

בראשית

Vol. XIV No. 4

BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

Sivan 5761/May 2001

THIS IS THE BEGINNING OF A BEAUTIFUL FRIENDSHIP

by *Howie Beigelman*

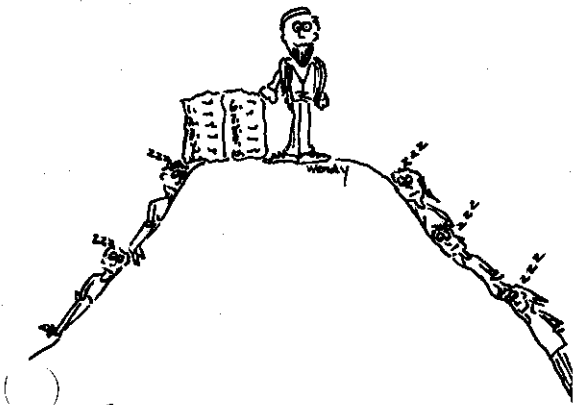
If you ever forgot a special someone's special day, you'll appreciate this: On the very first Shavuot, our ancestors slept in... G-d had to awaken them to receive the Torah! In fact, the Midrash compares G-d to a groom who must come and awaken His bride on the very morning of their wedding. Big mistake on our part. To make up for those extra zzz's, we customarily stay awake all night studying Torah on Shavuot eve.

Actually, we spend a good bit of time talking to our friends, cracking jokes and downing cups of coffee. If our place of study is particularly generous, we may be treated to cheesecake or ice cream sundaes. Surely it'd be better for us to sleep, so as to arrive in synagogue both physically and emotionally awake, capable of actually reading the prayers and comprehending the Torah reading!

Then again, maybe not. This is a fundamental statement of what we believe Judaism is about...If you're thinking, "since when is Judaism about black coffee and falling asleep during Hallel?" Bear with me.

Let's review how we got here:

The L-rd sends violent plagues upon Egypt. Egypt, now humbled, disgraced and frightened, stands powerless as a slave (cont. on p. 2)



THE REACTION OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE
TO THE REVELATION AT SINAI

KASHRUT: A SCUBA DIVER'S VIEWPOINT

by *Olga Berd*

A while ago, after much determined persuasion from friends, I became a deep sea scuba diver. By now I have a number of dives to my credit in the Pacific Ocean, the Caribbean and the Red Sea, but one particular dive continues to stand out in my memory.

Two years ago, with scuba tank, BCD (Buoyancy Control Device - the big vest) and regulator firmly strapped on my back, I walked off the end of a dive boat into the crystal-clear blue waters off the island of Bonaire. I was ready for a magnificent deep sea dive on the unspoiled reef wall of the volcanic mountain, home to the most magnificent diving on the planet...what I got was an eye-opening, new view of the world.

Perhaps you are asking what this has to do with Judaism and Kashrut. I will tell you - enlightenment can come anywhere, at any time, and from the most unlikely sources!

I grew up Jewish - not observant, but definitely Jewish. My parents are Holocaust survivors, and our house had Friday night *Seder*s and the "Big Holidays" (Pesach Seder, Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur - the usual). But, I never made it to Hebrew school. I never got over the rabbi of the little shul where my mother brought me to study,

(cont. on p. 3)

HAPPY ANNIVERSARY

by *Rabbi Seth Binus*

Between the holiday of Passover and the holiday of Shavuot, we count the passing days in a process called *Sefirat HaOmer*, the counting of the Omer. To fulfill this mitzvah each night of *Sefirah*, we count out-loud the number of days and the number of weeks (if any) that have passed since the second day of Passover. Why did G-d issue such a commandment? It seems like a most rote and monotonous task, geared only, at best, toward establishing the proper date for marking the festival of Shavuot and the giving of the Torah.

The *Sefer HaChinuch* (13th century) offers a profound explanation of this perplexing commandment: Because we are counting the time between the Exodus from Egypt and the giving of the Torah, we are expected to be filled with anticipation. Just as a bride counts the days until her wedding, we show this anticipation and excitement by counting the days until the giving of the Torah.

The question that remains, however, is how can we truly generate the same degree of excitement today that we had at the time of the giving of the Torah? Is it really possible to re-enact and reinvigorate the yearning of our souls and become excited once again about the

(cont. on p. 3)

BEAUTIFUL FRIENDSHIP (cont. from p. 1)... people, some three million strong, brazenly march out of Egypt in broad daylight. Mustering belated courage, they pursue the newly freed slaves, no doubt encouraged by an apparent tactical blunder expressed best by Ramses (Yul Brenner) who smirks and comments, "The G-d of Moses is a poor general." The Jews, trapped between mountains, the Sea of Reeds and Egyptian chariots, understandably panic. But G-d made no tactical blunder. The Jews cross the sea on dry land and G-d routes Egypt's army. Once the mightiest military force in the world, it sinks, quite literally, to the depths of the ocean. Pharaoh, the sole survivor, returns home defeated.

Following these miraculous events, Israel encamps around a small mountain. Merely seven weeks after fleeing Egypt, Moses advances to the mountain's peak from where emanates the voice of the L-rd, G-d. That same voice that made heaven and earth, formed the seas and canals, sculpted hills and valleys, created man and beast, now thunders from Sinai, addressing Israel with "I am the L-rd, your G-d, who took you out of Egypt."

Ergo, I'm the same G-d who slew each Egyptian first born. The very same G-d that bloodied the Nile. Splitting the sea -- that was Me too. And I sent the hailstorm of ice and fire to lay waste to Egypt's agricultural economy -- the herds of cattle, livestock and fields of plenty.

After the feature presentation, Moses remains on Sinai to study the entire Torah with G-d. Returning to the camp several weeks later, Moses finds that the people, having forsaken G-d, are worshipping a golden calf!

G-d, and I'm putting this mildly, is furious. If it were not for some quite excellent lawyering by Moses, G-d would have destroyed the people of Israel where they stood, save only Moses.

This sequence begs the most fundamental of questions. To wit, what were the Jews thinking? Agnostics have cried out throughout human history that if G-d would openly reveal Himself, then they would follow in His ways. Well, here G-d did reveal Himself to every single Jew, and less than two months later they traded it all in for a dime store idol. What are we missing?

Nothing. Nothing at all. The Talmud remarks that simple maidservants standing on the banks of the Red Sea during its famous split, witnessed visions holier than Ezekiel's prophecy of G-d's throne. The Talmud's fundamental point being that those lucky maidservants are just that -- lucky, and still maidservants. Maybe they reached higher prophetic levels, but it did not affect their lives meaningfully. Similarly, Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler writes that Abraham's hospitality to wandering Arabs was greater than his greeting G-d because Abraham chose to do it. Prophecy is merely a gift. Internal choices are stronger and longer lasting than external gifts.

At the outset, we mentioned that G-d treats the Jews as His bride. We, as it were, had a little tryst with an oversize piece of jewelry. No wonder He was angry! G-d's Torah wasn't given to make us jump through hoops. Do this. Don't do that. No! It is all about having a fulfilling, enjoyable life

and a relationship with G-d that reflects that. If we do it right, it will even be fun. That is why we study all night on Shavuot. It would be more productive to sleep that night and study by day + but it wouldn't give us the same pleasure. G-d must be our best friend and we need to enjoy our relationship with Him. We've each stayed awfully till the wee hours talking with close friends, discussing mostly inane things. Often those are our best memories, even if we don't recall what was so funny about that joke told at two in the morning, or what was said that was so special.

Shavuot sets the tone of our relationship with G-d. If we intend to have a friendship and a fulfilling relationship with G-d, we must treat Him as we would our best friend. We spend a night talking with G-d. Hopefully, we have a great time, even if we don't remember all we said or learned, and even if we laugh at jokes that are only funny at 2 A.M.

May we merit that G-d become our best friend. May we enjoy all of our time spent studying His law and performing His commands. May it be through Judaism that we have the most fun and the most fulfilling life.

Pass the hot fudge.

Howie Beigelman is an attorney (and freelance writer) from New York.

THE MANY NAMES OF SHAVUOT

Shavuot, Festival of Weeks - Shavuot is the only holiday not listed in the Torah by the day and month on which it is to be observed. Rather, the Torah instructed that this festival take place on the 50th day after the second day of Passover, the day on which the Omer Sacrifice was offered. The name, therefore, reflects the fact that this holiday occurs seven complete weeks (shavuot) after Passover. In mystical terms, the number 7 represents the natural order of things, and so a complete, natural cycle has occurred.

Chag Ha'Bikurim, Holiday of the First Fruit - The natural cycle that has been completed is agricultural. On Chag Ha'Bikurim, the offering of the First Fruit of the harvest was brought to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem as a gesture of thanksgiving for the successful crop.

Z'man Matan Torateinu, Time of the Giving of the Torah - But Shavuot takes place one day after the seven weeks, which is one step beyond the natural cycle and is, therefore, also representative of a supernatural event as well. On Passover, we celebrate the miraculous Exodus of the People of Israel from Egypt. The Israelites at the time, however, were, at best, a family, a loose assortment of cousins bonded together by their mutual misery. At the end of seven weeks, however, at the base of Mount Sinai, the former slaves rose above their human limitations and, by accepting the Torah, took upon themselves a total commitment to G-d, thus creating the Nation of Israel. Shavuot is therefore also known as Z'man Matan Torateinu, the celebration of the giving of the Torah.

From www.njop.org

HAPPY ANNIVERSARY (cont. from p. 1)...commemoration of the giving of the Torah? The answer to this question is, quite simply, that we are not only *commemorating* our receiving the Torah. When we celebrate Shavuot, we are, in effect, actually *receiving* the Torah again.

We celebrate the Torah on Shavuot by studying Torah and seeking out new ideas and insights. By learning something new, by understanding Torah in a way we had not understood it before, we make our Shavuot truly a "Z'man Matan Torataynu" -- a time of the Giving of the Torah -- as we say in our prayers. Our Shavuot must not be restricted to a rote rehearsal of prayers and practices, but rather must be enriched by a renewed examination of the Torah and its significance.

The necessary learning of Shavuot night can, perhaps, be better understood by an analogy to a marriage. Typically, a Jewish wedding involves candles being carried down the aisle while music plays. The *Tashbetz Koton* (14th century Book on Jewish Customs) explains the significance of this custom of candles and music. More than creating a pleasant and meaningful ambiance, the candles and music are intended to reflect the atmosphere that dominated the giving of the Torah. At Mount Sinai, we are told, there were *kolot u'v'rakim* -- sounds and lightening. The Torah, we thus understand, was given amidst loud sounds and the appearance of fire in the sky. At a wedding, we try to simulate this atmosphere.

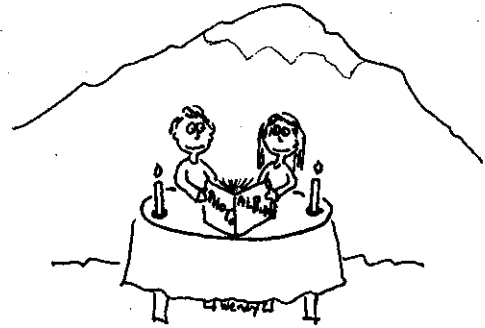
But why attempt to simulate the atmosphere of the giving of the Torah at a Jewish wedding with candles and music (which are slightly easier on the ears and eyes)? What has one matter to do with the other? In fact, they have much in common. After all, the giving of the Torah was a wedding between G-d and the Jewish people. G-d was the groom, and we, the Jewish people, were the bride. The Scroll of the Torah is compared to the *ketubah*, the marriage document, with agreements and conditions for the marriage. Thus, when we accepted the Torah, we were married to G-d.

If the Giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai was like a wedding, it follows that our commemoration, our re-enactment of the Giving of the Torah, should recall and reflect that wedding. Anybody who has observed a married couple on a special anniversary knows the excitement that can be generated as the wedding experience is recreated. Some people watch their wedding videos or flip through their album to relive the excitement of that day through recorded memories. Sometimes it is a private experience, shared by only the husband and wife. They are not simply satisfied to recount the experiences of that special day, but, rather, they are eager to relive it to the best of their ability, to revitalize the excitement that they once experienced.

Since Shavuot is the anniversary of the marriage of G-d and the Jewish People, it is important for us to attempt to relive the experience of our "wedding" to G-d. Therefore, we spend the evening learning Torah, recreating the excitement of the marriage day and reviewing the history of our relationship.

Our wedding day, however, was not perfect. Our

tradition teaches that, much to our embarrassment, the Jewish People had to be woken by G-d on the morning of the receiving of the Torah. We were not very eager to awaken from our slumber early. The *Holy Arizal* (Rabbi Isaac Luria, 16th century) explains that if one studies Torah the entire night of Shavuot, she or he will not come to any harm the entire following year because this mystical practice is a *tikkun*, a correction. To compensate for our historical lack of enthusiasm, Jews observe the *tikkun layl Shavuot*, the "correction" of Shavuot night, by studying Torah all night. Here too, there is an experiential aspect to our actions. Why does studying the Torah all night long benefit us if we are merely remembering something that happened many years in the past? Like the married couple celebrating their anniversary and reinvigorating their love, on Shavuot we are expected to understand that the relationship is still flourishing and that the Torah is still being given even now.



THE JEWISH PEOPLE AND G-D
RENEWING THEIR VOWS

Shavuot is our opportunity to rejuvenate our bond with G-d. This year, let us make Shavuot meaningful and let us be filled with renewed commitment to the Torah as we prepare ourselves to receive the Torah once again. We must allow ourselves to feel the excitement of that the bride feels on her wedding day, for that is who we are, and allow ourselves to experience that which our ancestors experienced (indeed, what we, ourselves, experienced), when they received the Torah, as our souls hovered around Mount Sinai listening to the words of G-d.

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KASHRUT (cont. from p. 1)...throwing me out with the explicative: "A girl! You brought me a girl? Leave now!!!"

Having observant friends helped me come to love Judaism. One Shabbat afternoon in the country, I met Rabbi Buchwald, and within a few hours I knew I had found a friend. Here was someone who persuaded those he met through example, but without value judgment. He was secure in his knowledge of the right path and in his joy in living a Jewish life. His view was simple: Keep the flame lit, reach out, and eventually even those who doubt will begin to see the light.

But back to scuba diving.....

(cont. on p. 4)

KASHRUT (cont. from p. 2)... Now, under the sea is G-d's kingdom even more than on land. Here life is "pristine," unblemished by the hands of man. It is a place of quiet and peacefulness. It is a beautiful eco-system in balance, inhabited by a myriad of colorful sea creatures. Multicolored Parrot Fish eat the hard coral rock. Stone Fish blend into the stony bottom. Blue Tangs, French Angels, and Truks (adorable white with black polka dot fish that look like little helicopters scooting around with flat black bottoms!) swimming side-by-side with the bigger creatures, the Moray Eels, Sting Rays (awesome and gentle creatures lying in the quiet sand), Tarpons (ancient), Sergeant Majors, Tortoises, Octopuses, Lobsters...and a million different kinds of live anemones, colorful little tropical fish, sponges, and living coral (big brains, purple tubes or fan-like in various forms) that sway in the underwater current.

This delicate system of big fish and little fish inspired me to think about, of all things, keeping kosher.

Kashrut: As a modern person, kashrut has always been somewhat of a mystery to me. Why so many rules that seem so arbitrary? Why could we eat this and not that? What difference does it make anyway? Other people eat non-kosher food and don't die? What's the big deal?

For me, the light went on 110 feet deep beneath the sea. Really!

As a diver, it dawned on me that G-d created many creatures for our planet, each of which has a different purpose for being here, including us.

The Parrot Fish and Truk are playful and beautiful to look at, but they are not really edible. They spend all their time eating away at the dead rock of the coral reef. They, along with the shrimp and lobsters, eels and slugs, and other bottom creepy crawlers, are the vacuum cleaners and living garbage collectors

that keep the underwater world clean. G-d's personal clean-up crew!

We don't eat vultures, sea gulls or other carrion birds. We don't eat pork, since pigs are another garbage collector of the planet. We don't eat bugs or snakes or eels, because they eat everything - absolutely everything. Have you ever really looked closely at a lobster? It's the underwater big brother of our land-based cockroach (scientifically true!).

Yes, these curious creatures are interesting. Some are harmless, others ugly, and some are breathtakingly beautiful. They are, nevertheless, the clean up crew of the planet. G-d made them for this purpose. G-d blessed them and so should we, but not so that we may eat them! I'm sure you've heard the phrase: "You are what you eat." Here it is folks - one good trip beneath the surface of the sea, unspoiled by man - reveals the ultimate truth about the grand design.

Kashrut really does make a lot of sense. It's not at all about the dishes. It's a lot more than that - it's about being clean, living clean and eating

clean.

G-d had a plan. The plan was simple, and the Torah makes it crystal clear:

- 1) Be Clean (Body, Mind and Soul)
- 2) Live Clean (Body, Thoughts, Spirit and Action)
- 3) Eat Clean (Kashrut is the way!)

I saw the light at 110 feet underwater and now the light shines brighter wherever I am. Hearty Appetite! Keep the light burning.....and pass the Smoked Salmon please.

Olga Berd is an attorney specializing in real estate, finance and estate planning in Manhattan and a Beginners Service Graduate.



"HASHEM IS HERE, HASHEM IS THERE,
HASHEM IS TRULY EVERYWHERE!"

Illustrations by Wendy Dunn

בראשית

Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Sarah Rochel Reid, Rabbi Yitzchak Rosenbaum, and 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 NJOP, please write or call: 485 Fifth Avenue, Suite 701, New York, NY 10017, (212) 986-7450, e-mail info@njop.org.

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