





# BERESHITH

"IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter  
for Beginners,  
by Beginners

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# בראשית

## DAYS OF AWE: 1952, 2002, 2005

Robert Kaplan

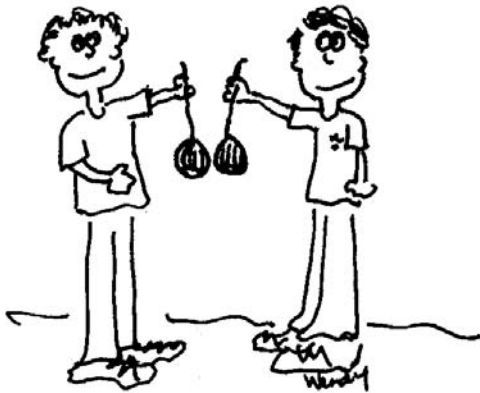
### 1952-Rosh Hashanah: The Days of the Chestnut

It's a beautiful, sunny autumn morning. I am 12 years old. I am standing outside a synagogue in the Bronx. Despite being trapped in my "holiday best" sports jacket, tortured by itchy wool slacks and strangled by a tie, I'm concentrating fiercely on a dried chestnut, suspended by a shoelace being held by one of my best friends, Herbie Burstein.

I too have a chestnut, similarly dried, pierced and threaded with a shoelace. (Herbie's is also knotted at one end so the chestnut cannot fall off.) My goal is to hit and smash Herbie's chestnut into smithereens. If I do it in three blows or less, I will add Herbie's chestnut's "lives" onto mine. If I cannot, we will trade roles: Herbie's chestnut will become the attacker and mine will await its vengeance. If his chestnut fragmentizes mine, he will add the number of lives my chestnut has accumulated on to his.

Don't ask me what "lives" were--or why they were called that; I cannot remember. Only this I know: he whose chestnut survived the High Holidays--actually the only time we ever played this game--with the most lives, wins. Honor, only. There was no cash prize.

*(cont. on page 2)*



WE'VE COME A LONG WAY,  
SINCE PLAYING WITH CHESTNUTS

### LET'S BE BOTHERED

Rabbi Y.C. Grunstein

"Please don't disturb the services."

This is a common refrain in almost every synagogue throughout the Jewish world. Any time a voice, other than that of the rabbi or cantor, is raised too loud, it is quickly shushed. Talking in the synagogue is considered, rightfully, inimical to the sense of decorum that should prevail during the course of our standing before G-d in exalted prayer.

If regular services are meant to be silent and stately, then it is, all the more so, true of the High Holidays. Ironically, however, the Rosh Hashanah service is filled with music and "voices"--a hundred voices to be specific. These are the *kolot* (voices/sounds) of the shofar.

And when are these "noises" created? Smack in the middle of the cantor's repetition, right in the middle of the 3 extra blessings that we add each Rosh Hashanah! If it's decorum we're looking for, why does *(cont. on page 2)*

### CHANGING PERSPECTIVES

Channah Ruth Valderamma

I was already somewhat observant when I agreed to help a longtime colleague with a job. We broke for lunch and, as we were waiting for the elevator, he suggested that we go to Burger King--his treat.

"Thank you, but I'm kosher." I replied as we entered the elevator.

"Kosher!" he smirked. "Don't you know the Jews just created kosher so they could charge more money for food. They're so money hungry! You know why they were in the desert for 40 years?--Someone dropped a nickel!" He started laughing at his own joke. "What does the rabbi do anyway--he just blesses the food, right? Don't worry, I'll bless it for you and you can pay me the extra money!"

*What an idiot! He thinks that what he is saying is fact, I thought with disgust. Yet only a few months, maybe even just weeks, before, his little monologue wouldn't have fazed me at all. I probably would have* *(cont. on page 3)*



*DAYS OF AWE (cont. from page 1)...*

What does any of this have to do with Rosh Hashanah? Not much, Judaically. In fact, if you were to have asked Herbie or me, or almost any of the other boys whose families belonged to this synagogue what was going on inside, the best you would have gotten was a few mumbled answers about “New Years,” “atonement” and “sins.” That’s about it.

Rosh Hashanah, 1952, in fact, was my last Rosh Hashanah near a synagogue for 50 years. I was “Bar Mitzvah-ed” in the Spring of 1953, and in that time and that place, among my family’s and social set’s “Jewish community,” the Bar Mitzvah was often, if not always, a graduation into oblivion as far as being “Judaic” was concerned.

### **2003-Rosh Hashanah: The Days of Awareness**

Once again, a beautiful, sun-filled early autumn day. I am now 62 years old. And once again, for the first time in 50 years, I am dressed for the Rosh Hashanah occasion (though this time my “holiday best” and I are on friendlier terms). As then, a small group of boys rush about outside a synagogue, this time in an Orthodox, suburban community on New York’s Long Island. They are, however, without chestnuts.

I am a bit late for having misinterpreted the directions of our host, Rabbi Raphael Butler, who is conducting a special service in a vestry room downstairs from the main service. The instant I enter the room, Rabbi Butler spies me and signals me to come up front. He has obviously had an eye out for me. Men nod hello to me without interrupting their praying. As I move to my seat, two men close in on me, one at either shoulder. The older man to my right is Rabbi Butler’s father. On my left, the younger, is one of the Rabbi’s sons. I feel reinforced. I try to find the place in the prayer book, but, having forgotten how to read Hebrew, it is all confusion. Rabbi Butler sees my predicament, comes over, turns pages quickly, and points to the proper place. I will lose it in a moment.

Luckily for me, Rabbi Butler begins to speak in English. He tells of Abraham and Isaac on the journey to a mountain called Moriah--the place where Abraham is to sacrifice Isaac. With them is Eliezer and another young

servant--and a donkey. As the story unfolds it becomes clear that the donkey is an important character--one who is only concerned with his comfort. He constantly complains of the heat and the flies, the weight of his burden and the chafing he suffers from his harness. Eliezer and the servant are also devoted to complaint and speculation and are unable to see the distant beauty of Moriah and the truth that will occur there.

As I listen to the Rabbi’s words, I see that I too have the eyes and priorities of a donkey--and realize I have been preoccupied with only myself for the past year. A true, comforting sense of remorse awakens in me. It is an opening, a moment when my darkness yields to light. I determine, in that moment, that the coming year will bring the possibility of a broader vision.

### **2005-Rosh Hashanah. The Year of Names.**

Having attended Rabbi Butler’s service again in 2004, I find that a seed of atonement had been planted in me--which some regular study of Torah over the past year has watered and encouraged. Though, as I write this, Rosh Hashanah is still a few weeks away, I am thinking about it, preparing myself for it. Memories of my past have been close to me these last days, specifically of persons whom I have treated badly. I find a wish in myself to make amends to them--in one manner or another--for most are gone. I write names on a page to jog memories: Jessie, John, Irving... and in the process note that there are names of those who are close by, people in my life today that I can add to my list. I do: Steve, Jeanne, Nita, Larry, David, Matt, Lisa... Through reflection I intend to bring this list to life in the next weeks, to practice feeling their presence and remembering how some false and incomplete side of me caused them difficulty and pain and loss. And then when Rosh Hashanah is here, presenting me with an opportunity to atone as best I can, I will, once again, journey to Rabbi Butler’s special service and use it well.

*Robert Kaplan is an unaffiliated cohen, originally from the Bronx, New York, who spent his first 60 years discovering the outer world guided by Rand McNally and who intends to spend his next 60 years discovering his inner world guided by the Torah.*

**LET’S BE BOTHERED** (cont. from page 1)... the Talmud insist that we blow the shofar right in the middle of the service, initiating bothersome “noises” in place of the wanted silence and decorum?

Are we to assume that Judaism’s definition of “decorum” is different than the one found in the dictionary? Moreover--after being nudged and bothered enough (by the rabbi/peer pressure/G-d) to actually join these long and complex services on Rosh Hashanah, do we have to be bothered even more by this not-so-musical noise?

Actually, our tradition explains why these 100 blasts have to bother us in the middle of the cantor’s beautiful recital?

Our Sages say: “Even though the shofar is a biblical command from the one above, there is still a secret behind it. When it’s blown, it’s a noise that’s supposed to say ‘Wake up sleepy-heads from your sleep and you nappers from your naps!’”

Well, the shofar sure is loud, but synagogue on the High Holidays is hardly a “slumber party.” What are we waking up from?

I believe that G-d, in his infinite wisdom, understood that on the day on which we all have found ourselves in synagogue, we may feel a bit too comfortable. After all, we’ve made it, we’ve done the right thing and come to the best place to be that day. All the talk (cont. on page 4)

**CHANGING PERSPECTIVES** (cont. from page 1)...agreed and even laughed. Now, however, I found myself feeling quite irritated and sensitive about his comments. Hoping he would just shut up, I didn't dignify his comments with a direct response.

"I thought you were vegetarian," I countered.

"I *am* vegetarian most of the time, but once in a while I get a taste for meat." By that time we were walking out of the building, and I saw a halal hot dog stand on the corner. Since I was just beginning to learn the laws of kashrut, I thought that 'halal' meat was kosher because it was slaughtered the same way. (I've since learned that this is not the case, and that there are many other critical factors. Halal and kosher are not at all the same, so I don't eat it anymore.)

"Look," I pointed to the hot dog stand, "I won't go to Burger King, but I'll eat 'halal' meat if you want to share a hot dog."

"Why not," he said and proceeded to pull some money out of his pocket. In the process, a bunch of change spilled on to the sidewalk in front of the stand. He bent down and picked up most of the change, but left some on the ground.

"You missed some," I said, pointing to the remaining coins on the sidewalk.

"That's for you to run after like all the other Jews," he challenged. I felt the hair stand up on the back of my neck. I wanted to smack him. Time stood still as my mind went through what seemed like a million somersaults. I clutched myself tightly to keep from shaking, and my hand brushed against the bulge in my breast pocket. Suddenly I had a moment of clarity.

"Hey, wait a minute," I said. "I used to think the same way as you." I pulled out my pocket siddur and opened it. "But there's this Jewish law that we Jews (I wasn't *halachically* Jewish at the time, but after my first Shabbat experience I really "felt" Jewish and concluded that I must be Jewish, hence, I identified myself as a Jew) read every morning in our morning blessings. I proceeded to read it to him:

These are the deeds for which there is no prescribed measure; leaving crops at the corner of the field for the poor, offering first fruits as a gift to the Temple, bringing special offerings to the Temple on the three festivals, doing deeds of kindness, and studying Torah. (Peah 1:1)



You can apply the same law to the change you dropped," I continued. "Whoever picks it up will be somebody who needs it, emotionally, physically or even spiritually, Jew or non-Jew."

Silence. When he finally spoke, it was in great surprise, "That's a Jewish law?"

"It is," I answered, showing him the words in the siddur. He read them for himself. Again silence.

"I like that law," he said thoughtfully.

Encouraged by his response, I ventured a little further. "You prefer to eat vegetarian, right? You're particular about what you put in your body, am I right?"

He nodded. I proceeded to tell him what I knew about how an animal is slaughtered according to kosher law, that the knife must be incredibly sharp, very smooth and can have no nicks, so the animal dies instantly, with no pain or shock. Also, the rabbi must make certain there are no blemishes or defects in the lungs of the animal. The meat is drained of all the blood and is then soaked and salted to make sure there are no traces of blood left.

"If you're so particular about what you ingest, shouldn't you be particular about the way the meat you eat has been killed?"


Surprisingly, he agreed and said that the next time he ate meat it would be kosher!

*Channah Ruth Valderamma lives in Manhattan and is an antique furniture refinisher.*

בס"ד

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**LET'S BE BOTHERED** (cont. from page 2)...regarding change or rejuvenation or repentance, must be speaking about the "other guy." We've arranged to be here, we took off time from work to attend, and so the numerous references about wrong-doers in the holiday liturgy are probably referring to someone else.

*This is the comfort level that the shofar is there to shatter!* As Jews, we have a timeless commandment of "kedoshim tihiyu" to be holy. Even if we've reached a level of observance we consider to be high, we should still strive for more.

With beautiful suits and dresses filling the packed synagogue on these holy days, we may come to believe that we are safe and comfortable. G-d, however, wants us to do better, and therefore it was ordained that this loud, intrusive set of noises occurs smack in the middle of the service.

When you enter the synagogue this coming Rosh Hashanah and hear the sounds of the shofar, think about what you could be bothered to do.

- Consider attending synagogue another day above and beyond your usual schedule.

- Consider the amount of money you've given to charity and how much more could be contributed?

- Perhaps celebrate a Shabbat dinner?

Yes, the shofar is about to disturb the decorum of our synagogue sanctuaries. This year, however, let's allow it to penetrate. Let each of us, in our own way, with our own struggles and needs, be bothered by that "noise."

May the sound of the shofar penetrate us all, so that next year we may state that we have climbed those steps, and are ready to be bothered to climb some more.

*Rabbi Yehoshua Grunstein is the rabbi of Beth Israel Synagogue in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.*



**BOTHERED BY THE NOISE!**

*Illustrations by Wendy Dunn*



*Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Sarah Rochel Hewitt, Rabbi Yitzchak Rosenbaum, and Beryl Levenson of the **National Jewish Outreach Program**. 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 NJOP programs, please write or call: 989 Sixth Avenue, 10th Floor, New York, NY 10018, (646) 871-4444, e-mail [info@njop.org](mailto:info@njop.org) or visit [www.njop.org](http://www.njop.org).*

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