

בְּרֵשִׁית

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BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

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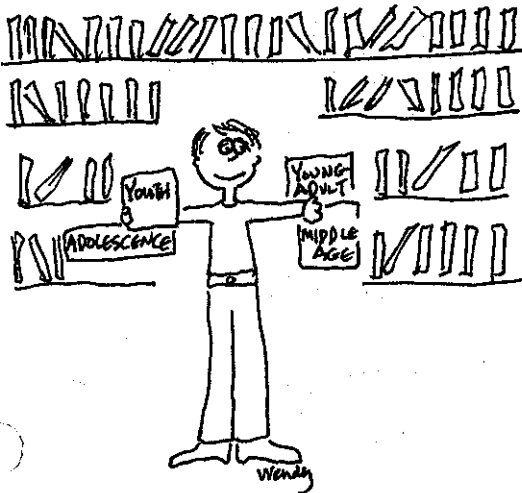
LEARNING FROM MISTAKES

by Joe Hample

Does G-d make mistakes? Of course, the traditional answer is no, but how do we *know* G-d doesn't make mistakes? Now, this is just my own opinion, I'm not speaking for NJOP, but I think we have a need to believe in an ultimate wisdom. We need something to put in that conceptual slot and that's where G-d comes in. I'm imperfect, you're imperfect, your parent or child is imperfect, your boss or landlord is imperfect, Bill Gates is imperfect – but imperfect by what standard? Imperfect compared with whom? Our minds can conceive of a perfect being, and we need to name it. Two or more perfect beings would imply two or more versions of perfection, thus marring the clarity of the concept. Our Jewish idea of striving for the right, for the one true meaning of justice, requires a single flawless Deity.

Even so, when we read the Torah, or history, it's hard to be sure G-d is error-free. Certainly G-d changes direction a lot. For example: G-d created people and says they're very good; then G-d drowns humanity because they're so wicked; finally, G-d promises never to destroy the world again, because humankind is not worse than one could reasonably expect – two changes of the Divine mind on the same issue in the (cont. on p. 3)

LIBRARY



"WHAT CAN I LEARN FROM MY EXPERIENCE?"

STRENGTHENING OUR COMMITMENT

by Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

Well, Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, is fast approaching, which means it's about time to make those resolutions and commitments: "This will be 'THE big year,' the one in which I actually follow through on my promises of self-improvement, character development and religious dedication," or "This Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur will be a definite turning point in my life and I will begin to maximize my potential."

Will this year be like every other year? Will we again dread the Rosh Hashana service, constantly checking our watches and seeing how many pages are left? Will we still feel anxiety as Yom Kippur day approaches, dreading the long fast and seemingly endless day of prayer?

Or maybe, just maybe, this year can be different. Perhaps we will actually be moved by the High Holiday experience and use it as a basis for growth. Perhaps we can make "this year different from all other years?" (To borrow a phrase from *sover*.)

To begin the quest for a more effective Rosh Hashana, it is good to re-examine the nature of the day. Interestingly, if you search for the theme of Rosh Hashana in the (cont. on p. 2)

SUKKOT - BEYOND THE SHOFAR BLASTS

by Robin Kline

I used to be a lox and bagel Jew. I lived in New York, knew some Yiddish words, and as a kid, I cheered for Sandy Koufax and saw "Fiddler on the Roof." Of course, our family always went to synagogue on Yom Kippur to say Yizkor for my father, had Seders on Passover, lit candles on Friday night and had a mezuzah on our door, but that was pretty much it. I never went to synagogue on Saturday morning, or understood what went on there. There were Orthodox Jews and then there were the rest of us. Somewhere there was an invisible line in the sand and we knew on which side we belonged.

When I became a mother, however, having a Jewish home and giving my children their heritage became very important to me. Our growth began simply. I was tired of feeling like an outsider when I did go to synagogue. If my children could learn Hebrew with a tutor and if I wanted my children to value the importance of learning, what was stopping me from doing the same thing? And when I voiced these thoughts, instead of seeing an invisible line at our synagogue, I found an outstretched hand. I began to learn Hebrew and our tentative and occasional appearance at the Shabbat (cont. on p. 3)

STRENGTHENING (cont. from p. 1)... Torah, you will discover a very different description than you might expect. Although most Jews think of the Jewish New Year as a day of judgment, a day on which G-d sits in the Heavenly courts punishing the sinners and rewarding the righteous, in the Torah you find no mention whatsoever of a day of reckoning in connection with Rosh Hashana.

In fact, the only reference in the Torah to anything normally associated with Rosh Hashana is to the shofar: "G-d spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to the children of Israel, saying: In the seventh month, on the first of the month, there shall be a rest day for you, a remembrance with shofar blasts, a holy convocation. You shall not do any laborious work, and you shall offer a fire-offering to G-d" (Leviticus 23:23-25).

Where in this passage is the fire and brimstone? Where is the seriousness of a day on which our lives hang in the balance? There is none – because Rosh Hashana is about something much deeper.

While some sources call Rosh Hashana the anniversary of the creation of the world, it is actually the anniversary of the creation of humankind – which coincided with the 6th day of creation. Celebrating the creation of humankind begs the question: Why were we created? Why did G-d create a world with the human being at the center of it?

Remember, G-d is infinite and omnipotent – G-d is perfect. By definition, G-d has no needs and no wants, so why did He create a world of people? The conclusion must be that G-d's creation of the universe was a most perfect act of altruism and love, as the verse in Psalms (89:3) says, "The world is built of love." Creation didn't fulfill any need or desire of G-d, since He has none; rather, creation was a gift born of pure motivation and benevolent intention – something that we, as finite beings, can come close to but can never achieve. G-d created the world to bestow good on His handiwork.

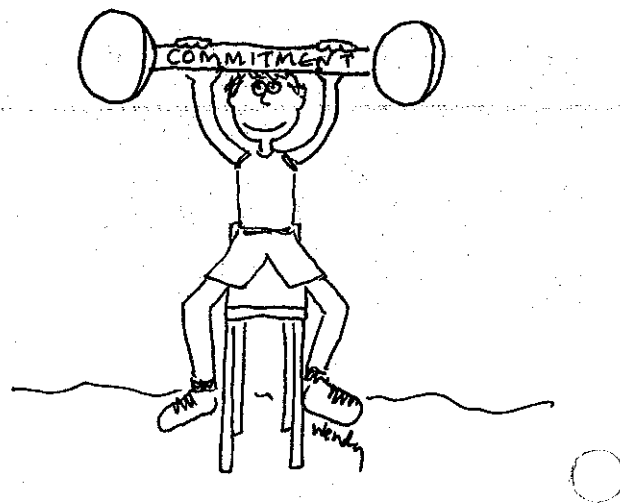
What is the good G-d bestows? Since G-d is the source of all good, the greatest gift of good is to know G-d. Man was created as a creature capable of experiencing G-d. So far, so good (no pun intended), but how do we experience G-d? How do we connect and develop our relationship with Him? The closeness of our relationship with G-d is determined by the same variable that dictates the depth of any of our relationships in life – commitment. Commitment isn't about lip service and platitudes. It is about the desire to give and to please, even if this requires personal sacrifice or compromise which serves to strengthen the relationship. Ultimately, these sacrifices are negligible compared to the joy and satisfaction one experiences from the closeness of the resulting bond.

The same is true in building a relationship with G-d. We need more than a casual commitment that expresses itself once or twice a year, and we need more than a shallow commitment that doesn't go beyond lip service. To truly make our existence meaningful, G-d and G-d's will must be a foremost priority. Commitment takes constant growth. It entails a consistent climb to get closer to our Creator by trying to obey more of what G-d desires, not just doing every ritual by rote.

The mitzvot are about adding meaning and purpose to the mundane actions of our lives and thereby attaining closeness to G-d. The holidays create a cycle full of landmark growth opportunities.

The values and ethics of Torah fashion an approach and attitude to life to give us direction in our decision-making and help us shape our priorities. Mitzvot are more than just dictates from the King, they are (on a basic level) what we can "give" to express our commitment to G-d. When we fulfill G-d's will, our relationship blossoms.

So why is judgment associated with Rosh Hashana? Because each year, on the anniversary of humanity's creation, G-d reviews the decision to create humankind by examining humanity to see if they are achieving their purpose. Judgment, which is the by-product of the birthday celebration, does not define the character of Rosh Hashana, nor does it necessarily set a sad and depressing tone to the day.



In truth, the judgment of Rosh Hashana is incumbent upon us. To make this Rosh Hashana different, and to have our experiences impact on us in a lasting way, we must ask ourselves if we are doing our best to gain the greatest good. Are we sincerely committed to developing our relationship with our Creator through mitzvot?

We live in an incredible time. The world, and, more specifically, the Jewish people, are learning a profound lesson from one individual, Senator Joseph Lieberman. He makes a greater contribution to the Jewish people through the way in which he leads his everyday life, than through any policy or decision in which he may participate. The tests and challenges to his convictions are enormous; and yet, he shows us that keeping kosher is more important than a state dinner and Shabbat supercedes the campaign trail.

We too have obstacles and tests. We can succeed, but only if we are honest with ourselves. If we fail, the greatest challenge will be before us as we assess whether we are serious about growth or we are looking for an out.

If we take this period of time and use it to ask ourselves these important questions, hopefully, a year from now, we will be able to say "this WAS a big year."

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LEARNING (cont. from p. 1)...space of a few chapters. But this is a good thing, isn't it? I'm flexible. It sets a worthy example; it teaches us to be flexible.

A more painful question is why G-d created Amalek, or Achadnazzar, or Torquemada, or Hitler. Weren't those mistakes? Didn't G-d foresee the wickedness in their hearts and the damage they would do? Did something slip through the cracks there? Or is it possible G-d created these scoundrels on purpose, to test us or teach us some kind of terrible lesson? Personally, I'm not able to see it that way. I can't understand these villains as either G-d's mistakes or the instruments of G-d's inscrutable will. I have to believe that history's rascals chose their own wickedness in defiance of G-d. They had as much power as you or I to choose the good, but they blew it. G-d may make life difficult, but the silver lining is choice, the power to choose life. A world without pitfalls would be a world without choices, and that doesn't have much appeal. So I really don't think G-d makes mistakes. And I don't think human mistakes are inevitable, either, in principle.

The worst mistake of all is to obsess about our mistakes. In the Bible, people tear their clothes a lot when the prophets scold them for their shortcomings. This is not such a good idea. Clothes don't grow on trees. Better they should digest the experience and move on. We never do anything perfectly: life is approximation. For some reason we tend to see our flaws more clearly than our talents. We easily become preoccupied with our defects. I have a big problem with this myself. But when I catch myself fretting about any little misstep, like buying groceries and forgetting the eggs, I tell myself the fridge will be better stocked than it was before. That's all we can ask, the opportunity to make things a little better than they were before.

As you know, the number one High Holiday buzzword is *t'shuva*: "return" or "repentance." The word means *both* going back where you were before *and* going forward to a new place of responsibility and maturity. At the New Year, we're returning to the beginning of the annual cycle, but also entering a fresh chunk of time we've never seen before.

Another form of the word *t'shuva* turns up in *Etz Chayim*, the song we sing when we return the Torah to the ark. "*Hashivenu, Hashem, elecha v'nashuvah*," Let us return to you, O G-d, and we shall return. The next line is "*chaddesh yameinu k'kedem*," Renew our days as of old. This is the ultimate prayer, isn't it? Give us another chance, make us new again, let us start over again in health and strength and youthful enthusiasm. That's a powerful prayer for those of us who woke up one day and realized we are in our forties and still aren't rich and famous. I feel very close to you; I think I can tell you this -- sometimes I've been tempted to wallow in what is fashionably called a midlife crisis. A midlife crisis is when you've been an adult long enough to realize you don't know how to be an adult. But you have to treat your errors as an education, and make the best of being a big wrinkled kid. It has its moments.

So G-d is out there, or in here, and G-d is watching us live our people's weird and wonderful story, a story that is never finished, a story that continues at this hour on this holy day. It's our

responsibility, not just to know this imperfect story, but to own it, to act out its best elements, to heed its cautionary advice. That's why our ancestors left it to us.

Actually, it's remarkable how often we are rescued from our own folly. It would be too much to say that G-d *always* makes things work out in the end: we're not in the messianic era yet. But we're supposed to believe in the possibility of improvement and transcendence, in the Divine power to recover what seems lost and revive what seems dead. And in *my* life, at least, it's surprising how often things *have* worked out in the end, much more often than I deserved. I've made a lot of *faux pas*, but my friends have usually forgiven me. I've fumbled my way through a baffling career, but that paycheck keeps showing up twice a month. I've eaten too much, exercised too little, crossed against the light, but I've survived to tell the tale. Like Blanche du Bois, I've relied on the kindness of strangers, but in my case the strangers have largely justified my confidence. Even when our mistakes do lead us to grief, it's important to pardon ourselves and turn the page. No use adding the insult of self reproach to the injury of misjudgment. We can use the word *t'shuva* for any change of direction, whether moral or pragmatic, and certainly for the decision to leave our mistakes behind. If you're ever tempted by self-recrimination, just ask yourself: does the past exist in any physical sense? Or is the past just shadow and memory, just a storage area in the mind? We dare not shrug off our sins against others because only our victims can forgive us. When we are our own victims, however, we must be willing to forgive ourselves. I like to think of the past as a library of experience, where you can look up any type of choice or action and get a clue as to the probable outcome. The past is reference material. We're fools if we don't draw the appropriate lessons from the past, but we're equally foolish if we let it poison the present and future.

At this season of repentance and renewal, I urge you to learn from your mistakes, then dismiss them. Don't let them make a mockery of your feast. Cut those mistakes out of your heart. Banish them to the desert, and let G-d heal your hurt, feed you from the banquet of peace, and soak you with the well of redemption. *L'shana tovah*.

Joe Hample, a Systems Engineer, is the membership committee chair at Sha'ar Zahav in San Francisco, CA, and a public speaker on Jewish topics.

SUKKOT (cont. from p. 1).. Learning Service became a monthly ritual. Last December, we began our regular attendance at the Friday night service; and, when we learned that our beloved Learning Service rabbi was making *aliyah* (moving to Israel), we began going to the regular service in the main sanctuary on Shabbat day. Now we feel completely at home there as well. We have learned that the line was a line that we ourselves projected.

This year as summer turns to fall, I am looking forward with great joy to Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, to the challah baking and apple cakes, the new dresses for our daughters and the reflection and soul searching that mark the start (cont. on p. 4)

SUKKOT (cont. from p. 3).. of the new year. The holidays have always been a spiritually uplifting time of renewal, but this year I wonder what will happen beyond the shofar blasts. What will I do about the other holidays, beginning with Sukkot? Thus far, Sukkot has continued to be one of the holidays I looked at from the outside and thought, maybe next year. I couldn't figure out how to explain to my boss why I was taking off, *again*. I haven't been able to explain that to myself. Because I don't feel I have a personal history of meaning, I approach Sukkot as a child, excited about experiencing it for the first time, eager to learn.

Perhaps Sukkot is the first test of how seriously we take all of our promises to lead a fuller and more meaningful life. Sukkot brings us back down to earth. It teaches that we must appreciate the holiness in the very fundamental acts of daily life, to remember the agricultural roots of our society, and to pray for rain, good crops, and the basic needs that our bodies require to stay alive. We focus on what is really important in a home: shelter, food, welcoming guests and feeling a connection to G-d. Having experienced the spiritual awakening of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, our material needs can be met simply. Sukkot helps us recognize that all we really need is a shelter and the joy of knowing we have succeeded in doing Teshuva, that we have purged ourselves of our sins and resolved to try harder this year to live a good and meaningful life.

To help guide me through this challenge, I think of the beautiful prayer we say during the High Holy Days: "Like Clay in the Hands of the Potter." The image it evokes is of G-d shaping and creating us. As one who works with pottery myself, this poem evokes a deeper meaning. A potter does not completely impose the form on the pot. Creating with clay is a process that, at its best and most meaningful, incorporates an understanding of the limitations of the natural

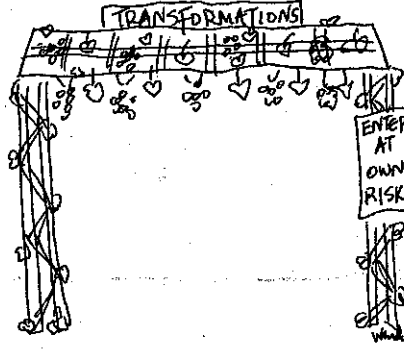
material – the clay in a sense has a life of its own. Respecting it, and approaching it with technical skill and aesthetic sense, allows one to actually create pots and to express something about one's self and one's essence. It is dynamic and interactive, not "top down." "Like Clay in the Hands of the Potter" represents the dynamic, interrelationship between G-d and the individual. It reinforces, for me, the feeling of individuality and uniqueness. The prayer also reminds us that we are created *b'tselem Elokim*, in the image of G-d, and are always responding to our Maker because of our essence.

Fundamentally, Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are about this sacred dialogue between us, as creations, and our Creator. Once these holidays are over, however, the relationship does not end and does not stay static. We have an opportunity each day to strengthen it. Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are about the heights of spirituality in our relationship with G-d. Sukkot is about bringing spirituality into our daily lives, in the way we eat, sleep and provide for our needs. Sukkot is about the form the

clay takes because of what it is on the inside and about the form our lives take because of what is on our inside, of the uniqueness of who we are as individuals and what we bring to our lives every day. It is something we all share, regardless of where we are on the religious spectrum.

I do not know where I will go as I travel this spiritual journey, whether or when I will ever feel that I have arrived. But, I look forward to future years when I can remember back to how I first learned to observe Sukkot and to a future in which, each year I experience learning and growth.

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בראשית *Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Beryl Levenson, Rabbi Yitzchak Rosenbaum, and Sarah Rochel Reid 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 NJOP, please write or call: 485 Fifth Avenue, Suite 701, New York, NY 10017, (212) 986-7450, e-mail info@njop.org.*

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