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BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

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SHAVUOT: REMEMBERING THE MIRACLE AND THE DISAPPOINTMENT AT SINAI

by Rabbi Aaron Frank.

MT. SINAI



"REMEMBER THE BROKEN PIECES"

These days, with my hectic schedule, I find that I do almost all of my shopping via catalogs. But, during the intermediate days of Passover this year, I actually had a chance to go shopping in a real store. The man who was helping me told me that I should wish him a zissen (sweet) Pesach, a happy Passover, because he was Jewish.

As we got to talking, he told me that he had just celebrated his fiftieth wedding anniversary, and, for the occasion, he and his wife had a reaffirmation of vows at a second wedding ceremony. He told me all about it, then told me about something that I found very strange.

It seems that there are Judaica artists who are doing something new. They ask the bride and groom to gather the pieces of the glass that is broken under the chuppah (wedding canopy) and save them. The artist takes the pieces, encases them in a beautiful glass cube and inscribes the names of the bride and groom and the wedding date on the piece as a memento of the occasion.

The salesman was very excited about this new art form. (cont. on p. 3)

A D'VAR TORAH FOR SHABBAT ACROSS AMERICA

MARCH 20, 1998

by Deborah Spector

Shalom Aleichem -

The Book of Exodus closes with Moses coming down from Mt. Sinai with the second set of tablets and with a radiant face. He gives the Children of Israel their instructions for building the Tent of Meeting, and we read of the magnificent artistry of the Ark, the curtain, the Menorah, the altar and the priests' vestments.

Sealing the holiness of the endeavor, Moses begins by reminding the Children of Israel: "On six days work may be done, but the seventh day shall be holy for you, a day of complete rest for G-d; whoever does work on it shall be put to death. You shall not kindle fire in any of your dwellings on the Sabbath day."

There are so many things to say about Shabbat--beginning with G-d's abstinence from work recalled in the second chapter of Bereshith, (Genesis) to G-d's special blessing for those who keep his Sabbaths, which appears in the Book of Isaiah. There is profound beauty in the (cont. on p. 2)

THE GIVING OF THE TORAH -- SOME FUNDAMENTALS

by Bruce M. Luchansky

When I was growing up in the educationally-challenged town of Beltsville, Maryland, there were certain things that my non-Jewish friends and I knew for sure. We knew that Mike's Pizza Parlor had the best subs in town; we knew that Bobby Dove (whose real name was "Guy") could play anything on the electric guitar after hearing it only once; and that a Chevy Malibu SS was the coolest car on the road.

When it came to religion, however, the three other Jewish kids in my school and I weren't quite so sure about a lot of things. We knew we were Jewish--that's why we refused to sing the Xmas Carols during school chorus performances in December (that is, unless some Chanuka songs were included in the program for balance). But we didn't really know what we, as Jews, were supposed to believe. Usually, we listened to what our non-Jewish friends believed about religion and simply assumed that we believed the opposite. In this way of course, we were just as likely to become Druids as observant Jews. (cont on p. 3)

D'VAR TORAH... (cont. from p 1) mystical imagery which is part of our liturgy, our poetry, our literature. There are the myriad practices to preserve Shabbat, to make it spiritually and psychologically sound and full of meaning. It is G-d's day, and yet it is ours. It is unconnected to the rhythms of nature, and yet it is connected to rhythms which are even greater than nature. It is one of our ways of affirming again and again the creation, the redemption from Egypt, the revelation at Sinai. In prayer it is our time to affirm and thank and praise, not to supplicate. It is indeed a piece of the world to come.

But instead of talking about those beautiful things, I thought it might be more useful to bring in a dose of Shabbat reality. Let's talk about actually observing Shabbat here and now, particularly if you have kids or happen to find yourself among them often, and you're a little anxious and disengaged at the prospect of making Shabbat part of your life. Let's keep it really simple--Friday night only--and maybe next year we'll talk about Saturday.

Now, some of you may be "pros" at preparing for and making Shabbat, so that at the appropriate time the candles are lit, the table is attractive, the food is ready, *Shalom Aleichem* is sung, the wine and the day are blessed, the Sabbath Bride is among you. You guys have another cup of coffee.

Because I suspect that for many people, like for me, making Shabbat is a work in progress.

I was raised in a family in which my mother always "benched light" (lit candles) and we almost always had challah, and sometimes we recited kiddush (but just blessing the wine, not the day). So things were somewhat familiar when, as an adult, I started observing Shabbat with my own family. And let me tell you, it wasn't easy.

I started small, like you're supposed to, and quite self-consciously, with candles and challah, and with an overriding sense of unauthenticity. But I cleaned and cooked and set the table with our best. And I would gather my family to welcome the Sabbath bride, and instead found myself confronting a warm family fight over who lights the candles, who says the Motzi, and whether or not we should bless the dog.

Now, I have a wonderful sweet family--but when I gathered them round, my guys looked at me as if I were from outer space, they rolled their eyes, made jokes, and rivaled each other to be the first to leave the table. This mode of welcoming Shabbat went on for quite a while. We're talking more than months here--and I was sure I was doing something wrong. This was not the authentic Shabbat it was meant to be!

I've spoken to some other women about this, and found astonishing solidarity and support for what I thought had been our family secret.

One summed it up saying, "That warm feeling I try to create is often lost by people blowing out candles, lighting paper to see what happens, taking 800 pieces of challah, complaining about the challah, complaining about the choice of challah cover, and (my favorite) telling me the chicken is "almost as good as school lunch."

She also says that from her home, another Jewish home can be seen through the window. Candles are glowing as the sun sets and the children say, Mama, why do we light our candles at dinner while Bubbie & Zayde Appleseed (who light at sundown) do it right?

In a recent magazine article, Rabbi Harold Schulweis has a very interesting piece about work and Shabbat. He writes of people's fear of Shabbat, fear of taking the time to pause for spiritual engagement. He says that we fear the Sabbath, as slaves fear freedom. He makes the case for the challenge of adopting this day as a time of sanity and holiness. But I take issue with one of his comments. He says: "If there is shouting at the Sabbath table, the candles are extinguished." I'm not promoting shouting at the

Sabbath table, or mean spirited behavior. But when you decide to make Shabbat part of your life, it may not always be perfect, it may be slow, and what happens at your table on Friday night may not always meet your expectations, and you may wonder about its authenticity.

Judaism is, in many ways, a set of prescribed behaviors, whatever we may believe about their origin. And behaviorist: we are as Jews, we just keep doing it. We keep making Shabbat--and it's "making" Shabbat because although G-d's seventh day will inexorably come, we have to affirmatively act to observe it. We have to act to make the time distinct. We can't wait to be overwhelmed by the beauty of Shabbat--and moved to let it carry us along. It just isn't gonna happen unless we make it happen.

So back to my own little family saga... Friday night we laughed and fought and were frustrated, sometimes, and sometimes we were moved and in tune with Shabbat, sometimes. And gradually certain things happened--we found that we never miss lighting the candles, even if we're going out, like tonight. We avoid movies and meetings and school bazaars. My husband, who is not Jewish, gets the flowers, even if he usually can't make it home in time for the candles. When someone drops in for dinner, they become part of what they perceive as a religious observance in our dining room. And the results are incredible. A few summers ago, friends were visiting from the East, practicing Catholics, and we were outside on a warm summer evening. I slipped in quietly to light the candles but everyone followed me. And my friend said his breath was taken away by the power of doing this in our home, on a warm summer night, as naturally as the sun was going down. We were benching light, but he could tell that we were sanctifying the day.



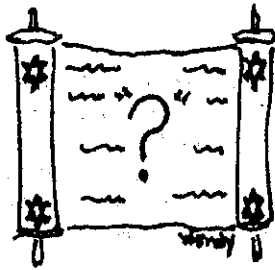
And another reward--my children and I gradually expand our Friday night observance, adding to the *Kiddush HaYom*, the blessings for the children (and the dog). The portion from Genesis we recite before the brachah... *Va'Yechulu bashamayim v'ha-aretz v'chal tz'va-am*. No one has asked me for *z'mirot*, the songs of Shabbat because frankly they beg me not to sing. Very gradually my kids and I have learned to make Havdalah late on Saturday--that most mysterious and exotic of home rituals, when we take leave of the Sabbath.

At times in our lives, each of us may find ourselves alone on Shabbat or with people who don't observe. And like the first step we might take with a child, we just have to light the candles for ourselves. Sometimes too much is made about the family nature of all we do Jewishly, and I have been guilty of taking the easy way out tonight by shamelessly using kids. But the point, of course, is just to do it. To hear it, and to do it. As Rabbi Alan Bregman says, the ritual of observing Shabbat is a binding act for Jews everywhere. As we light our candles, Jews all over the world do in an act of affirmation. *Ken y'bi ratzon*. May it be G-d's will.

Deborah Spector is Vice-President, Oak Park Temple B'nai Abraham Zion

THE GIVING OF... (cont. from p. 1) Somewhere along the way, however, I've filled in a few of the gaping holes in my Jewish education. The starting point seems to have been learning about something called the Torah-- what it is, how we got it, and what it means to us as Jews. I don't think I'm the only one for whom the question, "Who wrote the Bible?" crossed his or her mind frequently every week in Hebrew school--but was too embarrassed to ask. After all, isn't that something we were supposed to know already?

I am relieved to have learned two comforting things. First, G-d "wrote" the Bible (the Torah). He did it by dictating it to Moshe (Moses) on Har (Mount) Sinai and Moshe transcribed the part that he was told to write down (known as the Five Books of Moses, or the Chumash), and he taught orally to the Jewish people the part that he was told to teach orally (known as the Talmud). The second comforting thing that I learned was that I was not supposed to know this simply by the process of being born as a Jew. It was something that I had to learn.



"WHAT IS TORAH?"

I also learned a third thing, which was both comforting and exhilarating. Although the Torah was given to the Jewish people more than 3,000 years ago (in approximately 1310 B.C.E.), its role in the daily life of every Jew has not changed. That is because the Torah is not a history book that we use as a reference, like an atlas or an almanac, that we can choose to pick up or put down as the need arises. It is not a story book that we use to entertain our children when we want something more cultural than Arthur's Pet Business. In its purest form, the Torah is a contract between G-d and the Jewish people. The Jewish people promised their eternal allegiance to G-d, to follow G-d's commandments -- all 613 of them. As part of that promise, the Jewish people agreed that they would study the Torah incessantly to be sure they understand exactly what is required of them.

In exchange, G-d gave the Jewish people the awesome privilege and responsibility of being G-d's delegation on Earth--to bring G-d's presence to the world by following His commandments, and by inspiring the rest of the world to a life of spirituality by our example. The contract was made permanent by the giving of the Torah--the obligations are just as binding on G-d and the Jewish people today as they were in 1310 B.C.E., and they will continue to be binding for all time.

I am pretty sure that my life in Beltsville would have changed dramatically in many ways if I had known some of these facts growing up. At the very least, I probably would have listened a little more closely in Hebrew school, and I may have even bothered to look at the Chumash that I received for my Bar Mitzva. Most importantly, however, I might have looked for someone--a rabbi or an observant family--who knew more about Judaism than I did and asked them the million questions that I had about my

heritage. If I had done so, I am sure that I would have learned to appreciate my responsibilities as a Jew much earlier than I eventually did. And I'm guessing that it might not have been an entirely one-sided relationship. I am just as certain that the rabbi or observant family I had met would have learned to appreciate the awesome beauty of a Chevy Malibu SS, waxed and buffed to a glorious shine with a full tank of gas, as if they were seeing one for the first time.

Bruce M. Luchansky is an attorney in Baltimore, where he is a member of Bnai Jacob Congregation and one of the leaders of the Beginner's Service (known as the "ABC's of Jewish Prayer").

SHAVUOT... (cont. from p. 1) But as I left the store, I told my wife that I don't really understand why anyone would want such a thing. I liked the idea of keeping the wine glasses used at a wedding, but why keep the broken glass? Why remember it?

The truth is, that we have to ask the same question about the holiday of Shavuot. Allow me to explain. The anticipation that surrounds Shavuot is, in many ways, like no other holiday. We literally count down the days from Pesach and the exodus from Egypt, to our becoming true servants of G-d by receiving the Torah on Mt. Sinai. Shavuot commemorates the highest moment of the history of the Jews, the marriage between the Jewish people and G-d. The wedding canopy, Mount Sinai, was smoking; there was fire and the sounding of the shofar. It was there at Sinai that G-d gave the ketubah, the marriage contract, to the Jewish people--the Torah. It is this beautiful and transcendent moment that we remember on Shavuot.

This incredible movement of "mental bliss" is suddenly shattered. The Jewish people rebel by deifying the golden calf. Moses reacts. The Torah tells us, (Exodus 32:19) "And it came to pass when he (Moses) came near unto the camp and saw the calf and dancing--then Moses' anger waxed hot and he cast the tablets out of his joined hands and smashed them beneath the Mount." Moshe took this most precious gift and, on the seventeenth of Tammuz of that year, destroyed it.

In the following chapter, we read about the second giving of the tablets. And G-d said to Moses [Exodus 34:1,] "Hew for yourself two tablets of stone like the first ones; and I will write on the tablets the words which were on the first tablets that you broke." So Moses followed the instructions and once again, Moses had two tablets. The tablets were in Moses' hands on the tenth of Tishrei, the day of Yom Kippur.

So, why do we celebrate the Torah on Shavuot? After all, Shavuot was the day that G-d gave the Jewish people the tablets which were shattered into pieces. It was on Yom Kippur that the permanent tablets were finally delivered into Moshe's hands, and to the Jewish people for generations to come. Shouldn't we then celebrate the giving of the Torah on Yom Kippur instead?

The answer to this inconsistency comes by way of a tradition that tells us that when the Jews transported the tablets in the Tabernacle, they not only carried around the intact tablets, they also took the shattered pieces of the original tablets wherever they went. They did so in order to remind themselves of their past. The broken tablets were not only to act as a reminder of the event of the golden calf, but more importantly, they were to integrate that past experience into the lives of that generation. The goal was that the Jewish people would not only remember the broken tablets, but use them to spur on increased learning, increased awareness of themselves and, most importantly an increased connection to G-d.

This is the message of celebrating the giving of the Torah on Shavuot. Even though the giving of the original tablets turned out

(cont. on p. 4)

SHAVUOT... (cont. from p. 3) to be a disappointment for the Jewish people and for G-d. In our personal lives, it is tempting for all of us to think about broken experiences and want to rid ourselves of them. It is tempting to want to completely forget the great job that we had to leave, the ending of a close relationship or a death of a loved one. Among the many lessons of Shavuot, is the lesson that we should not forget those difficult moments. Shavuot teaches us that we can use the challenging experiences that have ended in heartbreak, and keep them alive in order to learn from our past and blend them with our future to make our lives more worthwhile. Shavuot teaches us not to forget our past, but to use our past to make our present lives more meaningful

and valuable. So now I understand the value of this new trend of Jewish art that my nice Jewish salesman shared with me. I wish I had saved the pieces from the broken glass at my wedding & I would put them right next to our other wine cups--be preserving the pieces of the broken glass helps us to imitate the actions of the Jewish people in the desert. We must keep the fragments and blend them not only into our national religious psyches, but into our personal ones as well.

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This poem had its first reading at the
NJOP TEACHER/VOLUNTEER APPRECIATION EVENING, JUNE 5, 1996

by Larry Diamond

*I picked a flyer in a local food shop,
"Come join us at Shabbos"...What's this NJOP?
At this time in my life, is Judaism for me?
Go to KJ, Nine-thirty, perhaps I shall see.*

*While I studied in Brooklyn after school,
I remembered no words, no grammatical rule,
But I tip-toed in and in a short while,
A man approached, with a genuine smile,
"Just put on this tallis, I'll help you with the prayer,"
I'll never forget that, I'm sure glad I went there.*

*And week after week,
from the back of the room,
I listened and learned,
each prayer and each tune,
And sing at the top of my lungs? Oh, you bet!
Cause if I didn't, "no kiddush I'd get!"*

*The Crash Course brought me right up to speed,
Before you knew it, Hebrew, I could read,
And holidays, kashrut, more than I ever knew
This Flatbush kid's becoming a Jew.*

*So tonight we are here, to schmooze and to sup,
To praise you of NJOP, for you don't give up,
If you teach us to pray, or teach us to read,
We're gonna get it, and you will succeed,
So fill up our services, get people to try 'em,
And bring to reality, the dream of Ephraim.*

Larry Diamond is a businessman and is a graduate of the Kehillath Jeshurun Beginners Service.

Illustrations by Wendy Dunn

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