

# BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter  
for Beginners,  
by Beginners

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# בראשית

## JOURNEY OF ELUL

Kit England

The month of Elul is about preparing ourselves, both physically and spiritually, for the upcoming High Holidays. This preparation brings to fruition our need for connectivity. We make plans for where we will be, for travel arrangements, if necessary, and for buying tickets for holiday services. All for the purpose of being able to connect with each other, and, ultimately, with G-d. We also need to start preparing ourselves for making amends for the ills we have done.

Connecting requires communication. I've always struggled with communication in one way or another. I became legally blind in high school. When I went to college and started attending services at a synagogue that was within walking distance of my dorm, I never tried to get to a braille *siddur* (prayer book) because I was not a strong enough braille reader for it to be of any use to me. What captured my soul when I first started going? I knew no Hebrew, and I had no book to follow along. I was struck however, by the gorgeous melodies being sung by the cantor at the *Kol Nidre* service. So despite being essentially illiterate for the purposes of praying, the incredibly

(cont. on p. 2)

"How does a young, deaf, legally-blind woman connect with G-d?"



## A SERVICE TO REMEMBER

Michelle Lubin

In September 2006, religion was not a significant part of my life. I was a 27 year-old single mother, having walked away from a destructive marriage a year and a half prior. I had just gotten a full-time job, and my young son and I were living with my parents while I was paying off a mountain of legal expenses from my divorce and saving money for an apartment. Suffice it to say, I was starting over in every sense of the word.

I had begun seeing a really nice guy, Jeff, who had moved to Dallas-Fort Worth earlier that year for a job promotion. The High Holidays were quickly approaching, and though both of us were Jewish, neither one of us was really into religion. Jeff, however, being new to the area and slightly more connected than me, asked if he could join me at Rosh Hashana services. It suddenly dawned on me that I had neglected to tell him that it had been

(cont. on p. 3)

## START LIVIN' - THE NEXT THING ON THE LIST

Rabbi Dov Fischer

With Rosh Hashana on the horizon, we pause to take stock: What is a year?

We do not get many of them in a lifetime. According to Moses, in Psalm 90, we typically may look to have seventy of them -- "if with strength, eighty." One year goes, and then comes the next one. Gee, that was fast.

For us as Jews, we use the New Year not only to look ahead, but also to make the forthcoming year more successful by first looking back: What did I actually do with the last year? With one fewer left ahead of me, what will I do with the next year? It would be a shame to waste too much of another one.

Many of us maturely defer gratification for years. For example, if I want to travel abroad but need to focus on saving money for a home down-payment or put my children through private school, or I simply need to stay around to focus on my career -- well . . . there is always next year to travel, or the year after that, or...whenever.

(cont. on p. 2)

**JOURNEY OF ELUL (cont. from p. 1)...** haunting tunes drew me to Judaism.

From then on, the majority of my Jewish experience became auditory. I went to synagogue and listened to the cantor singing the weekly prayers. For years, people asked me why I enjoyed going to services every week when I couldn't read a siddur. I simply loved the connectivity I felt. I could feel G-d's presence in the musicality of the prayers.

Despite this, I had a sense that something was missing. The silent *Amidah*, which everyone recites to themselves, was always awkward. I could never figure out if it was better to stand like everyone else or sit, since I wasn't reading it -- so I vacillated. While I was spiritually uplifted by the sounds I was hearing, I wanted to pray and say the actual words, in order to be closer to G-d. This past March, I finally got a copy of the ArtScroll braille siddur -- an impressive 14 volume set that was placed on the top shelf of the bookcase in my living room. Prayer completely changed for me, and I even felt more drawn to synagogue than I had before, even if it did take me more than twice as long to read everything than it did everyone else. Barely two months later, however, the unimaginable happened to me: I began to lose my hearing. I was suddenly plunged into the world of deaf-blindness.

Which brings us to Elul, the month of preparing for the new year. This is the time of year when one is meant to reach out and become more involved, and, for me, I've never felt more disconnected. This year, I've had to consider carefully how to use my time during Elul because my spiritual and physical preparations are enmeshed. My first step was to contact the Jewish Braille Institute once again and request a braille *machzor* (holiday prayer book). This needed to be done well in advance, not only so that the material would come on time for the holidays, but so that I would have time study them.

My Elul preparations now include familiarizing myself with the *machzor*. This is necessary because it is an astounding 21 volumes -- a number that makes the ArtScroll prayer book look small. Additionally, my braille is still not as strong as your average print reader. So, combined with the fact that I cannot rely on my hearing to help orient me to the service, I need to know where things are located in the *machzor*. This process is also helpful to me as a newcomer to the Orthodox service. Finally having a braille *machzor* will allow me to, at last, for the first time, really have the chance to sit down with someone and have the entire service explained to me, and be able to read the prayers -- a thought that is truly exhilarating. What more could my Jewish soul want than to *literally* put my hands on the *machzor* for the first time and truly read its contents in (cont. on p. 4)

**START LIVIN' (cont. from p. 1)...**

As a society, we tend to deem that mode of thinking wise -- and it is wise -- because, devoting time and money to travel when facing more urgent priorities that cannot be deferred will ultimately result in my not enjoying the traveling. So I have to keep my priorities straight: a career and success are important -- for self-esteem, to pay bills, to make a gainful life; a home is important -- for shelter, for comfort, for leisure; and education is important -- because nothing can be more important than assuring that one's son and/or daughter receives the best possible secular and Jewish education that a parent practicably can offer.

But if there is maturity and wisdom in deferring gratification for the here-and-now priorities, it is equally important to not lose sight of all the different parts that combine to living a rich and worthwhile life. The "how" is just as important as the "why," and it remains important to "make the list," to set the priorities, to know what we are aiming for.

What goes on such a list? One beautiful secular perspective comes in a country song, "My List," written by Toby Keith. He offers this alternative to the predictable list of a busy business day's priorities:

*Go for a walk; say a little prayer.  
Take a deep breath of mountain air.  
Put on my glove, and play some catch.  
(It's time that I make time for that.)  
Wade the shore, and cast a line.  
Look up a long lost friend of mine.  
Sit on the porch, and give my girl a kiss.  
Start livin' -- that's the next thing on my list. . . .*

Toby's list is pretty great. As Jews, perhaps we might consider adding a few more things:

*Join with my spouse and walk to shul.  
Enroll my kid in a Jewish school.  
Buy Jewish books to put on my shelf.  
Open them up -- I owe that to myself.  
Turn to G-d, and pray each day.  
Then listen to the things my children say.  
Look up a friend to host for Shabbat.  
(It's time that I make time for that.)  
Ask my child if anything hurts.  
Think about the text printed on his shirts.  
Study Torah each day for all the years I've missed.  
Start livin' -- that's the next thing on my list.*

In so many ways it is wise and mature to defer our gratification. But some things need not, and should not, be deferred endlessly as time passes by.

That is the blessing of Rosh Hashana, its pull and force. The Jewish New Year's Day is a tug. It tells us, gently, that we just said goodbye to a year composed of (cont. on p. 4)

**A SERVICE TO REMEMBER (cont. from p. 1)**...roughly 10 years since I had set foot in a synagogue to worship.

A former boss and good family friend, Scott, happened to have been taking classes with some Kollel rabbis in Dallas for a few years. (He would ask me from time to time if I was interested in learning more about it, but I had made it pretty clear to him that religion wasn't an interest of mine!) But when it came to finding a place where a couple of completely unaffiliated young Jews would be welcomed for Rosh Hashana, I figured Scott would know where to point us, so I gave him a call. Today I like to joke that the Kollel rabbis must have a bat signal in the shape of a Jewish star, because within 5 minutes of speaking to Scott, my phone rang and I had my first introduction to Rabbi Nasanya Zakon. Just like that, Jeff and I had an invitation to attend High Holiday services.

The day of Rosh Hashana, we drove to the Jewish day school where services were being held that year. I was a nervous wreck, completely uncomfortable and not knowing what to expect. My previous experiences had left me with the sentiment that services were superficial, with rabbis who were more professional than personal and congregants who cared more about what people wore than the content of their prayer books. It just didn't resonate with me at all.

We walked in and were immediately greeted very warmly and enthusiastically by a wonderful woman who was genuinely thrilled to meet us. It turned out to be Rabbi Zakon's wife, Devorah. Jeff was ushered to one area with some very kind gentlemen, my son was taken to a room where he had an abundance of other little ones to play with, and Devorah walked me to another room which contained several people. I hesitantly took a seat, my first learner's service experience being just moments away.

After a few minutes, a very young and friendly rabbi stood up and began talking to everyone. Something in his voice put me at ease almost immediately -- he seemed so genuine and sincere. He wanted to spend time just talking to us, relating everyday themes like setting personal goals and our relationships with loved ones to the meaning and beauty of Rosh Hashana. Then he instructed us to turn to certain pages, going at a comfortable pace and stopping periodically to explain the meaning behind each prayer. Every now and again, he was joined by another young rabbi, and together they would sing familiar tunes in the most stunning and impassioned way, their bodies rocking and their faces etched with fervor, as though they were singing straight to the Creator Himself. It culminated with the most amazing and haunting rendition of "Adon Olam" I had ever heard. I was completely mesmerized. After services ended, Jeff and I were introduced to several people. There was something electric in the air; the whole room was

spiritually connected, and we felt like a part of something really special and beautiful.

Driving home later that day, Jeff and I were very excited. Attending services had somehow stirred something deep inside of both of us that we didn't even know was there. We didn't

really know what we were getting ourselves into exactly, but we knew we wanted more. I met Rabbi Zakon for lunch a few days later, and we had a long and productive conversation about my not-so-great history with religion and what might be a good next step from there.

Shortly after that, I received a call from a woman named Sara. She and her husband were leading a learner's service out of their home every week on Shabbat. They had just moved to Plano, Texas, from Israel, and she asked if we would please join them for services and lunch afterwards.

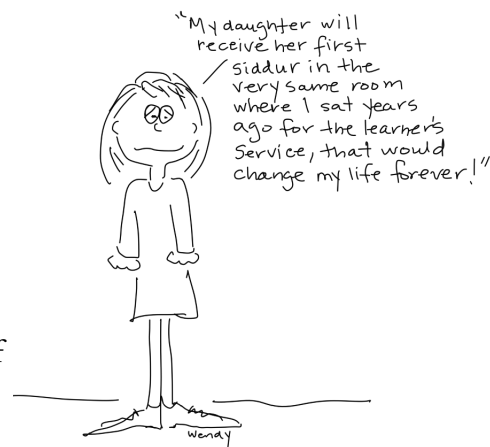
After just one inspiring service and Shabbat meal with Sara and her husband, Rabbi Chanoch Oppenheim, and their beautiful family, we were hooked. Jeff and I began showing up regularly at their home for Shabbat learner's services, and then we started individually learning with Sara and Rabbi O. Over a multitude of classes, phone conversations, meals and weekend outings with the kids, we developed the most incredible bond with this amazing family. We really fell in love with all of them.

One year later, Sara took me to the *mikveh*, and then Jeff and I stood under the Chuppah as Rabbi Oppenheim married us, with Rabbi Zakon looking on as a witness.

Today, Jeff and I are happily married, Sabbath observant, and we have a warm, wonderful kosher home. Four months ago, I flew to Baltimore to share in the joyous *simcha* of the marriage of Saras and Rabbi O's daughter, Chavi. My son is now 12 and preparing for his Bar Mitzvah. And my daughter will start pre-K in the fall at the local day school. She will get her first Siddur in the very same room where I sat in 2006, for the learner's service that, unbeknownst to me, would change the course of my life forever.

*Michelle Lubin is a strategy analyst for a global financial institution, and she also has a passion for music/entertaining. She lives in the Dallas-Fort Worth area with her husband, two children, and a spoiled toy poodle who has a penchant for Challah on Friday nights.*

## LEARNER'S SERVICE





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## DATED MATERIAL

**JOURNEY OF ELUL** (cont. from p. 2)... preparation of being able to pray in synagogue.

Which brings me to the next step. I've been working every day to learn American Sign Language, and I will be sitting with a friend who knows basic sign and is willing to help me keep up with what is happening during the service. I have reached out to the rabbi of the synagogue where my husband and I will be attending and arranged that I will be able to sit as close to the speakers as possible to hear whatever I can. We will also be staying with family who won't mind guiding me around a synagogue that will be extra crowded.

Elul is always about getting closer to G-d, which looks different for every person every year. This year, for me, it's less about philosophical preparations and more about a lot of practical and physical ones. It is, nonetheless, my journey toward G-d, my community, my new life as a young, deaf-blind Jewish woman, and my desire for a sweet and happy new year.

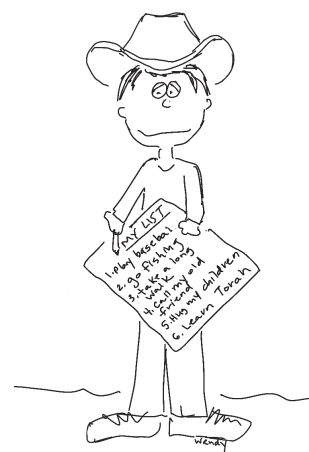
*Kit England is a freelance writer and is the Radio Show Production intern at Jew in the City. She and her husband are excited to have been married for 6 months, and she is loving Jersey.*

**START LIVIN'** (cont. from p. 2)... hours and minutes we never will get back. It reminds us that the next Rosh Hashana, before which we will either succeed or fail at the many opportunities before us, is only twelve months away. It softly nudges us to make the list and to begin checking off the items by living them.

Rosh Hashana is a call to be aware of time. Another year has passed, and if I am going to observe Shabbat more meaningfully, this is a great time to start. If I am going to make my home kosher and open it to Shabbat guests, this year is the time to act. And if I want to grow as a Jew, I really should start attending one or more of those classes that they always are announcing, perhaps the one to read Hebrew with facility.

Start livin' -- that's the next thing on the list.

*Rav Dov Fischer is an adjunct professor of the law of Torts, Remedies, and Civil Procedure at two major Southern California law schools. He is also the rabbi of Young Israel of Orange County, California, where he has hosted Beginners Services.*



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**בראשית**

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*Illustrations by Wendy Dunn*