

ברשת

Vol. XV No. 4

BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

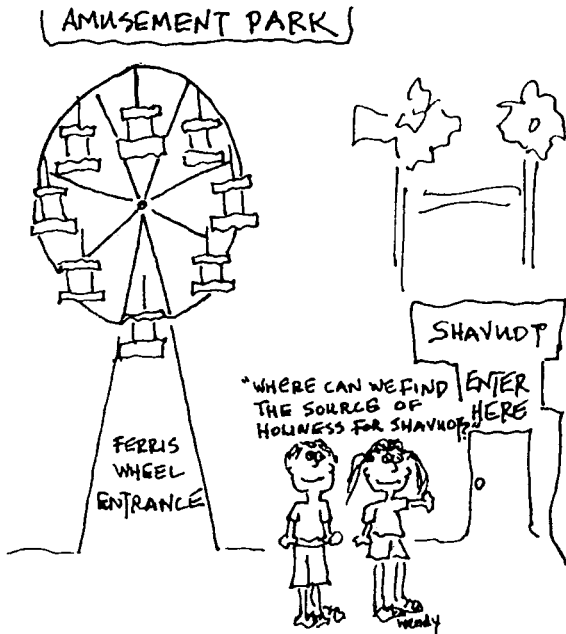
Sivan 5762/May 2002

HOLIDAYS ARE HOLY DAYS

by Rabbi Yitzchak Rosenbaum

On Passover we eat matzah, on Sukkot we dwell in huts, on Rosh Hashana we blow the shofar and on Yom Kippur we fast...all actions intended to help us reach a high level of holiness. But what about Shavuot? Shavuot has no Seder to conduct, nor does it have a lulav and etrog to wave about. What's going on? Should we not strive to attain a high level of holiness on Shavuot, just as we do on the other holidays?

While the Torah mentions the holidays in several places, one of the most comprehensive descriptions of the holidays encompasses a significant section of the weekly Torah reading of Parashat Emor (Leviticus 23). Starting with Passover and going through Shavuot, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot, this section on the holidays is introduced with the words (Leviticus 23:2): "*Mo'aday HaShem asher tik're'u otam mik'ra'ei kodesh, ayleh baim mo'a'die*" -- "The appointed times (holidays) of HaShem which you shall call them *mik'ra'ei kodesh*, these are my appointed times." Yet, before describing the holidays, the Torah interrupts the narrative to talk about Shabbat ("Sheshet Yamim..." 23:3), indicating a connection between the commandment to observe the holidays and the Sabbath. It does not, however, explain (cont. on p. 4)



SHAVUOT RALLY

by Sarah Rochel Reid

Was this what it was like when our ancestors stood before Mount Sinai, crushed by the throng of their fathers-mothers-sisters-brothers-cousins all hoping to get just a step closer to the mountain? Did the Israelites in the wilderness look around at the masses, wondering how their greater family had come to be so beautifully diverse? Were they inspired not just by the flaming mountain, but by the overwhelming feeling of unity, the sense that they stood with one heart, ready to be a nation united?

Perhaps reflections such as these, over-dramatize the sense of *achdut* (unity) that many of us felt on April 15, 2002, when some 200,000 people came to Washington, D.C. for the rally to support Israel. Beyond politics, beyond "denominations," beyond petty arguments, Jews had come together from all walks of life to say: "We are still here, world! We are Jews, and we are a force to be reckoned with." The buses and local Washington trains were filled with supporters of Sharon and proponents of Oslo, it didn't matter that they disagreed over what needed to be done. What was important was that they all agreed that Israeli Jews need to know that our family is one family, and that we will not desert them. "He" with the kippa and "she" (cont. on p. 2)

G-D OF MY FATHER

by Miryam Noll

I'll let you in on my secret: I'm not really Jewish.
No, really.

Sure, we lit candles, said the motzi, went to services Friday nights. Sure, I dressed-up as Esther, made a shoebox sukkah, beat my sister at penny dreidle. Sure, I studied for Bat Mitzvah, summered at Camp Hess Kramer, knew Hatikva by heart. I grew up Jewish and proud of it. Until I went to Israel. And met "observant" Jews.

My father's family is Jewish. My mother's family isn't. She converted, Reform style. That, these Jews observed, meant she's not Jewish, I'm not Jewish, and I've never been part of the tribe.

Not Jewish? Now that hurt. Incredibly so. So much so that I told myself I'd never set foot in an Orthodox shul again.

And I didn't. For upwards of 15 years. Until last year, when the death of three friends shook my -- what I found to be tenuous -- faith in G-d and sent me in search of my religion's roots. I wanted to learn, from the ground up, what Judaism's vision of G-d was and what the Jews' relationship to that G-d was supposed to be. (cont. on p. 2)

SHAVUOT RALLY (cont. from p. 1)... in the tank top, stood side by side cheering "*Am Yisrael Chai*" (The nation of Israel lives!).

A nation. Indeed, it is a strange concept to comprehend, especially for a people who are scattered throughout the four corners of the earth. Yet even after 2,000 years of exile, we have remained a people united. How have we survived?

Our triumph over time is the result of another great assembly -- a rally at the base of Mount Sinai 3,300 years ago. Having broken the bitter chains of slavery, the Israelites crossed the wilderness following their great leader, Moses. Anxiety ran high. With each great miracle they cheered, and with each minor set-back the ancient Israelites bemoaned their fate...slaves for hundreds of years, they did not have the confidence in themselves to understand that they would not be deserted by Moses or by G-d.

Moses led them to the foot of Mount Sinai, and told them that they should wait for three days; then, they would be addressed by G-d. Three days of preparation. Imagine the electricity, the energy! Just think of the tremors of excitement felt when Moses said "Be prepared in three days..." G-d is coming! Perhaps it all seems too distant for us to even imagine -- the expectation of G-d Himself! They were warned that it would not be a simple thing, that G-d was going to instruct them in the Torah, -- the laws by which to live their lives. They were told that they could only come so close to the mountain, but not onto the mountain, that they could not actually approach G-d. The Israelites responded in one voice, "All the words that G-d speaks, we will do."

This great multitude knew only the very basic parameters (the Ten Commandments) that G-d had set forth, yet they did not hesitate for a moment to dedicate themselves to following the rest of His commandments. Their devotion, their zeal, is what has been transmitted down through the ages.

While the rally in Washington cannot be compared to the greatness of the event at Sinai, it is, perhaps, the first step back towards that unfettered dedication.

At Sinai, we were well over a million strong, but those million were only 1/5 of the number of Israelites who had been enslaved in Egypt. The other 4/5 were unable to commit themselves to following Moses. In Washington, there were only 200,000, out of more than 5 million American Jews. Yet they were 200,000 who took a day off from work, sat on buses and trains for hours and hours, just to be there. And for every person at the rally, three more said that they wished they too could have come.

In Washington, we were a "mixed multitude." We were religious Jews and secular Jews, right wingers and left wingers, Ashkenazim and Sephardim -- and we stood as one people. So too at Sinai, there were the soon-to-be sanctified Levites next to the wealthy men of Asher. The devoted scholars of Issachar were standing side by side with the merchants of Zebulun, together even with those Egyptians who had recognized the oneness of G-d.

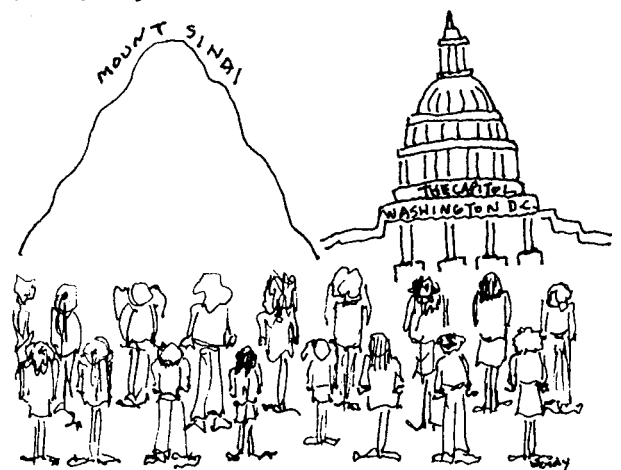
At Sinai, we cried out together "*Na'aseh v'nishma!*" ("We will do and we will listen!") We were willing to accept G-d's laws before studying them in detail, so that G-d would know

that we were sincere in our dedication. In Washington, we chanted "*Am Yisrael Chai*" ("The Nation of Israel Lives.") We waved our posters and cheered our leaders. We raised our voices so that the world would know that the Jews are still strong, and that we still care.

Washington was a first step in bringing the Children of Israel back together, and ending the petty squabbling that has plagued us through the last century and more. Perhaps the next time that we gather for a rally, our signs will once again proclaim "*Na'aseh V'Nishma!*" "We stand with G-d" -- or, simply, "We are the Children of Israel!"

At Sinai we were calling out to G-d and we were calling out for ourselves. At Sinai, we called out to ensure that in 2002 there would still be Children of Israel to call out, "*Am Yisrael Chai.*" "The People of Israel Lives!"

Sarah Rochel Reid is a former beginner who currently lives in Passaic, New Jersey.



"THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL RALLY"

G-D OF MY FATHER (cont. from p. 1)...To my dismay, the institutions with the broadest array of reasonably-priced classes were all of the Orthodox persuasion. By drawing a sharp line in my mind between learning at shul and supporting its denominational outlook, I decided to give some basic classes in Judaism a try. Once I started learning in depth about the G-d of the Torah and the law -- Halakha -- that roots the Jewish people to that G-d, it didn't take long before I found myself over the line. Learning led to prayer, prayer to community, community to lifestyle, and back around again. So now, after almost a year of learning through struggle, I've decided to convert and commit to a life under halakha.

But I've had to swallow enough pride along the way to drown me.

The single hardest thing to swallow was the slap-in-the-face feeling of being told I'm not Jewish. And don't tell me it's nothing personal -- it's just a matter of applying the law to facts. That may be true intellectually, but it's no salve for the emotional sting. It's hard not to take being excluded personally: especially when being part of the Jewish people is what being a Jew is all about.

(cont. on p. 3)

G-D OF MY FATHER (cont. from p. 2)...So, when I started learning at an Orthodox shul, I hid the fact of my mother's conversion like a birth defect. Not that I ever lied about it. I just didn't volunteer. A couple of rabbis to whom I finally bared my birth encouraged me to continue to keep it under wraps: one acted like the fact wiped me clean of all Jewish identity, while the other -- the more sympathetic one -- acted like it was some shameful secret to be fixed as quickly and quietly as possible.

I was lost in no man's land. I didn't belong in classes with converts who were learning what Pesach was for the first time. But sitting in classes with Jews returning to their religion wasn't going to solve my "identity crisis." I couldn't find any books written by or for people like me, and finally ended up putting together a line-up of classes and tutors to get the education I felt I needed to commit to conversion with meaning.

I still have a lot of learning to do before I'm ready to make an educated life-long commitment. And I'd be lying if I said that the limbo of living in the close company of Orthodox Jews, while not being considered part of the family, is comfortable. It's not.

But the longer I've been learning, the more I've come to see how everything is a matter of perspective: what I've looked at for so long as a liability -- my "illegitimate" status under halakha -- is in many ways a truly privileged position. So I wanted -- while I'm still feeling the pain of living in limbo -- to share my thoughts with others like me in the hopes of making a dent in the not-being-Jewish obstacle to learning about life under Jewish law.

It's safe to say most people today put a high price on individual autonomy and personal choice. I know I do. Of course, having the freedom to make a choice means taking responsibility for the consequences. But I'd still almost always rather do something of my own free will than at the direction of others.

And, as painful as not being born a Jew under law feels, it's really the ultimate in autonomy. I don't think I could ever look on it as having a choice to be Jewish: I was brought up on kugel and kishka, there's Jewishness built into my bones. But I have the choice -- unlike my friends who are Jewish by birth -- to not be a Jew under law without paying a price. Precisely because the law excludes me by birth, it expects nothing from me -- unless and until I choose to submit voluntarily. And so, one of the biggest things Jews-by-birth have to struggle with -- their G-d imposed submission to halakha, -- is, for me, a matter of personal choice. The way I see it, G-d has put tremendous

faith in me by delegating the decision of my submission to the law.

On the other hand, the fact that -- through no fault of my own -- I have to go through a conversion to be Jewish, while secular Jews-by-birth don't, is the ultimate in forced humility. Especially in America, where it's what you do, not who you were born to, that's supposed to count, it's very hard to accept that something so beyond my control as the circumstance of my birth should dictate the course of my life. But accepting that fact means acknowledging, contrary to popular perception, that my life isn't really my own creation -- it comes, with all its particularities, as a gift from G-d. And, given only the choice to take it or leave it, I'm taking my life -- circumscribed by circumstance as it may be -- thankfully. The alternative, need I say it, is no life at all.

Another big benefit of going through the conversion process is that it gives me the obligation -- and excuse -- to get the best education available: I am bound to end up learning more about the religion than most of the secular Jews returning to observance. Even more important, in being called to account before a court of rabbis, I'll have the chance to declare my faith to G-d in a way not open to Jews-by-birth. It can be easy, if you're not faced with a take-it-all-or-leave-it choice, to dabble in observance, to take on what feels comfortable or makes sense. The circumstance of my birth saves me from falling into that trap. In having to declare wholehearted submission to halakha, I'll have the opportunity to acknowledge G-d's sovereignty wholeheartedly. The act of conversion is in itself a unique demonstration of faith, requiring submission on an issue that goes to the heart of my identity -- my status as a Jew under law.

But I think the best part of converting is getting to take on a new Hebrew name -- and start life anew on a blank slate. This Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, Jews around the world prayed to G-d to free them from the errors of their past. I didn't need to: G-d has put the power of deliverance into my own hands. Looking forward in the spirit of Hanukah, I prayed instead for the strength to rededicate myself to life as a Jew at a higher level -- and thanked G-d for the gift of being able to choose to become one of the chosen.

Miryam Noll is a graduate of the Beginners Service at Lincoln Square Synagogue. She currently resides in Jerusalem, Israel, with her husband, David, and their 4 children. This article first appeared in Bereishith in September 1994.



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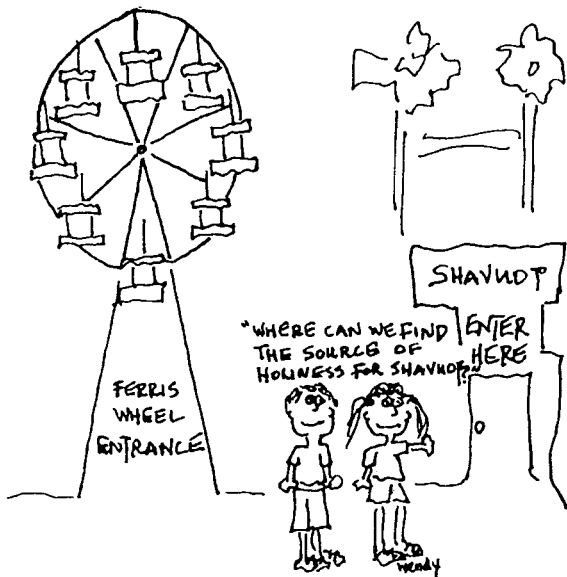
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AMUSEMENT PARK



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