

בראשית

Vol. VII No. 4

BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

Iyar 5754/May 1994

UNDER THE MOUNTAIN

by Rabbi Michael Taubes

On the Holiday of Shavuot, we celebrate and read of the dramatic events leading up to, and culminating with, the giving of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai. This is certainly the most central and significant spiritual occasion in the history of the Jewish people. It was this event that molded the multitude of newly freed slaves into a nation with its own beliefs and code of law, still followed today.

The actual giving of the Ten Commandments, was, of course, a "live" program—every person standing there witnessed the Divine revelation. Every man, woman, and child present at Mount Sinai saw and heard the voice of G-d, a fact that Moses continually reminds the people about throughout the Torah.

When reading the story, one can not help feeling the awe and the excitement as it builds, and we, the readers, wonder what it must have been like to be there, to be elevated to such spiritual heights. How inspiring it must have been to experience the revelation of G-d and to readily accept His Torah.

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*Is it good for the Jews or
bad for the Jews?*

THE MISSING LINK

by Lori Landman

Although I am Jewish, my Jewish education has been practically non-existent. Like many American Jews of my generation (I am 32), I have felt almost completely "disconnected" from Judaism. Going to synagogue, which I only did once a year on that "special day," was an embarrassment for me. I was always lost. I never really knew what was going on. Holidays came and went, as did their special prayers and ceremonies. As others were able to participate, I always felt like I was on the outside looking in. I considered myself a Jew "in name only," and felt in reality, that I did not really "belong."

Feeling estranged from one's heritage can be a very lonely feeling. It's as though something is

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THE LITTLE SHUL WHERE EVERYONE IS PRESIDENT

by Ellie Fier

Outwardly, there's little that distinguishes that small, white building on Madison St., just yards from the sandy boardwalk of Hollywood Beach. Except for the sign on top, a passerby might hardly notice it. *Abavat Shalom* it reads—Love of Peace—the only Orthodox shul in the area. But there is no rabbi, no cantor and no *shammus*. And although the shul seats 120, in off-season it's sometimes a struggle to attract a minyan. But in season, on Shabbat and on the High Holy Days, it's packed to the rafters. And not because there's no charge for admission. It's obviously due to a unique blend of talent that makes up its Board of Directors.

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THE LITTLE SHUL. . . (cont. from p. 1)

Seventy three year old Harry Sprung, a short man with a pleasant ruddy face, is Board president and one of the synagogue's founders—hardly an undertaking for one who had once repudiated religion.

Brought up in Poland, "very Orthodox," Harry was the son of the president of the *Chevre Kaddisba*. "My father wore a *stretmel*, my mother a *shettel*, and I wore earlocks," recalls Harry. "And every day I'd put on tefillin and daven."

But during WWII, Harry and his family were whisked away, one Friday night, to a gulag in Siberia

*"In our little shul, we all live together
in peace and tranquility"*



where hunger and typhus were rampant, and where his parents, in their early forties, succumbed to disease.

"After that," Harry vowed, "I didn't want to hear any more about religion. G-d never heard my prayers." Years later, though, Harry reconsidered his decision. "I began to realize that I couldn't live without faith. It's much better to believe," affirms Harry who has pulled through two by-pass operations. "Believing is not only good for the soul, it's healthy for the body."

When once again, he cloaked himself in his prayer shawl, Harry remembers "feeling good." And he felt good again when he met Itzy Sapiro from New Jersey and Aaron Halpern from Poland—also a Holocaust survivor. These three, who were determined to daven daily, were inspired to build a shul.

"We sent flyers to every house," recalls Harry. "We said we were going to have a minyan and buy a Sefer

Torah. And anyone who didn't have the money was asked to borrow it."

In 1986, their first Rosh Hashanah, services were held at the Ramada Inn on Ocean Drive. "We charged \$50 a person and seventy people came," recalls Harry whose Yom Kippur appeal brought in an additional \$1400.

The following year the Board decided not to charge admission. "The whole Miami Beach showed up," boasts Harry. "And on Yom Kippur we raised \$6000." The shul-in-waiting was no longer a mirage. At a Sabbath Service in the apartment of David Tilles, 25 people pledged \$30,000. With the accumulated funds, they could now buy the house at 415 Madison St. where no parking is permitted on the street, and where, inside that little white house, they would "make beautiful improvements."

In season, at Ahavat Shalom, 80-100 people come to daven on Shabbos—many Canadians. "Off season, for a minyan, we recruit additions from the boardwalk," explains Harry who, together with his cohorts, tackle the tasks at hand with business-like fervor. Experience has served them well.

"We're very lucky," notes the bearded David Tilles, a Baal T'shuva who manages real estate and is the volunteer *shammus*. "We have top level executives who devote all their energies to the shul. But if each had his way, each would be CEO."

In the beginning, it was the "Battle of Wills." They couldn't decide who should be the rabbi? Who should read the Torah? And who should be president of the Board? A skilled mediator, Itzy Sapiro, points out, "With Jews, everyone is president."

These days, Harry Sprung, with his beautiful voice, fills the role of cantor. Itzy Sapiro fills the role of vice president, and Aaron Halpern is treasurer.

Complementing the force is volunteer *shammus* David Tilles who is central to the shul's operation. It's a combination that works.

"We're a small, *haimish* shul, that's often likened to a *shatiebel*," David Tilles points out. "We're loyal and dedicated. People are surprised when they drop in. They didn't know we were here. At this year's Purim festival more people than ever showed up and they promised to be back."

But nobody is worrying. The concern now is how to enlarge the shul. Should they build up, or not? That's the next decision for all the presidents of the Board of Directors.

Ellie Fier is a free lance author and a graduate of the Etz Chaim Beginners Program in Baltimore, MD.

UNDER THE MOUNTAIN *(cont. from p. 1)*

And yet, the Talmud takes some of the excitement away from this special moment by relating a very puzzling Midrash. We are told that, as the people stood at the foot of Mount Sinai, G-d somehow uprooted the mountain, and held it over their heads, announcing that if they accept the Torah then it will be good, but if not, "they would be buried *there*."

G-d's threat to drop the mountain onto the people's heads, changes their "inspired" acceptance of the Torah into an act of self-preservation, and seems contradictory to the sense of majesty and greatness described in the Torah.

The late Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik z"tl has suggested that the key to understanding this passage lies in the words which are attributed to G-d, namely, that if the people refuse the Torah, they would be buried "*there*." Why does G-d say "there" (*Sham* in Hebrew) instead of "here" (*Poh* in Hebrew)? If He was, indeed, threatening to drop the mountain upon their heads, then He should have said that their burial place will be "here". Why use the word "there"?

This implies that G-d was not actually threatening to drop the mountain on the people's heads; He was not threatening them with immediate annihilation should they refuse to accept the Torah. Rather, He was telling them that if they do not accept the Torah now, then, somewhere down the road, perhaps many years later--a mountain of assimilation would fall on their heads, wiping them out not physically, but spiritually. "There," somewhere down the road, would be their spiritual burial place, and they would cease to exist as a religion and as an independent nation.

Without G-d's Torah to guide them, this newly liberated people might be able to survive for a while; the lessons of Moses and the events of the Exodus might continue to inspire them temporarily. But somewhere over "there" as they begin to be influenced by other peoples and cultures, their spirituality will slowly begin to dissipate, their recollection of G-d's miracles will begin to fade, and ultimately--over "there"--they will die out as an independent religious entity.

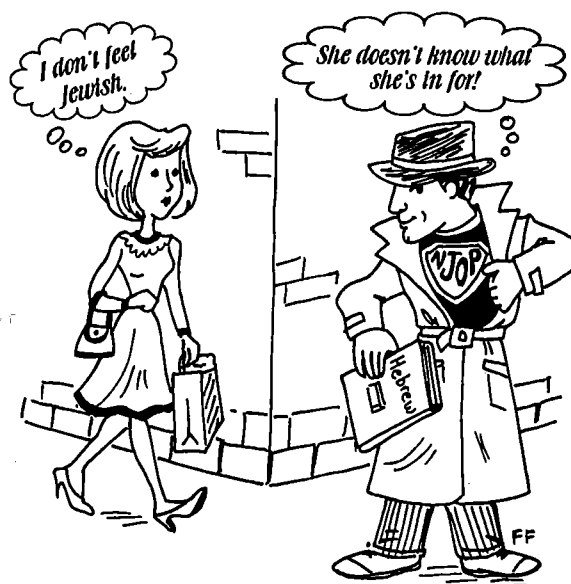
Other commentators have advanced a completely different explanation for this enigmatic Midrash, suggesting that people understood the word of G-d so clearly that they accepted it immediately and without question as if there had been a mountain hanging over their heads, forcing their decision.

Just as they would have immediately obeyed G-d out of fear for their lives had there actually been a mountain over their heads, so too, they now obeyed G-d immediately out of understanding and true faith. The Midrash, then, is explaining that the people had reached a level of understanding that made it, in effect, impossible and illogical to do anything but His will.

Both explanations of the Midrash are relevant today. The more one knows and understands, the clearer it becomes that G-d's truth, the Torah, is the only truth. We have witnessed with our own eyes the bitter results of the abandonment of Torah, with intermarriage rates at 52% and climbing. Two million American Jews no longer identify themselves as Jews. Indeed, the prophecy, of "there" seems to refer to America. But, on the other hand, we are also witnessing an unprecedented return to Torah. Tens of thousands of Baalei T'shuva are enriching the Jewish people with their enthusiasm and commitment. They are living proof that what occurred on Sinai occurs again in every generation.

Just as the Jews at Mount Sinai reached a high level of spirituality and understood that to deny G-d and to disobey His will is to act without logic and reason, so too Jews today are reaching for that same high level, using scientific knowledge and intellectual sophistication to draw closer to G-d and to the heritage of our people.

Rabbi Michael Taubes is the Director of the Jewish Learning Experience of Bergen County.



THE MISSING LINK *(cont. from p. 1)*

missing from your life; something deep and tangible. Finding it can be an experience that is not only very satisfying inside, but also transforming. After many years of searching, this has finally begun to happen to me.

I decided a few years ago, that I wanted to connect with Judaism and find my place in the Jewish community. I tried several ways to begin my "quest," including reading books on Jewish history and traditions, speaking with religious people, and observing holidays. Although I was surely going in the right direction, none of these produced the sense of belonging that I was seeking. I still felt "cut off."

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THE MISSING LINK *(cont. from p. 1)*

Then, about three months ago, I received a flyer from the Jewish Culture Foundation at NYU, with a listing of upcoming events. My eyes were drawn to the bold letters which read "Learn to Read Hebrew--In 5 Easy Lessons." I pondered learning Hebrew for some time, and suddenly, I felt ready. I had to tackle some inner resistance, which turned out to be a mixture of fear and intimidation. Hebrew seemed to be so drastically different from English, and I worried whether or not I could grasp it. Perhaps I worried that others in the class would have more knowledge, and once again I would feel uneasy.

I decided to join the class, in spite of my hesitation. It turned out to be just the "link" that I needed. After a very short time, I am now able to read and recite prayers that I have heard since childhood. I have started attending Friday night services, which are extremely fulfilling, now that I am beginning to understand what they are all about. Although I can't read as fast as most people there, I can follow along silently without getting lost most of the time. During the recent Passover Seders, I read my portions in Hebrew and gave my parents the gift of hearing me for the first time. It was a very exciting moment. Learning to read Hebrew, the language of my

faith, has opened the door to what feels like a Magic Garden. I finally don't feel like an outcast among my own people. This is a thrill that is hard to describe. Hearing the ancient words and prayers in my own voice touches my heart, and my spirit, as has nothing else.

Currently, I am attending the advanced beginner classes, where we read from a Siddur, prayer book. We have the same wonderful teacher who volunteers his time to relay some of his vast knowledge to us. We are learning some of the meanings behind the prayers, and hearing them set to their traditional tunes. The classes, which are co-sponsored by the National Jewish Outreach Program, are made up of an interesting mix of people. Some of them are not even Jewish. All are there for their own reasons. The classes are open to anyone, and there is always a very comfortable and accepting atmosphere. Best of all, it's free!

Slowly but surely, I am moving closer to my goals: to be a part of the wonderful group that I am from, to live as a Jew in custom as well as in name, and most importantly, to belong.

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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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