

בראשית

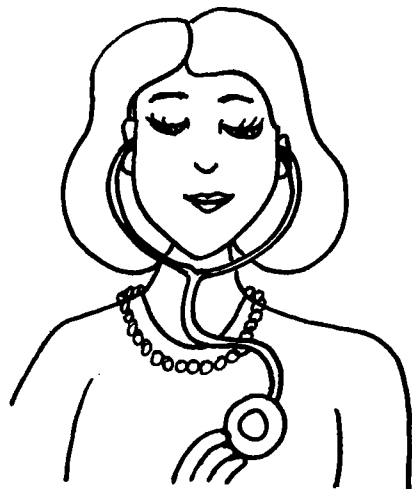
Vol. III No. 1 BERESHITH: "In the Beginning" 5749 Elul/September 1989

GET OUT YOUR STETHOSCOPES, IT'S ROSH HASHANA!

by Betty S. Jacobs



So, how was your year? Mine alternated between two of life's limbo states: searching and struggling. The search was a multiple one: the right job, the right apartment, the right mate, more confidence, the other sock, moral support, discipline, my cordless phone, more faith, any faith, etc. Sometimes I wonder if I'm cut out to be an adult.



I'm embarrassed to admit that I've entertained moments (long ones) when other people's lives looked much better than my own. Other people have: spouses, children, fulfilling careers (monetarily and otherwise), take vacations, find time to do unto others, and don't need to covet.

This year has brought a convoy of coveting down my road, with a truckload of guilt bringing up the rear. But it's the remorse that's going to get me to embark on the most difficult of human tasks: effecting change in oneself.

With all my sighing and groaning, I think it's good when the soul nudges, calling attention for a work out. Which brings us to G-d's most precious gift to all who screw up, or just need to put in for a better mazal detector -- Elul*.

From the first day of Elul I feel I am breathing Jerusalem air. The
(cont. p.4)

THE SHOFAR, A CALL TO PIERCE THE HEAVENS

by Rabbi Yitzchak Rosenbaum

Tekiya, Shevarim, Teruah, Tekiah - the sounds of the shofar echo clearly in my mind, as the year 5749 draws to a close and as I anticipate, along with so many others Jews, the arrival of Rosh Hashana 5750. What is there about these simple, unsophisticated sounds that is of such special significance to the Jewish soul? Why do so many Jews, who otherwise have no connection with their heritage, feel the need to be in the synagogue when the shofar is sounded?

The key to understanding this mystical attraction can be
(cont. p.2)

THE BENEFIT OF PANIC

by Alan Leicht

Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, time to take stock, re-evaluate, enumerate our sins. A very serious business. But for many of us, before we can get to the sins we commit in life, we have to get over the fear, indeed sometimes the panic, over the mistakes we're liable to make in shul. After all, this is a time when so many of us come to a synagogue for the first time in a long time or perhaps for the first time ever. We're out of practice, or even totally at sea. We're prone to panic.

Not me anymore. I now consider myself officially religious, or perhaps more accurately, officially
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found in our comprehension of G-d's response to human prayers. As Jews, we believe that G-d listens to, and hears our prayers. However, we are not always able to express ourselves as clearly and as beautifully as we would like. Even the most eloquent of men might find himself unable to express to his Creator the things that must be said. Who would not be tongue-tied when standing in front of the King of Kings awaiting judgment?

It is at such a time that the shofar speaks for us. It speaks, not with sophisticated phrases and intellectual words, but, rather with the most basic elemental sounds, like a baby crying out in the night. And G-d, like a nurturing mother, hears these cries, and knows and understands our innermost needs. Just as G-d heard the sighs of the Jewish people in the Egyptian captivity and sent Moses to redeem them, so too, on Rosh Hashana, he hears our prayers as expressed through the shofar. Its simple sounds speak more eloquently than the finest orator.

Does this mean that we should stop praying and rely only on the shofar? Not exactly, for we are blessed with the power of speech and must certainly use that gift of G-d, along with all of our other gifts and talents in His service. But if we falter, if our words are inadequate and clumsy, we can take comfort in the story told of the beginner who knew only the letters of the Alef-Bet.



When the congregation began to pray on Rosh Hashana he felt lost and cut off from G-d and from his people. Until, in an inspired moment, he said, "Dear G-d, I only know the Alef-Bet. But the prayers, after all, are composed of words, and words are composed of letters. So I will say the letters, and you, Hashem, please take these letters and make them into words and prayers as you see fit."

Tzaddikim who know of these matters, say that all the prayers of the Jewish people that year, led by the special Alef-Bet prayers, went directly up to the Heavenly Throne.

L'shana Tova Tikatevu V'techatemu!!

Rabbi Yizchak Rosenbaum is the Program Director of the National Jewish Outreach Program.

(cont. from p. 1) (PANIC)

observant. I'm in shul every day of the year. But it wasn't so very long ago that I would freeze in terror if I saw them coming towards me to give me an aliya, call me to the Torah where I would have to make the blessings. Did I know where to stand, what to touch, what hand to shake? My children still enjoy reminding me about the time I recited the wrong Kiddush at Rabbi Buchwald's table. And I remember well my hours of riffling pages in the siddur looking for the place, while all around me experts beat their breasts, hitting home runs of atonement. But not anymore. I have gotten over my proclivity to panic in a synagogue. Or so I thought.

One morning in Jerusalem a few weeks ago, I panicked.

I love to daven in Jerusalem. And I love to shul-hop, picking up new customs along the way, rubbing shoulders with Jews of every imaginable description from the four corners of the world, joining in a conglomeration of customs that harmonize in a grand chorus in praise of G-d. I have become an old hand at it, quite confident now in almost any kind of minyan or shul.

It's amazing, the variety of Jews and customs, and rather than making me feel insecure, I delight in it. I have my customs, others have theirs. A great deal of Jewish religious behavior is custom. So much so that the Talmud tells us that a custom, a "minhag" is as important as a law.

The wearing of a yarmulka, for instance. There's nothing in Jewish law that requires us to keep our heads covered. It's a custom. But so strong a custom, that it is universally accepted as if it were law. It doesn't matter whether Jews are in robes, suits or sweatshirts, everybody's got a hat of some kind on, even if it's one of these cardboard things you get at the Western Wall.

So imagine my embarrassment when at 6:15 on an August morning, I marched into a little synagogue in the Sha'are Chesed neighborhood of Jerusalem, bareheaded.

In my own defense, I had been on a horrendous schedule, a research assignment for a television script, eighteen hours a day, hardly any sleep, still jet-lagged, bumping into walls. I had left my hotel room after giving my thinning hair a few quick strokes, oblivious to the fact that the yarmulka, which had been a permanent fixture on my head for the last eight years, was on the towel rack. I drove calmly, lightheadedly, to shul.

Naturally, I was not a moment inside before a craggy Jerusalemite signalled to his own abundantly covered head, and whispered in what sounded to me like a blending of Hebrew, Yiddish, Arabic and English that my own head was unadorned. My hand went up like lightning to the bald spot my yarmulka always so benignly covers, and since this was not the kind of shul that provides a box of polyester skullcaps, I dashed back out to the car and headed back to the hotel. 6:16.

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The early morning summer sun in Jerusalem is dazzling, and it hit me square in the eyes as I drove east. I blinked, reached for the windshield visor and was struck with a tremendous jolt as the left front tire smashed into a concrete road divided in my path, sending my bald spot to the roof, flattening the tire, and causing a gentleman on the sidewalk to wince horribly and nearly drop his tallis bag. He gestured and shouted in Hebrew, Yiddish, Arabic and English that I had a flat. I waved back and ploughed on.

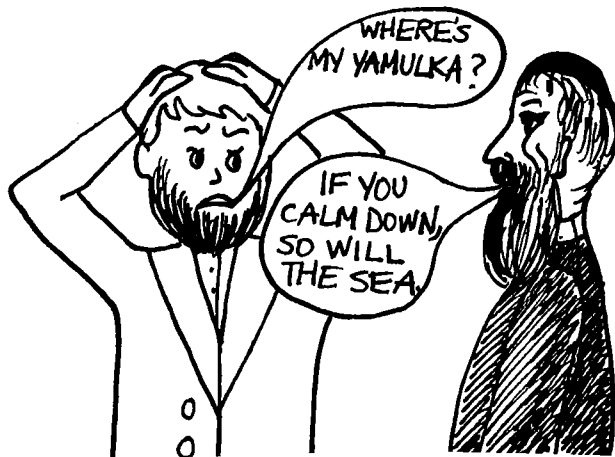
The one thing I did not want, under any circumstances, was to get out of that car with nothing on my head. Not under the sky of Israel, in the city of my ancestors. Not even for a tow truck driver, would I appear bareheaded in Jerusalem. Better it should be my custom to drive on a flat than go without a hat.

I passed citizens left and right, pointing, waving, calling in Hebrew, Yiddish, Arabic and English that I had a flat. But better they should point and gawk at the flat than at my head. I gripped the steering wheel and rumbled on. Nothing was going to drag me out of that car. I was in a certifiable panic.

The seven-minute thump back to the hotel was fraught with religious conflict. Was it permissible to pray for Divine help without a hat?

And then I had a visitation from Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, of blessed memory.

Rav Nachman told me of the time he was travelling across the Mediterranean from Istanbul to what was then called Palestine, in the year 1778, when a violent storm came up, and threatened to sink the ship. All on board prayed desperately for Divine deliverance. The wife of the Rabbi of Khottin criticized Rav Nachman for not praying for them. Rav Nachman replied that if they calmed down, so would the sea. At daybreak the sea calmed down. They were safe.



Rav Nachman advised me to do the same, and by 6:23 A.M. I was back in my hotel room, head covered, and by 6:35 I was back in shul. By cab. I had been through the storm, and arrived safely.

But in order to feel the safety, I had to first feel the fear. Not fear for my life, G-d forbid, but fear all the same, a miniature emotional turmoil of embarrassment, shock, a brush with social, and some physical danger, too, once I got a look at the tire.

I had experienced one of the little miracles that happen often, and too often go unnoticed because they end well. I tripped but didn't fall. But the most beneficial part was that I had rediscovered religious panic.

There is another Chassidic tale of the Ba'al Shem Tov who once received a complaint about a cantor who sang the Al Chet, the Confession on Yom Kippur, with a very cheerful tune. The townsfolk thought it was most irreverent because the Confession deserved a very solemn melody.

The Ba'al Shem Tov asked the cantor for an explanation. The cantor replied, "If I were the janitor in the palace of the king, and was assigned to remove all the accumulated rubbish, thereby beautifying the palace for the king, wouldn't I be happy in my work?"

Still, one might ask, what is the emotion that comes before the joy of clearing out the rubbish? Looking at the immense job confronting us, don't we first feel a sense of dread, a daunting fear that we'll never get the job done?

Fear can be beneficial. We often pray that G-d will grant us fear, fear of Him. Every New Month we pray for "yiras Shomayim", fear of Heaven.

I was getting a little too self-confident. A missing yarmulka and a flat tire shook me up, woke me up. I am going to try to use that panic, relive it during the Days of Awe. Shouldn't there be a touch of fear when one is called to an accounting, "stage fright" on the bima? After all, we're in the presence of the King.

For all of us who aren't so secure, who dread the mistakes we're liable to make, it might be that we're getting it right, just the way G-d wants it. Because after fear comes the sense of well-being. And perhaps in recalling my panic, my own tune for the Confession will turn into a joyful one in the palace of the King, and the sea will be, G-d willing, calm in the year to come.

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(cont. from p. 1) (STETHOSCOPES)

Almighty's presence is as close to us as our own thoughts. The blue between the clouds seems bluer, and every Jew walks around with a feeling both comforting and unsettling. A stirring, almost audible, signals that change is necessary and even possible.

Change, as we know, is no picnic. Like untangling a knotted chain or disturbing a cat curled up in sleep, letting go of negative traits can be frustrating, wrenching, and at best difficult. Especially since we are both the undoers and the objects being undone.

No need for angst. G-d, our Celestial Coach, stands close by offering encouragement and applause. It's the closest thing to unconditional love you'll find anywhere on this tough planet. Who else would forgive us for anything we did or didn't do, plus grant another try, again and again? Although G-d's love for each Jew is infinite, so too is His judgment, hence all this searching and struggling. Take heart. I'm told there's a big payoff in the next world. Of course, that's contingent on how hard we work in this one.

I think I know now why I couldn't stand make-up exams back at school. If I failed a test the first time, I could blame it on the reliable three: poor preparation, overwhelming material, or a bad day. Sometimes luck would reign and I got a second chance. With the luck came a boulder of parental expectation, looming above my head. After that, no more chances.

That's precisely why I've come to love the period of Rosh HaShana. Judaism is about extra chances. And I already know the questions on His exam. or most of

them... well more than last year. But does G-d hear my questions? Can He answer this? How does one fix a soul?

The Rabbis tell us that G-d creates the cure before the illness. He also urges us to conduct our own examination and diagnoses. Maybe this searching and struggling soul need only purchase a stethoscope and x-ray gear for a closer and harder look at what needs to be done.

I find doing some chesed and learning Torah the best remedies. I'll give Dorot** a call and then start with the chapter on coveting. Hey, get a load of this! Abraham searched alone for G-d and found Him, and just when faith was running out, Sara knew the joy of a baby in her arms, and Jacob struggled fourteen years under a hard-driving boss for his award. I guess if you're a Jew having a hard time, you're: a) following in your forefathers'/ mothers' footsteps, b) doing it right, or c) all of the above.

I'm feeling a lot better about the new year. Unlike my school days, I'm enjoying the studying. And with G-d's help, I should be ready for my "make-up" this Tishrei. Lots of luck on yours, and Shana Tovah!

* Elul-the Hebrew month preceding the High Holidays.

** Dorot - a volunteer organization which works with Jewish elderly.

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

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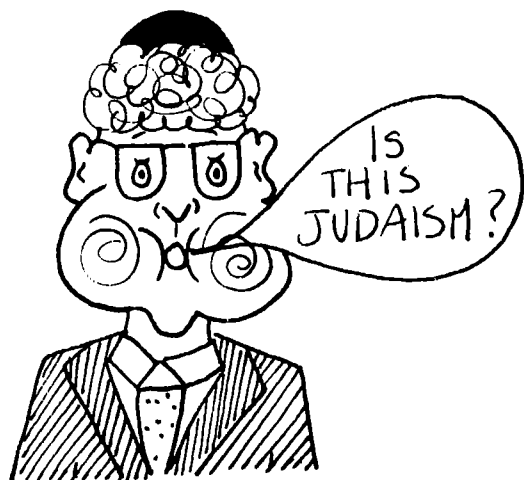
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DATED MATTER

A YOM KIPPUR LETTER TO MY RABBI

Dear Rabbi:

I'll tell you the whole story now. It was before Yom Kippur - a few hours before Yom Kippur and I decided to try your test. So I filled up my cheek with water - it was more than 1 1/2 ounces. I tried again - it was less than 1 1/2 ounces. Again, 1 3/4 ounces. Should I call Rabbi Buchwald at this hour and ask him MORE QUESTIONS? What if I take in the wrong amount - can I do anything to change my cheeks so they will hold less than 1 1/2 ounces of water? Then I decided to try figuring out how to eat solid food. Test run #2. No bigger than an olive. But I don't have olives. So I went out and bought olives. But there were 15 different brands. Big, small, medium. I tried one can and tried molding tuna fish to see how much I could eat.



I said to myself this is getting ridiculous - I better call Rabbi Buchwald. It's too late already! Being the neurotic I am, I was obviously going crazy. The measurements, the sizes, drove me crazy - it's too complicated. It's easier to fast. So I did!

I loved the service. It gave me the strength to fast. And the fasting itself was truly meaningful. Thanks again for everything. Wishing you and your family a wonderful happy and healthy year.

Love,
Steven

Renewal

by Betty S. Jacobs

Feel
the heart
marking
each moment
with a beat
Beating out
my time
within my body
Believe the beats
are not indifferent
It's the soul's
insistent knocking
I'm here
I'm here.

