

# בראשית

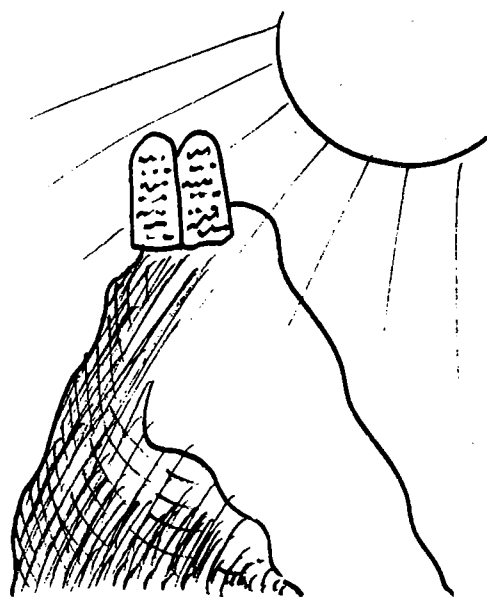
Vol. IV No. 4

BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

Iyar 5751/May 1991

## GOOD MORNING SINAI

by Rabbi Aaron Dov Friedman



Don't bet the rent money on the percentage of Jews who could answer the following question: "What is the significance of the holiday Shavuot?"

Everybody knows about Passover. It's marketed throughout the country, and even many otherwise assimilated Jews attend a Seder. Sukkot is less well known, but many Jews are familiar with its symbols, the Sukkah, Lulav and Etrog. But Shavuot... most people don't even know it exists.

There is a custom among Jews which dates back 3,300 years, to the time of the giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai, to stay up and study Torah the entire first night of Shavuot. Our tradition tells us that the Jewish people slept late that morning and had to be awakened from their slumber in order to receive the Torah. Can you imagine? To oversleep on the day that had been anticipated for hundreds of years! Is it possible for a bride or groom to sleep late on the day of his/her wedding? Usually, anticipation causes insomnia days in advance.

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## DESTINED TO LEAD A BEGINNER'S SERVICE

by Murray Richelson

As a child I went to a Conservative Synagogue. My classes in Hebrew School were simply "serving time" until my Bar Mitzvah. Instead of indicating the start of my Judaism, my Bar Mitzvah marked the end of it.

Seventeen years later, in the state of Ohio (some 500 miles from where I had been raised) I married Joan in an Orthodox Synagogue where she had been studying with the rabbi. Occasionally, we attended Shabbat morning services. At times, I recognized a few parts of the service, but usually, I had no idea what was going on! Once, on the High

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## LEARNING ABOUT THE HOLIDAYS

by Lianne Klapper

At this time, last year, I had never even heard of a holiday called Shavuot. As far as I knew, there were only two holidays that Jews celebrated with any regularity: Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

This year, I approach Shavuot with a very different understanding, albeit an elementary one. My first year of study has revealed that no one Jewish holiday can be taken on its own. The six holidays commanded in the Torah are all intimately connected, a cycle to be followed. Not just in the same circle each time they arrive again, but hopefully in an upward spiral as the years go by. It is a spiral that will bring more knowledge, deeper understanding

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## DESTINED TO LEAD (cont. from p. 1)

Holidays I was struggling in the hall with a huge talit, when a kind man helped me fold it correctly over my shoulders. As I walked in, Joan and the Rebbetzin were looking down from the balcony. When Joan pointed me out, the Rebbetzin commented, "What a nice young man, he even has his talit on perfectly!" Otherwise, however, it was a frustrating experience. The service was at warp speed, and with no page numbers announced, I kept saying to myself "I don't belong here... I'm not Orthodox." We went several more times with similar results. On one occasion, at last, I recognized a tune -- Adon Olam, my golden opportunity. But once again, frustration: they didn't announce the page number. That was it, the last straw. I left angrily, with no intention of returning. A few weeks later, my wife spotted an ad for the adult Beginners Service at Cleveland's Taylor Road Synagogue. At first, I wouldn't try it because "I wasn't Orthodox." But with my wife's encouragement, I started to attend. It fit like a glove. Here was a service that was designed for a person with little or no background. It was sensitive to my lack of knowledge, and just my speed. It gave meaning to my Jewishness. At the Beginners Service I also discovered that I love to sing. Prior to this, the only place where I ever sang was in the shower.

Thanksgiving 1989, we visited my parents and checked the local Jewish newspaper for synagogue listings. Finding an ad for a Beginners Program at an Orthodox Synagogue, we walked over but could find no Beginners Service. We were directed to the synagogue's Outreach Chairman who I asked: "So where's your Beginners Service?" "Well... we don't really have a service", he replied. "Why don't you come to our Wednesday night class?" I then told him of the wonderful service we had in Cleveland. He listened to my enthusiastic description, and expressed regret that there was no similar program in his synagogue. Left with no choice, we attended the regular service. At Kiddush an elderly man approached us. "I've never seen you here before. What is your name?" One thing led to another and I found out that this friendly gentleman had been close friends with my grandfather and even knew my great grandfather who had been very active in this synagogue years before. I had come only to "daven," but suddenly found my past.

At the end of August 1990, we learned that the leader of our Beginners Service was going to make Aliyah in early 1991. It had long been my secret

ambition to some day lead the service, but I was really nervous about coming forward to make this commitment. Questions raced through my mind, "Am I good enough?" "Can I answer all the questions?" I finally got up enough courage and asked my rabbi, who was encouraging, but said that he would have to think about it.

The next Shabbat was Labor Day weekend and we went back to stay with my parents. We were, of course, anxious to go back to the local synagogue to find out more about my great-grandfather. As we entered, we were very excited to see a big sign "Beginners Service 10:45 downstairs." At 10:45 we left the main service to go downstairs. Immediately recognizing us, the Outreach greeted us with: "Thanks to your inspiration, we now have a Beginners Service. But... the doctor who usually leads it is out of town, and we have no one to conduct the service today. Would you like to lead it?"



I jumped at the chance. G-d was answering my prayer. After the service, people told me how much they enjoyed it, especially the singing. At Kiddush, the same elderly man who knew my family told us that the Beginners Service room is the same room where my great-grandfather's set of Talmud is kept. Joan and I stared at each other wide-eyed and dashed downstairs, where we noticed, for the first time, the rows and rows of old volumes of the Talmud on the wall shelves. We couldn't find his name, but never-the-less departed with a very special feeling.

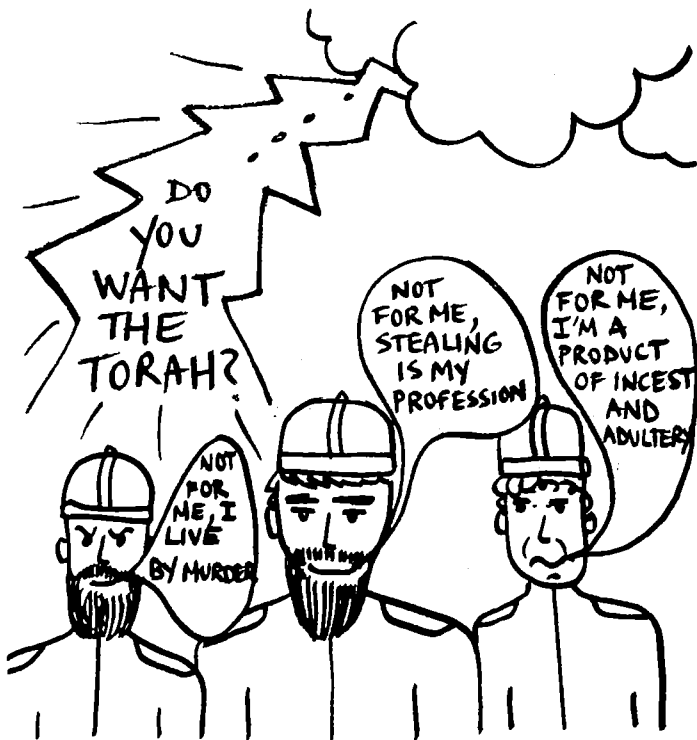
A few weeks later was Rosh Hashana. We were house sitting for a rabbi; I was in his library looking for something to read. I finally found something in English, the book of Jonah. The next week, on Yom Kippur, the Beginners Service gabbai handed me an Aliyah card for the "Third Aliyah", which included reading the Haftorah from the book of Jonah aloud

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## GOOD MORNING SINAI (cont. from p. 1)

Two of the many answers to this question also shed light on the very essence of the holiday. One answer views sleeping late as a deliberate action in preparation for receiving the Torah, G-d's words. The Jewish people felt that since they were merely flesh and blood, they would be blocked from fully appreciating and fulfilling their spiritual obligations. Therefore, they thought that by sleeping, they could achieve a temporary separation between body and soul, thereby becoming better receptacles for G-d's Torah.

The second answer is based on a familiar Midrash recounting the giving of the Torah. Before offering the Torah to the Jewish people, G-d went to all the other nations and offered it to them. Each nation asked "What will the Torah demand of us?" And each was given an answer, which for one reason or another, caused them to reject the Torah.



The Jews, upon hearing that the Torah was first being offered to the other nations, assumed that it would be accepted by one of them. They therefore slept late, because they simply despaired of receiving the Torah. How surprised they must have been to be awakened with the words "It's still available." So surprised, in fact, that they immediately said: Na'aseh V'nishma - "We will do and we will listen."

Both answers point to the common human failing of underestimating our relationship with G-d. The human race has been charged, as a requirement

for existence, with the seven Noahide laws, by which society must live. We were not asked if we wish to accept them. They are rules set down by the Creator, and are the religion of mankind.

We, as Jews, have been given an additional, exalted role. We are to be a light unto the nations, as we agreed to be at Sinai. This covenant was accepted as a national obligation, and is a commitment to a relationship which has been formed and tested over thousands of years, since the time of Abraham and Sarah. It is our ability to express ourselves spiritually within our physical limitations, that strengthens this commitment. The 613 commandments, corresponding to the 248 parts of the body and 365 days of the year, emphasize this principal. Our limitations in space and time are precisely those tools which we use to glorify G-d's name in this world.

We therefore spend the night of Shavuot studying Torah, giving witness that our "place in line" was never in jeopardy, and that our spiritual achievements evolving from our limited physical energies, are a fulfillment of G-d's master plan.

Our ability to elevate ourselves to the highest level of spirituality, even to the level of angels, is demonstrated so clearly during Kedusha. We stand with our feet together in the presence of G-d and say: "We shall sanctify your name, just as they sanctify it in the heavens above."

Let us all join this Shavuot in study and prayer as we rededicate ourselves; body and soul, to the relationship with G-d which is rightfully ours. This year, as the sun rises on Shavuot morning, we'll be there waiting to say "Good morning Sinai."

*Rabbi Aaron Dov Friedman is in the health care profession and leads the Beginners Service at the Jewish Learning Exchange in Los Angeles, California.*

## DESTINED TO LEAD (cont. from p. 2)

in English. I felt that I was being sent a message, that, like Jonah, G-d was not going to let me run away from Judaism. And so, the following Thanksgiving we, again, went back to my grandfather's synagogue. The doctor who led the Beginners Service told me that the service had been improved by including songs and melodies, following the pattern I had set. What a special feeling, and what a great message to all of us.

*Murray Richelson is an attorney and leads the Beginners Service in the Taylor Road Synagogue branch in Beachwood, Ohio.*

**LEARNING ABOUT HOLIDAYS** (cont. from p. 1)  
and a relationship with G-d, that becomes increasingly more real and informative.

To approach Shavuot without remembering its origins in Pesach and its continuation in the High Holidays (and the holidays that follow), is to miss much. There is a symmetry between Pesach/Counting the Omer/Shavuot and Rosh Hashanah/Days of Awe/Yom Kippur. Each of the two sets of holidays begin with a thirty day period of preparation. They arrive with a celebration of life, then take time for repentance and growth, and finally reaffirm that continuation of life with new understanding and resolve.

In the case of Shavuot, the Torah commands a wave offering of two loaves of bread. While a temple no longer stands where we can wave a literal offering, we can still offer up all we have been able to learn from the study of our escape from Egypt during Pesach, and our attempts to remember and emulate the qualities of our ancestral fathers, while counting the Omer. We can affirm the growing we have done, and offer to put that growing into service for G-d and our fellow man.

The symmetry between this time of year and the holidays of Tishri underscores our ongoing work as Jews: our duty to persevere in the process of learning Torah, seeing where we fall short, resolving to do better and attempting to bring what we have learned to bear on our lives.

The holidays are available as an aid, a reminder, to delve more deeply into what we could be doing every day: struggling to give something back to G-d by celebrating the gift of life. This process of learning, repenting and starting anew, is inherent in each Jewish holiday. It is a process which can be compressed into a day, or expanded to encompass the whole year -- indeed a whole lifetime.

Against the backdrop of the full year, each holiday in the Jewish calendar can be seen as preparation for, and parent to, the next. Similarly, each day of our lives can be used as preparation for, and parent to, the life to come.

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**בראשית**

*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: 485 Fifth Avenue, Suite 212, New York, NY 10017, (212) 986-7450.*

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