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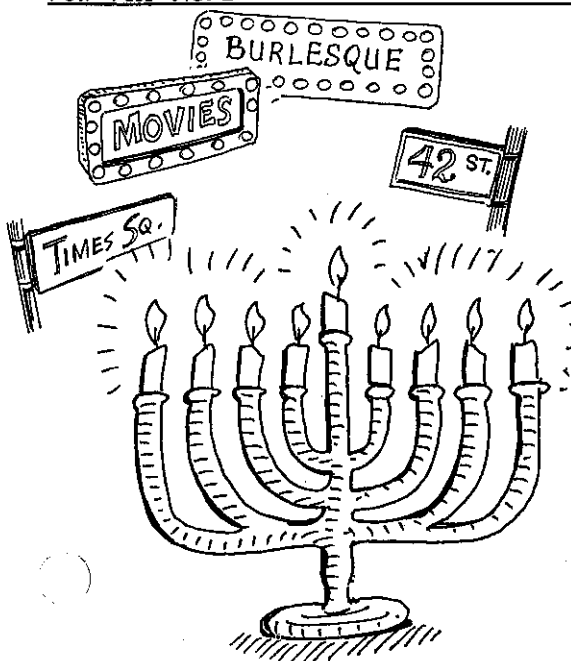
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BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

November 1994/Kislev 5755

FILLING THE VACUUMS IN JEWISH LIFE

by Rabbi Jeffrey Bienenfeld



In the Talmud (Shabbos 21), we find a very intriguing law pertaining to the holiday of Chanukah: "Rabbi Tanchum says: Whoever places the light of Chanukah above 20 cubit feet does not fulfill the mitzvah properly." Rashi explains the reasoning behind R. Tanchum's rule as follows: "Because at this height, the eye cannot see the lights and the obligation of publicizing the miracle cannot be observed."

Immediately following this law, the Talmud records another statement of R. Tanchum which at first glance appears to be totally unrelated to the former. The Torah tells us that when Joseph was thrown into the pit by his brothers, "the pit was empty without water." R. Tanchum explains the redundancy as "there wasn't any water, but there were scorpions and serpents." Now, what possible connection could there be between these two statements of R. Tanchum?

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G-D OF MY FATHER

by Audrey J. Wohlgemuth

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, 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

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THAT MISSING SOMETHING

by Diane Charme

All my life I have been searching for that missing "something" that might make sense of my life's journey. Questions such as, "What is my mission in life?", "What does Hashem (G-d) want from me?," and "Why haven't I 'gotten it' yet?" have been weighing on my mind for years. It is only recently that I have begun to assemble the many pieces of my personal journey and create a readable, and subsequently usable, map for day-to-day living. My search has taught me that at each point of my journey I have been exactly where I needed to be at that precise moment. It is only because of the interconnected chain of life experiences which has led me to this point, that I can now accept the answers to the many questions racing through my mind.

In my eagerness to find answers to these most basic and profound inner questions, I had been looking for the quick fix. I wanted someone to spoon-feed what, I now realize, I can only feed to myself. Previously lacking the confidence to admit that I am worthy of providing my own

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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.

To my dismay, the institutions with the broadest array of reasonably-priced classes were all of the Orthodox persuasion. But, 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.

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-Jew 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

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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 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

THAT MISSING SOMETHING (cont. from p.1)

answers, I have only recently begun to realize the depth of my own potential. For it is the journey toward *shlaymut* (moral completeness) which is the key to the answer.

The map I have been using to guide my travels has been of a never-ending journey of self-improvement and elevation toward a more G-dly state. The first thing I "uncovered" is that the "ultimate" goal is not the issue. It is the never-ending journey which is important. It is this journey which will determine one's place in *olam habah* (the world to come).

Not long ago, I began to take a personal inventory, and the enormity of my accomplishments pleasantly astounded me. For the past twelve years I have steadily increased my learning through classes, workshops, and study groups. I have eagerly accepted new mitzvot, while attending synagogue more regularly and increasing my observance of the holidays, the festivals and Shabbat. These accomplishments have so subtly shaped my belief system, my spirit and my observance over the years, that until now I have never realized their true impact. Through performance of the deeds, I have begun to internalize their message, clarifying the answers to my most pressing questions.

I have discovered that my *avodah* (spiritual work) in this world, is to bring G-dliness into the everyday aspects of my life. I strive, on a daily basis, for personal improvement. I have learned to develop the kind of emotional and intellectual honesty necessary for personal growth, and now feel ready to receive and accept Hashem's gift. For the first time in my life, I feel as though my direct line to G-d is operating. I read my road map with greater ease now, and have found that it truly

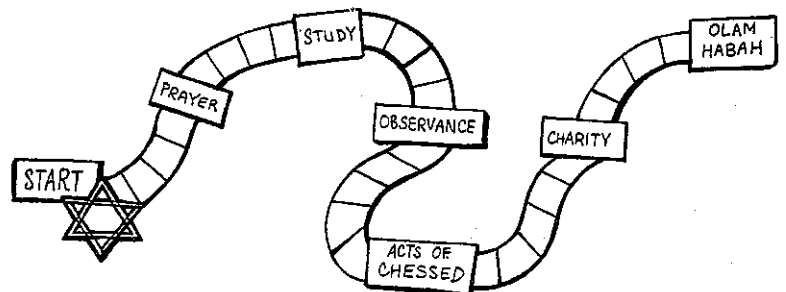
trap. In having to declare wholehearted submission to halakha, I'll have the opportunity to acknowledge G-d's sovereignty wholeheartedly. The act of conversion is in itself a unique demonstration of faith, requiring submission on an issue that goes to the heart of my identity -- my status as a Jew under 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.

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depicts a two-way street. The more I accept upon myself and give to others, the greater the spiritual and earthly rewards. Only after refining my own *midot* will I be able to fully grasp the beauty of a Torah observant lifestyle.

It has been through the Torah, that I have made inner discoveries and personal advancements. It provides me with a blueprint for daily living, complete with guidelines for family, community, love and relationships. The Torah has supplied me with a foundation for unlimited knowledge, faith and increased observance. It speaks to me of personal responsibility and accountability, today and in *olam habah*. It has given me the Sabbath.



I now have a working road map by which I will pursue my dreams of building and shaping a family rich in Torah values and mitzvot. Until recently, I have never stopped to honestly evaluate how far I have traveled since my spiritual struggle began so many years ago. Nor have I assessed, until now, my growth, development, or level of observance. Astounded, I have learned that the answers have been in front of me all this time.

Diane Charme is a mother of three, a professional volunteer, and attends the Beginners Service at the Boca Raton Synagogue.

FILLING THE VACUUMS . . . (cont. from p.1)

"Nature abhors a vacuum." Thus, no pit can ever be truly empty. Midrashically, R. Tanchum was conveying a powerful message. If you do not fill your life with positive, ennobling activities, the vacuum will inevitably be filled -- with far less desirable elements.

Similarly, in the case of Chanukah, the lights were meant to be publicized and understood to the exclusion of alien messages which invariably compete with the central themes of the festival. Placing the Menorah too high, tempts the roving eye to focus on the more vulgar and baser aspects of life which are often far more attractive. It is simply impossible for the "mind's eye" not to be preoccupied with something. The only question is whether it will be the inspiring Chanukah lights, or the alluring cultural glitter that all too often captures the attention of modern man.

We often mistakenly believe that by placing Torah learning "on hold" we do no harm to ourselves or our loved ones. We err. We forget that our lives are constantly being bombarded by an avalanche of data, values,

perspectives and temptations much of which we would consciously screen-out, if we could. The only solution is to provide a visible, attractive alternative to intensely engage our interest and time, and thus effectively crowd-out the objectionable elements in our culture.

R. Tanchum, therefore, was correct. The Menorah must be placed at eye-level. Its message must be clearly apprehended: "The candle is mitzvah and Torah is light" (Psalms). A renewed commitment to Torah study and Torah projects within our lives and community ought to assume top priority. We dare not allow current culture to set our communal and personal agendas. It requires keen vision and focus to see the lonely Menorah amidst the glitter of contemporary life. It requires even greater vision to commit to the truths symbolized by the Menorah and courageously strive toward their fulfillment. May this Chanukah mark the beginning of that noble and necessary realization.

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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 701, New York, NY 10017, (212) 986-7450.

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