

בראשית

Vol. I No. 2

BERESHITH: "In the Beginning"

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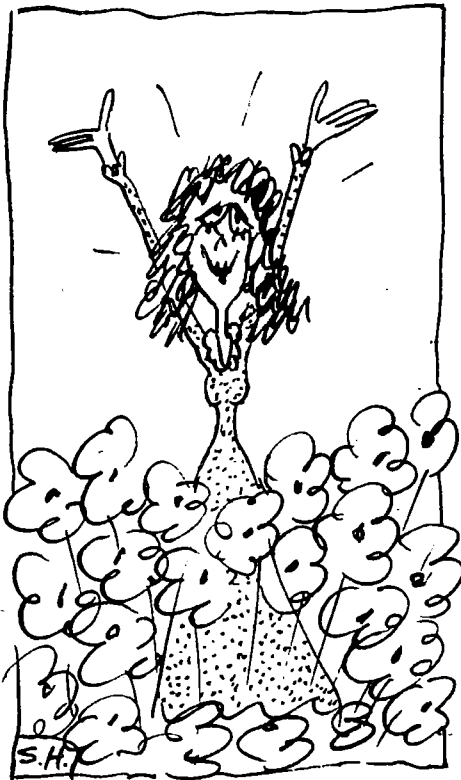
MY FIRST SHAVUOT

by Shelley Cohen

As I look ahead to Shavuot my memories of recent past Shavuot experiences illustrate to me just how dramatically my thinking and my lifestyle have changed since I first attended a Beginners Service not a year and-a-half ago. During this time I lived each of our holidays for the very first time. I have seen the Chanukah lights with new eyes, given and received my first *Mishloach Manot*, and cleaned my home as never before, in preparation for my first real seder.

Shavuot 5747 (1987) was the first Shavuot I had ever observed. In order to truly appreciate what a radical experience this was for me, please understand that I am the type of person who normally goes to sleep at 10 P.M.--11 P.M. the latest. The very thought of going to a 10 P.M. movie and staying out until midnight is positively painful. Prior to a year ago I am quite certain sure that I had never seen a clock read 3 A.M., not even for a "normal" reason, not for a party, not to cram for an exam! So it was really much to my surprise that last Shavuot I stayed up all night with relatively little difficulty and learned Torah with a community of new friends.

Pesach 5747 had been my first "real" Yom Tov. I had kept the first and last days of Pesach much as I had been keeping Shabbos as a newly Shomer Shabbos Jew--not carrying! Why, when I cut my finger while making a salad with a new Pesach knife and the cut was so deep that I needed stitches, I was afraid
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SHAVUOT -- THE UNIDENTIFIED HOLIDAY

by Rabbi Elimelech Gottlieb

We celebrate the festival of Shavuot as "Z'man Matan Torataynu", the time of the giving of the Torah. Yet, the Torah itself makes no mention of this reason for celebrating Shavuot.

The Rabbis explain that the Torah did not wish to set aside one particular day to mark the giving of the Torah. In this way it is emphasized that Torah must be as new to us each day as the day we received it. Commitment to Torah must be renewed daily with the fervor and enthusiasm of the Jews at Sinai. No single day stands out from among the others as the day to bring Torah into our lives.

(cont. p. 2)

GALUT

Anonymous, because I could be anyone!

In the beginning there was Galut, exile. Without any awareness of the existence of G-d or of his nature there could be nothing but exile. For many of us, that is how it all began.

I have no memory of biblical-thou-shalt-nots, merely familial thou shalt nots--which, just for the record, seemed just as divinely ordained. But all in all, my childhood memories consist of pizza on Friday nights, and if I did my homework and cleaned my room I could go to the movie with the other kids on Saturday afternoons. I never heard of the Sabbath and didn't find out until I was sixteen that bread was not supposed to be eaten on Passover. All Passover meant
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 to carry my insurance ID card to the hospital emergency room! So it was quite puzzling to me when I was invited to attend a Shavuot picnic, how was the food going to get to the picnic?

When I finally understood that it was permissible to carry food on Yom Tov things became even more confusing. Could I carry a bencher (Grace after meals book)? How about a picnic blanket? The questions went on and on, and I could hardly bother a Rabbi each day as I dreamt up new questions. Finally I decided to play safe and just carry food. If not for all of that confusion, I wouldn't have enjoyed the satisfaction of realizing that on Shavuot I had reached a milestone: I realized that I had learned *Shir Hamalot* (the psalm before the Grace) and much of *Birkat Hamazon* (Grace after meals) by heart!



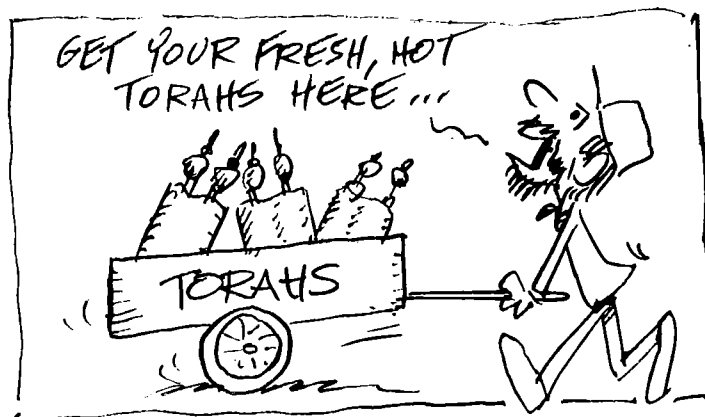
The picnic was a culinary delight, with each attendee bringing his own milchig (dairy) specialty. At the picnic, I was asked how I had spent Shavuot the year before. Although I had no recollection of Shavuot 1986, I knew exactly what I had done on Shavuot 1984. That year, on Shavuot, I had graduated from Harvard Business School. At that time, Shavuot meant nothing to me. I wasn't even sure what it was. I suppose that if asked I would have guessed that it is the holiday when Jews erect huts outside of synagogues. In fact, the only reason I knew it was Shavuot was that a few months earlier an Orthodox student in my class had asked me to sign a petition calling on the university to change the date of graduation so that it would not be on a Jewish holiday. I had refused to sign the petition, thinking it was stupid! I had no intention of observing the holiday, and therefore, thought that it would be hypocritical for me to sign such a petition.

If anyone had told me then, that just three years later, I would be staying up all night on Shavuot, I would never have believed them! If anyone had told me then that I would be worrying about whether I could carry a bencher on Yom Tov, I would never have believed them! If they told me that I would know what a bencher was, or better yet that I wouldn't need to rely on one because I'd know the brochos by heart.....!!!!

Shelley Cohen is product manager of Wizard Air Freshners at American Home Products, and attends the Beginners Service at the Lincoln Square Synagogue, New York.

(cont. from p. 1) **HOLIDAY**

An allusion to this subtle message is found in the special offering that was brought in the Temple on Shavuot. The Torah says "VeHikravtem Mincha Chadasha"...and you shall bring an offering of new grain." The requirement to bring an offering of something new symbolizes the newness of the Torah which was given on this holiday. The great commentator on the Bible, Rashi, cites a similar interpretation to the verse in the Shema "which I command you this day"...that each day we are to feel as if the Torah were commanded to us today!



Every new beginning is filled with the excitement of a fresh start. Inevitably, the excitement begins to fade. In order to seriously grow in Judaism, we must strive to keep our devotion to the Torah as fresh and alive as the day the Jews proclaimed "Naaseh V'Nishma" - "we will do, and we will listen."

The holiday of Passover began a new volume of Jewish history. Shavuot begins the chapters we must write each and every day.

Happy Shavuot.

Rabbi Elimelech Gottlieb is the leader of the Beginners Service of Havurat Israel, Forest Hills, N.Y.

A SUMMER IS A TERRIBLE THING TO WASTE

The summer months are often the "sweetest" months for Torah learning. By enrolling in an intensive summer program, a beginner can often make phenomenal progress in learning, greatly eclipsing what could be learnt in limited evening study. The following summer program listing was compiled by Rabbi Reuven Tradburks who heads the "Taskforce on Effective Programming" for the Association of Jewish Outreach Professionals.

AISH HATORAH - THE JERUSALEM FELLOWSHIPS

Rabbi Yitzchak Coopersmith
1220 Broadway, #610,
New York, NY 10001
(212) 621-4798
or Rabbi Shalom Schwartz
296A Wilson Ave.
Downsview, Ontario M3H 1S8
(416) 636-7866

FOR MEN:

FOR WOMEN:

6 weeks field/study in Israel. Ages 18 and over.
Seminars, workshops on Judaism and Israel.

DRISHA INSTITUTE FOR JEWISH EDUCATION

Rabbi David Silber, Director
122 West 76th Street
New York, NY 10023
(212) 595-0307

FOR WOMEN:

Summer Institute - June 27 - August 4
Monday - Thursday, 9:00 A.M. - 5:00 P.M.
For women of college age or older. Intensive
textual study. Full day program in New York City.
Courses in Bible, Talmud, Codes and Philosophy.

Summer High School Program - June 27 - July 28

Monday - Thursday, 9:00 A.M. - 5:00 P.M.
For high school women, intensive textual study.

ISRAEL - USA CONNECTION

Rabbi Avraham Jacobovitz, Director
Machon L'Torah
24786 Sussex, Oak Park, MI 48237
(313) 967-0888

FOR MEN:

Ages 19-28, July 5-18 at Moodus, Connecticut;
July 18-August 14 in Jerusalem, Israel based at
Machon Shlomo. Learning, recreation, touring.

ISRALIGHT:

Rabbi David Aaron, Director
3 Ararat Street, Old City, Jerusalem, Israel
(02) 285-785, 862-142

FOR MEN AND WOMEN:

Six weeks in the Old City of Jerusalem. Tours and
Jewish Studies. Starts June 6.

JEWISH LEARNING EXCHANGE

Rabbi Pinchas Kasnett
P.O. Box 462, Monsey, NY 10952-0462
(914) 352-7600 (NY and Canada)
(800) 431-2272 (Outside NY State)

FOR MEN:

Yeshiva learning and touring based at Ohr Somayach
Central Campus, Jerusalem.

FOR WOMEN:

Full day learning and touring based at Neve
Yerushalayim College.

KOL YAAKOV YESHIVA

Rabbi David Charlop, Coordinator
29 West Maple Avenue
Monsey, NY 10952
(914) 425-3871, (914) 425-2863

FOR MEN:

Full day Yeshiva learning for beginners through
advanced levels. Individual programs arranged.
Summer retreat June 3-19.

LINCOLN SQUARE SUMMER TORAH INSTITUTES

Rabbi Kenneth Brandt, Director
Lincoln Square Synagogue
200 Amsterdam Avenue
New York, NY 10023
(212) 874-6105

FOR MEN AND WOMEN:

6 weeks
Monday - Thursday 7:45 A.M. - 4:00 P.M.
Beginner, intermediate-advanced levels.
Full day learning program. Start June 20.

LIYNOT U'LEHIBANOT:

The Tzfat Program
515 Park Avenue
New York, NY 10022
(212) 752-2390

FOR MEN AND WOMEN:

20 - 30 years old. Three month program of study and
work in Tzfat. Sessions beginning in March, June and
September.

MACHON MEIR INSTITUTE FOR JEWISH STUDIES

2 Hameiri Blvd.
Kiryat Moshe, Jerusalem
02-525-997, 531-906

FOR MEN: Machon Meir

FOR WOMEN: Machon Ora

Complete yeshiva program with structured Hebrew
Ulpan, includes dormitory, tours and college credits.

NETZACH YISRAEL

Mrs. Leah Kohn, Director
27 Francis Place
Monsey, NY 10952
(914) 425-1888

FOR WOMEN:

Summer Seminar - July 10 - 23. Based in the Monsey
Campus. Extended enrollment available between July 5
and August 18. Full range of courses.

NEVE YERUSHALAYIM COLLEGE FOR WOMEN

Patricia Papock, Executive Director
39 Broadway, #3004
New York, NY 10006
(212) 422-1110

2-3 week Torah study missions to Neve Yerushalayim
in Israel, as well as 3 day supplementary missions.

OHR SOMAYACH INSTITUTIONS

Rabbi Avraham Braun, Menahel
PO Box 334, Monsey, NY 10952-0334
(914) 425-1370

FOR MEN:

Full day Yeshiva learning for beginner through
advanced levels.

OHR TORAH INSTITUTIONS

Mrs. Bess Bergman
1 West 85th Street, Suite 2F
New York, NY 10024
(212) 496-1618

FOR WOMEN:

Michelet Bruria

June 16 - July 21. Kiryat Moshe, Jerusalem.
Beginner through advanced levels. Classroom
shiurim and chavruta learning.

FOR MEN:

Yeshivat Ha Mivtar (Brovender's)

June 11 - August 4. Moshav Elazer, Gush
Etzion. Beginner through Advanced levels -
Yeshiva program.

PARDES INSTITUTE OF JEWISH STUDIES

American Pardes Foundation
PO Box 58, Roseland, NJ 07068
(703) 527-9246

FOR MEN AND WOMEN:

Based in Jerusalem. Traditional learning for
men and women of all ages.

TORAH INSTITUTE OF AMERICA

Moodus, Connecticut (203) 873-1431
Rabbi Menachem Zupnick, Alumni Director
263 Pennington Avenue, Passaic, NJ 07055
(201) 471-3247

Full day learning in recreational retreat
surrounding. Beginner through intermediate
levels.

FOR WOMEN:

June 15 - July 1

FOR MEN:

July 4 - 22, July 25 - August 15

YESHIVA UNIVERSITY OF LOS ANGELES

Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein, Director
Jewish Studies Program
9760 West Pico Blvd.
Los Angeles, CA 90035
(213) 553-4478 x 364

FOR MEN:

Four weeks in August/Elul

Full day Yeshiva program including a full
beginner's program.



Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of 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 the NJOP, please write or call: 475 Fifth Avenue, Suite 1810, New York, NY 10017, (212) 725-1690.

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

(cont. from p. 1) GALUT

to me was that we got to eat a new food, Matzah, in addition to bread.

I have no memories of family functions. Oh, there was an occasional Sunday at my uncle's house, but essentially we were alone. Alone, but not together; each for himself. When I think back on it, it is not that we were in exile from Jewish people, but rather we were in exile from ourselves--as if we constituted a poison that must not be spread to each other or to the nation at large. Perhaps if we didn't make too much noise no one would notice us!

And so it came to me that in a moment of unaccountable loneliness I was brought to synagogue. To be quite honest about it, it was not the warmth which attracted me. I found that quite offputting, abnormal perhaps. I did not return to the Beginners Service for four months after the Rabbi's initial warm greeting and exuberant singing. But I did return after all, not because of the luncheon invitations, of which I rarely took advantage, but rather, because, for the first time, answers to yet unasked questions were being given to me.

It was all very disorienting--the answers as well as the new questions. My earliest memories were not of fathers holding their children in their arms while praying. I do not remember mothers forever pregnant, wearing hats, smiling over their lot. I do not remember seeing the throngs of people that I see here on Saturday mornings. Three hours of it was all that I could bear. Three hours and then back to Galut. Alone.

Sometimes I was stopped. Often a total stranger would ask who I was, where I was from, and if I was new.

And if I was able to catch myself, if I could stop my eyes from turning to stone, if I left an opening for the questions to continue, I would generally be asked where I was going--if not in life, for lunch.

Galut can be anywhere. I imagine it can even exist in Israel. For me it's been in New York for three years. An observance alone. A lighting of a candle, a dinner alone, a morning in shul, a veneer of self-importance--until I can return to the safety of childhood.

Because that's how it was in the beginning and beginnings are difficult to change. They are wrought with emotion, with heart-wrenching reminiscences. Every step made to change a beginning is a confrontation with one's self. That's how it's been for me anyway.

But the Torah is light, and light can unveil any darkness. Sometimes I see myself change. I catch myself wanting to stay, wanting to rid myself of the exile--of Galut. But it means ridding myself of childhood.

While we mourn the tragedy of having lost millions, I celebrate the return of one. Certainly in spirit, if not always in body.

Sometimes I go to shul not just to pray but to assure myself that memories can be overcome, that parents can love children, and that the minority can be joyous observing laws that the majority call insane. In order to end the Galut of millions, we can only begin with one!

The author attends a Beginners Service in New York City.

Cartoons by Stu Hample

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