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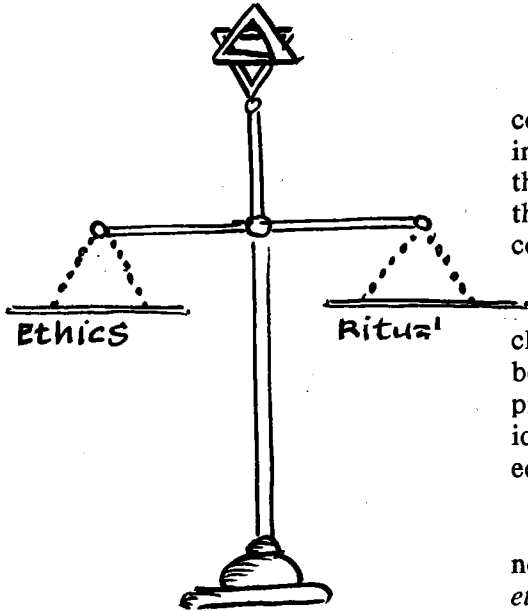
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BERESHITH: "In the Beginning"

5749 Tishrei/September 1988

ETHICS AND THE TESHUVA PROCESS

by Dr. Stuart Chesner



Teshuva is an intense process. It grips the deepest convictions contained within our souls and propels nebulous, ill defined, feelings into actions. The Baal Teshuva experiences an ecstatic closeness with G-d that provides a profound sense of happiness, intimacy and purpose. As the Baal Teshuva leaves behind a past of alienation and lack of connection, his soul cleaves to the source of ultimate value and meaning.

Sounds like pretty spacy stuff, right? But if you are reading this, chances are you have at least tasted the power of Teshuva to create a new being. This process with its mystical grandeur, is fraught with pragmatic dangers. Intense life change, even in pursuit of the highest ideals, can lead to psychological and spiritual imbalance. Loss of equilibrium in any spiritual quest can precipitate a dramatic crash.

One of the major imbalances that is common to the Teshuva of many nouveau-religious individuals is the imbalance between *ritual* and *ethical* Teshuva. In the passion of clinging to G-d it is not uncommon for the Baal Teshuva to lose sight of G-d's demands on our relations with man. Why is this so? When our awareness of G-d as a reality becomes a focal point, there is an intense desire to connect with the Source of All Being. Ritual behaviors and actions serve as the bridge between

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AFTER ISRAEL: SEEING THE WORLD FROM A NEW PERSPECTIVE

by Tod A. Jacobs

Before the Jews could receive the Torah at Sinai, they first were required to go into the wilderness to prepare themselves. For the precious living waters of Torah--as the common scriptural metaphor would have it--would only, indeed, *could* only, be poured into fitting vessels. This process of spiritual renewal, whereby we initially distance ourselves from our normal environment, from influences and habits, be they social, emotional, physical or psychological, in order to allow for a fresh perspective, has been utilized for more than three millennia by the Jewish people. Today's Ba'alei T'shuva, or, "those who have returned" to religious Judaism, are no exception. For the past two years, I not only witnessed this means of spiritual regeneration, I experienced it myself.

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ON THE FRINGES OF A MITZVAH

By Rick Shields

Not long ago, I felt the need to take on another mitzvah, so I decided to start wearing Tzitzit. It was a bit awkward for me in the beginning. But as a teacher once told me, all beginnings are awkward, otherwise they wouldn't be beginnings.

Getting my act together with Tzitzit was not easy. Some days I simply forgot to put them on. Finally, I decided that I had to be consistent with the mitzvah. So, whenever I was ready to leave for work I trained myself to make a Tzitzit check. If they were not on, off came the jacket, the tie and the shirt and on they went.

One day, I was running super-late, and Murphy's
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ourselves and the external Divinity. We have no intuitive sense of that which is ritually correct, but depend upon the transmission of ritual law that was first revealed at Sinai.

Secular society subscribes to the belief that ethics stem from within the self. The prevalent view is that people have an intuitive awareness of right and wrong, and thus do not feel the necessary dependence between ethics and G-d. As a result, ethical return to G-d is often relegated a back seat in the Teshuva process.



In contrast, it is essential to note that Judaism sees ethics as a direct extension of G-d. The Hebrew word for ethics is *Musar*. *Musar* derives from the same root as *Masoret*, tradition. The verb *Limsor* means to transmit from one source to another. *Chapters of the Fathers (Pirkei Avot)*, the magnum opus of Jewish ethics, begins with the statement "Moses received the Torah from Sinai, *U'mesara* -- and transmitted it to Joshua." The point is that in Judaism, ethics emanate from G-d to man and are not merely an expression of the self. Contemplation of this point leads to the inescapable conclusion that a serious Jew must study Jewish ethics with the same rigor and vigor that he or she studies Jewish ritual. Return to G-d speaks of a return to G-d's ethics as well as G-d's ritual. The integration and application of Torah ethics and ritual, provide a balance for the task of *Tikun Olam*, repair of the universe, which is the Divine task mandated to humanity. *Shana Tova*.

Stuart Chesner is married to Rachel Nava (formerly Shodofsky) and is the father of Ariel Yosef and Adin. He leads the Beginners Service at Taylor Road Synagogue in Cleveland, Ohio, and works as a clinical psychologist in private practice.

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Law struck: I wasn't wearing them! At that very moment the *Yetzer Hara* (evil inclination) said, "It's O.K. if you miss a day, and besides, look how late you are!" It took all my fortitude, but I forced myself not to yield.

One summer morning, I got up and listened to the weather report. It was going to be a scorcher. As I was getting dressed, I reached for my Tzitzit, and the *Yetzer Hara* reared its head and said, "It's going to be 98 degrees and 90% humidity! Are you some kind of meshugena, adding another layer of apparel? I replied, "I'm wearing them! I'm going to think cool, and I'm going to pick up one of these fishnet models, so pipe down." (Another victory!)



In all honesty, it has, in a reasonably short time, become a happy marriage. In part, I even look forward to putting them on. It gives me a good feeling inside to know that I am fulfilling a positive commandment from the Torah. Often I think of how a mitzvah serves as a link that forges past and future generations. I am enthralled by the fact that Moses, Rabbi Akiva and the Rambam (Maimonides) all wore Tzitzit, and here I am thousands of years later actively participating in the same mitzvah! It's a most powerful and moving experience. Now back to reality.

How to clean the Tzitzit was my next challenge. I was tempted to call the Rabbi, but it seemed like such a trivial matter, so I decided not to bother him. I pondered the question myself. At first, I considered just throwing them into the washing machine with my dirty socks and underwear. But I ruled that out; it just didn't seem proper. I decided not to put the Tzitzit in the machine alone, since I feared the fringes would get caught and tangled around that strange looking spinning mechanism. I thought about the bathroom sink, but decided against that because it was too closely associated with brushing one's teeth. I knew I had not exhausted all possibilities, but I was getting to the end of my fringe.

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At a small yeshiva in Jerusalem called Machon Shlomo, which Rabbi Buchwald suggested to me after I had spent six months in his inspiring Beginners Service, with the Judean hills as a backdrop, I sat and learned traditional Jewish legal, ethical and philosophical texts, 15 hours a day (including breaks, minyans and meals), five days a week. I was joined by about 25, mostly American, men (among them Ph.D.s in foreign affairs and literature, a leading expert in computer logic, V.P.s from Goldman Sachs and the Morgan Bank, brokers, lawyers, doctors, mathematicians, an actor, a few recent college grads, even a couple of ex-Reform rabbinic students)-- all under the tutelage of an almost unbelievable diversity of learned and devoted Rabbis (a former businessman, a Ph.D. in Mathematical Physics from Princeton, others with more traditional yeshiva backgrounds, even a Ba'al T'shuva of 15 years) all united by love for, and gifted ability to understand and communicate Torah.

This fascinating environment provided a framework for such uninterrupted personal, intellectual and religious growth, I find it almost impossible to describe. And yet there is a necessity to attempt, however inadequately, to note some of the insights of the experience, especially as I and my yeshiva friends begin to emerge from the "wilderness" to return to involvement in American society, business and academia.



The world used to look very different. For all its technological progress, civilization was nonetheless experienced as degenerating spiritually and ethically. In the absence of any way to live that accords with the individual's true nature, society must inevitably employ and justify almost any means to provide diversion and distraction from the meaningless passage of time--from drugs and sex to unbridled selfishness and career obsession. Even for those with a conscience, morality was still something we made up

as we went along. Yet one always had a nagging suspicion that such utterly subjective lifestyles were impossible ever really to validate. All that freedom, and nowhere to direct it.

The Torah wants us to see the world as it is, to rid ourselves of illusion, to become more active, more critical, to employ authentic scales by which judge true and false, higher and lower. The extent to which society and the media have turned us into passive receivers of trivia, of corrupt and hypocritical values, is hard to appreciate until we get away from it for a while and begin to ask questions. The Torah is often much more interested in our questions than our answers, since it is by asking questions that we can rid ourselves of false assumptions and approach deeper knowledge of ourselves, our values and the world.

A bottomless well of wisdom and intellectual challenge, with a philosophical depth and literary beauty never found in Plato, Nietzsche or Dostoyevsky, the Talmud is as fresh and relevant today as it was in its oral form more than 2,000 years ago. It may, for instance, present us with a set of facts to connect and make sense of them. The Talmud reveals the flaw in our assumptions and tears down the perspective we had built, only to build it up and destroy it again and again until it has been refined into something approaching the truth--a process of narrowing down our false assumptions, if you will. We quickly learn to appreciate that clarity is an unending process--not only in Torah, but in life--that truth is subtle and complicated, that appearances are deceiving, that all that glitters is not necessarily gold. . . .

The Torah also grants us a positive vision of what the world could be; that a person, with work, can become something more exalted than the angels themselves. The Sages call man a "miniature world." It comes as no surprise, then, that when the Torah commands us to become partners with G-d in the creation of the world, we are obliged to begin with ourselves, and our own enlightenment. Indeed it is this attempt to increase our awareness or our true identity and responsibilities--this harmonization of thought and deed--that expresses the Jew's freedom. As I said, the world looks very different now. . . .

Perhaps my most important and surprising insight came with the discovery that a Jew does not improve himself by cutting out all his "bad parts", by fleeing from the physical world, through fasting and denial. To the contrary, the Torah seeks to *re-channel* one's desires, drives, talents and emotions in ways which accord with one's true goals. Virtually every act can be brought within the framework of Torah and commandments, often merely by thinking about it in a different light. Business rises to the level of holiness when it is treated as a means of fulfilling

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I got it! How about cleaning them in a pot? I could fill it with some warm soapy water and swirl them around, rinse and hang dry. It sounded great. But I had to veto that idea as well, because my pots have not yet been immersed in the mikvah.

HELP!



I am currently getting ready to buy my third pair. I am open to suggestions for an inexpensive, practical and halachically appropriate way to clean them. Thank you.

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the commandment of supporting a family, of gaining independence, and of giving charity. In light of such insight, the family becomes more than a social unit, it serves as the primary mechanism for transmission of eternal Jewish values and tradition. A spouse becomes more than someone to satisfy your personal needs, but the being through whom we have a chance of reaching spiritual completion.



In short, it is a vision of renewal and possibility that my friends and I bring back with us from the "wilderness." I hope that others will create and seize similar opportunities while they can to enter a world as rewarding and fascinating as it is challenging.

Tod A. Jacobs is a television producer/journalist and is a graduate of the Beginners Service at Lincoln Square Synagogue.

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: 475 Fifth Avenue, Suite 1810, New York, NY 10017, (212) 725-1690.

Readers: This is your newsletter, and we'd like to hear from you. Article contributions are always welcome.

Cartoons by Stu Hample



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GIVING AND TAKING

by Ida Langsam

Some of you have only just begun attending the Beginners Service at Lincoln Square Synagogue; others of you have been coming for months (or years!) Eventually, we all begin to feel like a part of the L.S.S. family, welcomed every Shabbat with open arms.

For me, it began with classes through the Joseph Shapiro Institute in the evenings, and extended to learning the joys of Shabbat. Now I truly look forward to Saturday mornings because I know -- rain or shine -- as soon as I walk through those doors, I've walked into Shabbat.



L.S.S. has given me so much, and I can't begin to tell you how my life has been influenced in so many ways. When I realized this just over a year ago, I decided that I wanted to give back to L.S.S. some of what I had been taking, and so joined the shul's publicity committee. I found that the committee was staffed with bright and interesting people who also attend L.S.S. -- beginners, intermediate and main minyan-ers -- and share a feeling of love toward Judaism, and Lincoln Square. Through a series of events, I became chairperson of the Publicity Committee, and now have the pleasure of working on a regular basis with people from all areas of the media. Whether they are from the world of publicity, writing, advertising, marketing, art, entertainment, journalism or filmmaking, there is one huge factor in common...everyone on the Publicity Committee is a volunteer, working on projects when and to the extent that they have time.

This is an open invitation to members of the Beginners Service to join the L.S.S. Publicity Committee, whether you are a member of the shul or not. Here's a chance for you to become involved in the activities of L.S.S., a real roll-up-your-sleeves opportunity to pitch in and make a difference. We need people to call editors at magazines and newspapers, write articles, place the L.S.S. rabbis on television and radio talk shows, create angles and story ideas about the shul, edit press lists, research new media outlets, draw posters to publicize the various L.S.S. events -- whatever you do best or like to do most. No professional experience necessary; your enthusiasm will make up the difference.

Want an example? OK: know the Turn Friday Night into Shabbos event which took place on March 11th? That's a very special event which L.S.S. has initiated, and coordinated on an international level. Based on L.S.S.'s experience with this program in the past, the shul was able to include 30 other congregations in 25 cities (from New York to Los Angeles, from Miami to Toronto) in an organized effort whereby all these shuls will present the same program on the same night in their individual neighborhoods. The Publicity Committee was able to place Rabbi Berman on the "Ruth Jacobs Show" on radio station WEVD to talk about this major event; the Jewish Telegraphic Agency wire service ran a story, as did The Jewish Press, the Jewish Week, and The Long Island Jewish World newspapers.

If you're interested in becoming involved -- on a volunteer basis -- with the L.S.S. Publicity Committee, please leave word for me with Janet at the Synagogue office (212)-874-6105; I'll be glad to get back to you with details.

Here's your chance to give back some of what Lincoln Square has given to you; it's never too early in your discovery of Judaism to start!