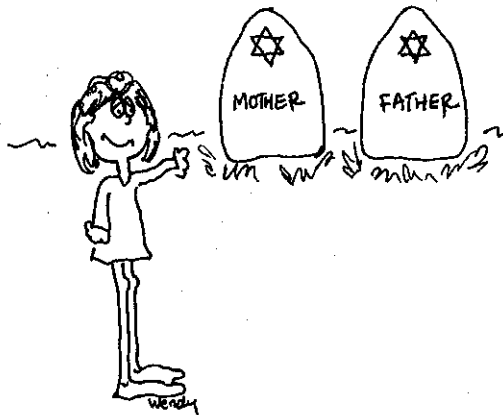
On a personal level, my life has changed enormously. Before I met Rabbi Simon and his wife, Ruth, I was a career journalist, locked into a typical 'Dinkie' (dual income no kids) lifestyle. Not only has my work changed, in that I have now studied sculpture, and am working on a project involving the Aleph-Bet and its hidden meanings, but I am now also a mother. Discovering the beauty and depth of Judaism made me want to pass on my heritage. My husband had always wanted children, and was thrilled by my change of heart.

Although a non-Jew, he yearned for us to bring up our children in a fully Jewish way, and I believe he is one of those rare people born with a Jewish soul. I became pregnant quickly, and at the age of 42, our baby son, Emet Eliyahu Moshe was born.

The name Emet perhaps best represents my personal journey. Emet means truth, its letters, *Aleph*, *Mem* and *Tav* representing the beginning, middle and end of the Hebrew alphabet. As a regular participant in the Beginners Service, I have learned how important it is to lead a balanced life, and to use one's powers of speech with care. I hope our son lives up to his name and is a seeker after truths.

And, as a fitting end to my story, I am happy to say that the *Sandek* (honored with holding the child) at Emet's bris was Rabbi Rashi Simon, without whom he might never have been born.

Michèle Jaffé-Pearce is a member of the Beginners Service at the JLE New West End Synagogue in London, England.



YOUR DEATHS, GAVE ME NEW LIFE

A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY (cont. from p. 1)

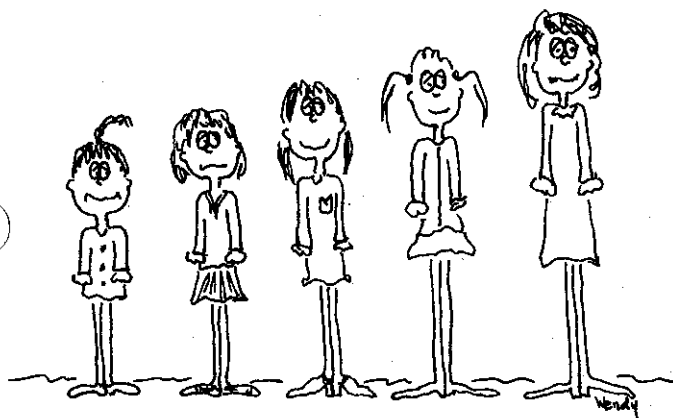
being filled with dread about spending two full days refraining from *melakha* (work). We had only been trying for a few weeks to be completely Shomer *habbos*, and I found it to be a major struggle. How could I spare two *more* days when I had so much to do! Adding to my stress was the nervousness I felt about having lunch at the homes of religious families who had invited us for the holiday. How would they receive us?

As it turned out, although keeping two days of Yom Tov was difficult, I found that I was well compensated. In addition to the enjoyment we had at the homes of people who had hosted us, I was able to attend a late night women's Torah class, and, in the traditional manner, my husband stayed up through the night to learn Torah in shul. Pesach

from being thrilling but relatively shallow in the beginning, into the fuller, stronger love that is the foundation for a family, my relationship with Torah continues to develop. At first, lighting Shabbat candles was novel and exciting; now it has become normal, even routine. Thankfully, those things that were a struggle for me then, have now become a cherished part of my Jewish life.

As I proceed on this spiritual journey, I am continually faced with new hurdles. But, as I look ahead I am encouraged, and I hope others will also realize that the more we practice, the stronger we get. And, with Hashem's help, what is difficult today, can be a source of joy a year from now.

Shoshana Sloman, a behavioral therapist turned homemaker, is a member of the Beginners Service at Congregation B'nai Torah, Indianapolis, Indiana.



SHAVUOT, THE HOLIDAY OF GROWTH

had been a turning point, a time of setting out in faith, whereas Shavout became a time of more concrete learning and of accepting the yoke of heaven.

Throughout the years, Shabbat, Yom Tov, and other observances have become more and more manageable. As my capacity to do mitzvot has increased, so has my appreciation of them. It's like riding a bicycle. When I was first learning to ride, all I could concentrate on was trying to keep my balance. Only after I had mastered the mechanics, could I begin to enjoy the scenery and the exercise.

Likewise, as the love between spouses grows

THE MOMENT OF TRUTH (cont. from p. 1)

In that moment of truth, we put aside all fears, all concerns, and demonstrated our unequivocal dedication to the cause at hand -- the acceptance of the responsibilities of being Jewish and the acceptance of G-d's Torah. It is on the Yom Tov of Shavuot that we celebrate that great and glorious moment.

What an awesome moment it must have been.

And for such an awesome moment, you would think there would have been an extended, perhaps cantankerous debate about the decision the people of Israel were about to make. But that's not what happened. There we stood, united in our conviction, and we proudly proclaimed, "*Na'aseh V'nishma*," translated to read, "We will do, and we will reason later."

"Reason later?" That sounds kind of risky. Would you buy a car or a house that way? Would you choose a college or a career on such a whim? Probably not. However, if you were a patient, and the doctor told you to take a certain medication in order to get well, would you first demand to know every detail concerning the effects of the medicine? How long would you wait before you took the first dose? How much convincing would be required?

(cont. on p. 4)

THE MOMENT OF TRUTH (cont. from p. 3)

Assuming the medicine promised to make you feel better, you might not hesitate at all, trusting that the doctor knows better than you.

It was the same way at Mount Sinai. In other words, our commitment to G-d was so absolute that we did not require convincing -- we keenly understood the necessity of accepting these commandments; we required no further convincing. After all, these commandments were coming from the G-d who had taken us out of Egypt, the G-d who had performed numerous miracles for us. How could his motives be questioned at that point? It wouldn't have been logical or rational to do so.

Our ancestors made a decision that has an impact on every generation... including our own. As we celebrate Shavuot, we must contemplate our role in this ongoing relationship with G-d. Let's

celebrate that moment of truth knowing that our lives are richer because our ancestors were so decisive. Let's celebrate that moment of truth with the realization that more than three millennia ago, a long term decision was made, which considered the needs of every generation to follow, including our own. And let's realize that the decisions we make regarding Judaism today will have the same long term impact for generations to come. The question of how we want our great-grandchildren to feel about being Jews is being answered now, with the choices we make today.

Moments of truth are happening at all times. Turn this Shavuot into one of them.

Rabbi Morey Schwartz is Rabbi of Congregation Beth Israel Abraham and Voltner, Overland Park, Kansas, and its Beginners Service



Illustrations by Wendy Klein Dunn



Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Beryl Levenson and Amy Gugig 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 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.



200 AMSTERDAM AVENUE
NEW YORK, N. Y. 10023

DATED MATTER