

# BERESHITH

## "IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter  
for Beginners,  
by Beginners

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# בראשית

## MY STORY

Albert Poe

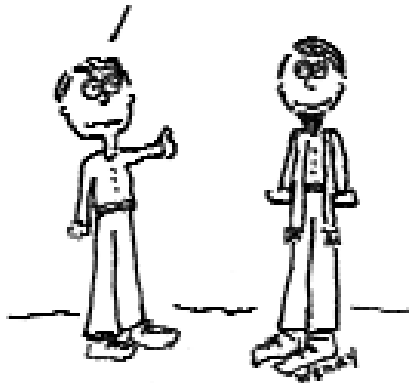
Whenever anyone asks about whether I grew up observant or not, I always say that my family was "unaffiliated." Actually, I was raised Methodist, and that is as "unaffiliated" from Judaism as you can get. My journey to Judaism was a search for truth. In fact, my mother remembers the minister telling her to be careful how she answered my questions, because I wanted to know the truth. I searched for that truth for a long time.

At first, I didn't even know what it was that I was searching for. I just knew, deep down, that I was unhappy. Like so many others, I desired meaning in my life. I wanted to know G-d, and in pursuit of that knowledge, I tried many different philosophies and looked at many religions. They all claimed to be the right religion, yet they all left me, as always, with questions for which they had no good answers.

By the time I was a young adult, I had given up on the religion of my birth, and for some reason the most logical thing to me seemed to find out about Judaism. I reasoned that Jesus was a Jew, so perhaps "his message" had been perverted in some way by modern religion. I did not know any Jews, certainly none who could tell me about their beliefs.

A few years later, I met the woman who would *(cont. on p. 2)*

"HOW DO I KNOW  
THAT I HAVE A SOUL?"



"SOULFUL QUESTIONS"

## THE CHOICE

Susanne Goldstone

I loved my high school. It was a great public school in California, at which I played varsity sports and was even nominated for Prom Queen. Then I went against the grain by deciding to attend Stern College, the women's division of Yeshiva University in New York. Everyone was flabbergasted. They asked all sorts of questions: Why hadn't I decided on UCLA or USC like most of my other friends? What is a yeshiva? Do you want to be a rabbi?

I was part of a typical Jewish American family. My parents had made certain that their children knew about their heritage. We went to services on the High Holidays, and my brothers and I had our Bar and Bat Mitzvahs at age 13 at a synagogue with a traditional rabbi. From my perspective, the Bat Mitzvah was mostly about the party and presents, but so be it. Granny's latkes were a staple at every holiday, whether it was Chanukah, Passover, or Thanksgiving. To me, going to temple, having a seder, dancing the *horah* at *(cont. on p. 2)*

## THE SHAVUOT COMMITMENT

Rabbi Chaim Dovid Green

The Maggid of Dubno was famous for answering all questions with a parable. Even when he was asked why he always answered with parables, he explained his use of parables with a parable saying: "Truth was walking about town, but everyone was afraid to look at him. Wherever he went, people screamed and ran away because he was completely naked! Along came his friend named Parable who told Truth that if he wanted to be accepted, he would offer him a suit of clothing. That is what happened. Parable gave Truth a suit of clothing so people would be more comfortable in his presence."

The Maggid was once asked why there is a need for the two Jewish holidays of Simchat Torah and Shavuot, as they both seem to have the same function, celebrating the receiving of the Torah. Why not condense them into one grand holiday? He answered with one of his most famous stories:

There once was a King and Queen who were childless for many years. In desperation, they visited an old *(cont. on p. 3)*

*MY STORY* (cont. from p. 1)...become my wife, a wonderful Jewish woman from New York. While neither she nor her family were religious, we were both certain that we would raise our children as Jews. This was something we agreed upon right away.

Making it clear that I was interested in Judaism, I attended an "Introduction to Judaism" class. We joined a local synagogue and were married. I went through what I now know was an incomplete conversion process that consisted of reading a passage from the book of Ruth and signing a certificate. We began living our Jewish life together.

Everything was going so well, and I should have been happy. Looking back, however, I see that I really wasn't happy—something was still missing. I still had questions that hadn't been properly answered. More importantly, by this time I knew the essence of my question.

One good thing about Judaism is that asking questions is encouraged. In fact, it seems that every question has a multitude of answers, depending on whom you ask. Thus I wound up with even more questions! Usually, I could recognize the right answer myself. My essential question, however, was always left unsatisfied. I wanted to know: Do you have a soul, and, if so, how do you know? It seemed as if no one knew the answer.

My wife and I were rearing my three young children from my previous marriage, but we wanted to have a child together as well. The doctors, however, told us that, without extraordinary medical intervention, we would never be able to have children of our own. We were crushed. We cried, and we prayed, and then, after several years of trying, my wife and I had our little miracle baby.

Our older children went to the religious school at the local synagogue, but we were not sure that would be right for the baby. We decided to send her to the local Jewish Day School. When she started kindergarten and brought home her homework, we could not help her because neither of us could read Hebrew. We really didn't know anything about Judaism! We were in trouble -- and, apparently, even G-d knew it. Suddenly I got laid off from my job, forcing us to move. That was when everything started to change.

Our little girl was now in a new Jewish Day School, but we still didn't understand any of her homework. Our mounting frustration was starting to affect us when my wife saw an ad for NJOP's Hebrew Reading Crash Course at the local JCC. After several weeks of study, my wife was shocked that she was actually able to recognize and read Hebrew! The Crash Course book beckoned: "Time to sign up for Hebrew II!" but the JCC didn't offer that course. When she called 800-44-HEBRE(W), the number listed in the Crash Course book, she was asked her address and given the name of the nearest location for the next Level II class. It was in a community center based in a home. A rabbi came from over an hour away to teach there. My wife began attending the classes, but I hesitated as I still had my big question. She asked me to come to the classes with her, but I was always

busy, and besides, I would say, he won't have a better answer for my question than anyone else did.

Then it happened. (I still insist it was a plot!) My wife got a flat tire at the center, and I went over to help. As it turned out, the tire wasn't flat, just very low on air. When I finished pumping air into the tire, my wife suggested that I go inside and ask the rabbi my question.

So I did. "How do you know you have a soul? If you have a soul, then religion matters. If you don't, then you can do what ever you want, because nothing really matters." That night I spoke with the rabbi for well over an hour. While the answer I received is too long and far too complex to explain at this time, it was exactly the answer I had been searching for. It resonated as truth deep within my being. For the next two years, I came to every one of the rabbi's classes.

I studied, met with rabbis and, finally, underwent a full conversion. We also determined that it would be appropriate, now that I was truly in my heart and soul a Jew, to have a new wedding. It was one of the most beautiful moments of my life, to wed my wife in our home, surrounded by close friends.

Perhaps I was raised as "unaffiliated" as possible for Judaism, but deep inside, I had always been affiliated -- *affiliated* with the truth. I just needed help finding it. Today my life is completely different, and for the first time I know what true and complete belief is.

*Albert (Tuvia) Poe is an Engineering Project Manager living with his family in Wilmington, DE.*

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*THE CHOICE* (cont. from p. 1)...my Bat Mitzvah, were all physical manifestations of Judaism. I wasn't at all connected to the spirituality of any of these events. Thus my decision to attend Yeshiva University seemed to come from out of the blue...but really, it came from summer camp.

Camp was critical to my youthful Jewish identity. The camp I attended every summer was in Southern California and was a mixture of kids from all types of Jewish homes, from observant to unaffiliated. While we had sports, arts and crafts and the other fun camp activities, our camp life was infused with a lot of Judaism. Each morning started with prayer groups. The religious kids were given a prayer book and a chance to pray on their own. The rest of us would sit with a counselor singing Jewish songs and learning a few prayers. I remember being envious of the religious kids. I saw them swaying back and forth with their eyes closed murmuring things in Hebrew. I remember thinking, how cool is that! It was as if they were having their own little meeting with G-d. I felt that all I was doing was singing words to a tune. I wanted to know how to do what they were doing.

Being a typical preteen, when posed with the option of a Shabbat program with my youth group or a Saturday morning softball game, I chose softball. When offered an optional

**SHAVUOT COMMITMENT** (cont. from p. 1)...wise man who gave them a potent blessing, but cautioned that if the child would be a girl, no man must see her until her wedding day, lest she die! When the Queen gave birth to a baby girl, a secluded island was prepared for the Princess, where she would be raised in the finest royal style with only female attendants and educators.

When the Princess came of age, the King approached a handsome nobleman and offered him his daughter's hand in marriage. "Sure," was the response. "Let me meet her!" After the King explained that his daughter was not to be seen before the wedding day, the nobleman declined. Time and again, the King was confronted with the same frustrating reaction: "Let's see her! If not, then how do I know what I'm getting myself into?"

At last, a worthy man told the King that he was greatly honored by the offer. If the princess had the attributes of her royal parents, he would be delighted to marry her even without seeing her until the wedding day.

A date was set, and the whole world was invited to the celebration. The bride proved to be more beautiful than anyone had anticipated. Everyone came to dance and rejoice. A marvelous time was had by all...except the groom! He was overcome with anxiety. For months he had hidden his inner fears about not having even met his bride.

Even after the wedding, despite the bride's beauty, he remained apprehensive. He anticipated that somehow her ugly side would eventually surface. After months of happy marriage, however, he came to appreciate more and more profoundly, her beauty, her charm and her wisdom. Each day another wondrous facet of her character and personality was revealed.

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prayer class or a trip to the mall and the 7/11, I chose the Slurpee. While I liked the idea of increasing my understanding of Jewish observance, it was not compelling enough to give up all the other things I enjoyed doing.

When it came time to choose a college, somewhere in my subconscious I realized it was time to make things happen. Two choices stood before me: UCLA, which has an active Hillel that offers abundant classes on Jewish topics, or Yeshiva University, where Jewish class attendance is not voluntary but expected of the entire student body. I liked the idea of the co-curriculum that Yeshiva University offers. In addition to the Liberal Arts and Science classes that other colleges offer, Y. U. requires all students to take a full course load of secular subjects as well as classes in Judaic studies, Jewish history and philosophy, and Hebrew language. To be honest, I liked the idea that these classes were required. It wasn't up to me whether on not to take a class -- it was the rule. I was 18 years old and decided to opt out of the easy choice. I chose to trek across the country to attend Stern College at Yeshiva University in New York City and begin my formal Jewish education. This choice changed my life.

While at Y.U., I attended all the beginner's track Judaic studies classes. I took beginner's Hebrew, (cont. on p. 4)

When he realized how fortunate he was to be married to this wonderful princess, the Prince became upset about having withheld himself from genuine joyful expression at his own wedding. He approached the King and admitted that although he was now delighted beyond measure, at the time of the wedding he had been filled with inner turmoil. A decision was made that a new party would be held. All of the original guests would be invited again, but this time only one person, the Prince himself, would dance to express his supernal delight.

The Maggid of Dubno explained that when the Torah was first offered, the Holy One showed it to all the nations of the world. Each nation raised questions about its contents, and each nation rejected it. However, when the Jewish nation was given its turn, there was a clear consensus among the people to accept the Torah even before seeing or understanding all its contents. This occurred on Shavuot. The goal of total trust, however, was not yet complete. The mind can know what the heart cannot yet accept. Only on Simchat Torah, after "living" with Torah and experiencing what King Solomon described as, "All its ways are pleasant, and all its paths are peace," (Proverbs 3:17), only then was the Jewish nation ready to express intense joy over the Almighty's precious gift.

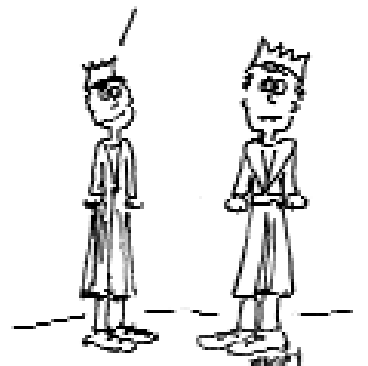
A great rabbi once asked a group of his students who were preparing for marriage, "On what do you base your marriage?" They unanimously agreed, "On love and understanding!" The rabbi corrected them saying that although their sentiments were correct, marriage could not really be built on love and understanding because they as yet neither loved nor understood their respective brides. Love and understanding only comes later with the experience of sharing.

Love and understanding are *goals*, not starting points. The foundation of a marriage is the total and absolute commitment to arrive at the mountain peak of love and understanding. Similarly, the basis of our relationship with the Almighty is in this awesome initial step: to act...to learn...perchance to understand. This step results in love. Sinai was a mountain of commitment, aspiring to an ocean of deep love and profound understanding.

As the entire oak tree resides in the tiny acorn, so may the whole of Jewish destiny be found in the kernel of that initial commitment from which we may continuously grow and which is constantly referred to as a "wedding day" -- the Festival of Shavuot!

*This article was originally published on [www.torah.org](http://www.torah.org), the website of Project Genesis.*

"OH KING, YOUR DAUGHTER IS TRULY BEAUTIFUL,  
BUT HOW DO I KNOW THAT SHE IS REALLY  
BEAUTIFUL INSIDE AS WELL?"



**THE CHOICE** (cont. from p. 3)...beginner's Bible (starting with Genesis, of course), and beginner's Jewish philosophy. The classes that interested me most, however, were those that taught how to lead an observant Jewish life. It was in these classes that I learned what it really means to believe in G-d, the significance of Jewish life cycle events, and the topic that forever intrigued me: How to Pray. Classes on prayer brought back those memories of camp and how badly I wanted to *daven* (pray) like the other kids.

Not only did I learn how to pray and what to pray, but I learned why we pray. Prayer is sometimes referred to as "service of the heart." It literally is an opportunity to have a meaningful conversation with G-d. We can praise Him for everything He does for us. We can ask Him for the things we need, like good health and sustenance. And we can thank Him for always being there for us and listening to us when we need Him. Before I learned this, the only time I really prayed was before opening my report card or while stepping up to bat at my softball games. Finally, I understood the spirituality of it all! It's not just murmuring words. It's about feeling what you are saying and speaking from your heart, not just your head.

I believe all Jews have a flame ready to burn brightly within them, and all they need is a spark to ignite it. From the very beginning of my time in New York (I graduated several years ago), I have continued using that spark and growing religiously, but I have taken my religious growth very slowly. Unfortunately, I've seen people take on too much too quickly on their path towards observance, going so fast that they are not able to hold on to that spark. I started small, reciting blessings over food, going to synagogue on Shabbat, and most recently, reciting *Mincha*, the daily afternoon prayer, every single day.

Every day I feel that I have the opportunity to do more with my life religiously and spiritually. It takes just one

act, one mitzvah, to get started: visiting a friend in the hospital, learning to read Hebrew, giving charity... whatever it may be, it's the little acts that help perfect the world and make living a more meaningful experience.

*Originally from Huntington Beach, California, Susanne Goldstone currently lives in New York City and is a Regional Program Coordinator for NJOP.*



Illustrations by Wendy Dunn



*Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Sarah Rochel Hewitt of the National Jewish Outreach Program. 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 NJOP programs, please write or call: 989 Sixth Avenue, 10th Floor, New York, NY 10018, 646-871-4444, e-mail info@njop.org or visit www.njop.org.*

*Readers: This is your newsletter and we'd like to hear from you. Article contributions are always welcome.*



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## OUR FIRST SHAVUOT

Elaine and Larry Komito

In the summer of 2004, in search of a Beginners Service, we came to Lincoln Square Synagogue. On our first Shabbat, we arrived a little before 9:15 am for the service, but no one was in the room. As we stood there reading the informational brochure and trying to decide whether we were in the right place or not, we were approached by a man with a *talit* (prayer shawl). He said, "Are you here for the Beginners Service?" We nodded and he said, "Welcome, I am Ephraim Buchwald. Come in and let's get to know each other."

Meeting Rabbi Buchwald changed our lives. At this time of Shavuot, the festival celebrating *Matan Torah*, the giving of the Torah, it is only appropriate that we recognize our *Rav*, our mentor, for all the Torah he has taught us and our beloved friends in the Beginners Service.

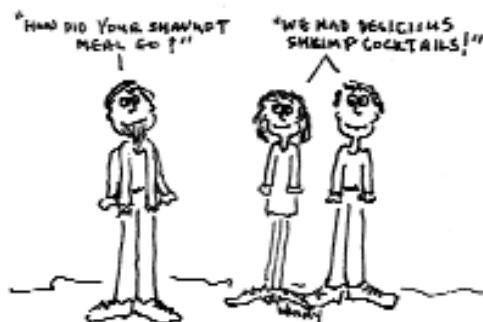
During the summer months, Jews study *Pirkei Avot*, Ethics of the Fathers, where it is written that Rav Yehoshua ben Perachia instructed: "*Aseh l'cha rav, oo-knei l'cha chaver, v'hevei dan et kol ha'adam l'chaf zechut*," Choose for yourself a mentor (a *rav*), and acquire for yourself a friend, and be certain to judge every person favorably (*Pirkei Avot* 1:6).

As a Beginner, finding a *rav* is a very important first step toward learning more about *Yiddishkeit* (Judaism). Without the proper Torah teacher as a guide, it is easy for Beginners to lose their way or give up on their journeys.

Our *Rav* doesn't just perform the typical rabbinic functions, although in truth he did officiate at our wedding. But, more importantly, our *Rav* is the sounding board for our concerns; he helps us navigate our lives on a daily basis. When we sought to marry, our *Rav* met with us to discuss how two people from divergent backgrounds (one, *frum* from birth, the other, *Baal T'shuvah*) could embark on a Torah life together. There is no doubt that without our *Rav*, we wouldn't be here today. Our *Rav* models *middot* and *mitzvot*, he doesn't just talk about them. This is what the *Mishnah* means when it says to choose a "mentor." Select someone who is *emesdik* (truthful/righteous) to be your mentor and your spiritual guide.

Every Shabbat and Yom Tov is another opportunity to engage Rav Buchwald in Torah study and witness his *hachmassat orchim* (hosting of guests). On most Shabbatot, our *Rav* and his wonderful *Rebbetzin* (rabbi's wife) Aidel and their family host a dozen guests or more at their Shabbat table. Some guests are invited ahead of time, but many are invited on the spot following the Beginners Service.

Celebrating our first Shavuot as a married couple, less than 3 months after our wedding, we decided to emulate our *Rav* and *Rebbetzin's* tremendous hospitality. In keeping with the advice from



*Pirkei Avot*, we decided that we needed to "acquire more friends." What better way to make friends and perform the mitzvah of *hachmassat orchim*, than to invite people over for *Yom Tov* meals! We invited many people from the Beginners Service, as well as friends from our professional associations or our workplace to join us. We had about 20 people for each meal.

Most of our guests were not *frum*, and we wanted to make their dining experience memorable. We set about to plan traditional Shavuot

meals replete with all sorts of *milchig* (dairy) and fish dishes, including homemade blintzes.

As we were planning the menu for the first night, Larry came up with the idea of serving mock shrimp cocktail. He tried in numerous ways to explain to me [his wife] what a shrimp cocktail is, but to no avail. Having never eaten one, I had no point of reference other than commercials on television. I left that project to him and worked on making the cheese and apple blintzes from scratch, as has been my custom every year since I was a teenager.

Since we live on the 21st floor, we arranged with the concierge to "assist" people with the elevator when they arrived. We encouraged our guests to come in time for candle lighting so they would have the experience of *Yom Tov* from the outset. We set up a separate table for the candles and gave out transliterated *brachot* to help everyone with the blessing.

The mock shrimp cocktail, complete with Larry's homemade cocktail sauce, was served as the appetizer to a chorus of ooo's and aaah's. People thought it tasted like the real thing! We also gave out doggie bags of blintzes for those who just needed a few to go. The best part of the night, however, was leaving our apartment at 11:30 pm and leading our guests on the long walk from midtown to Lincoln Square Synagogue to learn with Rav Buchwald.

When we arrived at shul with our posse in tow, Rav Buchwald asked us how we were doing. We told him the shrimp cocktail was a big hit! A strange look crossed over his face, but he quickly recovered his composure. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perachia's *mishnaic* advice was truly fulfilled when our *Rav* judged each of us favorably and offered us cheese-cake before the learning began. We learned together until 2:30 am.

Now you know the story of our first Shavuot, and how we acquired our new friends, and became part of the Lincoln Square Synagogue community.

Elaine, an Immigration Attorney, and Larry, an I.T. Consultant, live in Midtown Manhattan.

## CONGRATULATIONS AND MAZAL TOV

### ENGAGEMENTS

Sarah Rivkah Goodman and Zvi Gewirtz  
Mazal Tov to parents  
Barbara and Shlomo Dov Gewirtz  
Ruti Haleva and Mark Heilman  
Tsiri Kobre and  
Yitzchak (Yitzie) Zuckerman  
Mazal Tov to parents Miriam and Jeffrey Zuckerman  
Tzippy Stern and Gedaliah Levy  
Mazal Tov to parents  
Naomi Hildebrand and Barry Stern



Ayelet Nakonechny and Yisrael Skolnik  
Mazal Tov to parents Shelly and Daniel Nakonechny  
Rachel Rosner and Eugene Kantorovich (oops 12/05!)

### BIRTHS

Susan and Mark Esken, on the birth of a girl,  
Elena Julia (Etta Edna)  
Carrie Silberman and Omid Zareh, on the birth of a boy,  
Eliyahu (Benjamin Yare).

### BAR/BAT MITZVAH

Ilana Tamar Lidagoster  
Mazal Tov to mother Dr. Lidia Lidagoster  
Melanie Moore  
Mazal Tov to parents Lynn and Eli Moore

### SPEEDY RECOVERY

Yitzchak ben Chava

### CONDOLENCES

Marc Berger, on the loss of his mother, Barbara Berger

### CONGRATULATIONS

Charles Bernhaut, upon celebrating his 70th birthday  
Ann Crane, for co-chairing the Annual LSS Dinner  
Nina and Dr. Moshe Kawebblum, for being honored at the Scranton Community Kollel  
Sharona and Steven Spivack, for receiving the Parents of the Year Award from the Stein Yeshiva of Lincoln Park

