

ברשת

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BERESHITH: "In the Beginning"

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LOOKING BACK, AND LOOKING AHEAD

by Cindy Greenberg

For as long as I can remember, the High Holidays have been for me a time of reflection. It is at this time that I look back over the past year to evaluate how it measures up to my dreams and desires of a year ago, and set my goals for the year to come. I look at what I had set out to do, how much of that I accomplished, what else I achieved, how I feel about my life now, and what changes I would like to make in the coming year.

This year, my reflections take on additional significance as Rosh Hashanah marks one full year since I began observing Shabbat and the laws of Kashrut. Two years ago marking such an event would have seemed absolutely inconceivable! Looking back, it appears that every aspect of my life has been affected in one way or another: my social life, my relationships with family and friends, my job, and even the clothes I wear. Yet through it all, there has been a stability, a calmness, which can only come from the confidence of having made the right choices cautiously, slowly, and with abundant forethought and planning. Becoming observant was not a decision which I made lightly! It took two years of off-and-on learning, reading, discussing, debating, experimenting and denying, before I felt confident that this was how I wanted to live my life.

As I look back over this year, the most curious change in my life is that
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THE TZADDIK OF NEMIROV

A Tale Re-told by Rabbi Michael Whitman

I normally dislike stereotypes of any kind, especially about different kinds of Jews (and even more especially about Lithuanian Jews since I am one). However, this story, told by Elie Weisel, is so touching and so meaningful for the High Holiday season, it is my pleasure to share it with you:

Ask the old Chassidim. Ask them to tell you what the great Tzaddik of Nemirov was known to do during the week preceding Rosh Hashanah. They will tell you that in the early morning hours, when Jews everywhere rise to go and say their prayers of penitence -- the *Slichot* -- with special fervor, the Tzaddik of Nemirov had a way of disappearing. He would disappear and could be found nowhere. Neither in the synagogue nor in the House of Study nor at the Shtibl, -- least of all -- at home.

Where could the Rebbe be? Well, where *should* he be, except... in Heaven? Is not a Rebbe inundated with requests and pleas on the eve of the Solemn Days of Judgment? Jews need a livelihood, they need peace, health, a few nice Jewish boys for their daughters and girls for their sons... Jews wish to be honest and pious, but their sins are many, and Satan, with his thousand eyes, surveys the world from one end to the other, prying into everyone's life and tempting young and old, worthy and unworthy. Who is there to redeem a sinner if not the Rebbe? Who is there to help if not the Rebbe? Clearly, he personally had to go to Heaven to take care of things - everybody understood that.

But one day, a Lithuanian Jew -- a stubborn enemy of
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LOOKING BACK... (cont. from p. 1)

there are quite a few people in my world now who are very dear to me, who really never knew me before I became observant. Why is this so strange? I guess it's like the person who lost 100 pounds, and in trying to be supportive and empathic with overweight people, keeps hearing "How would you know what I'm going through, you're thin?!" To some of my friends, I've *always* been observant. To them I'm a person who never *really* struggled with questions like: Why should I keep kosher? Why can't I go swimming on Shabbat? Does it really matter if I rip the toilet paper? Do I have to obey the decisions which a bunch of Rabbi's made during a time so removed from my own? Is keeping Shabbat really more important in G-d's eyes than accommodating my family's (and sometimes my own) wishes? Are all these laws really meant for *me*, or is it enough that I just keep the spirit of the law?

So why *did* I become observant? I guess initially one of the attractions was that I have always been a traditionalist. I believe that keeping traditions, be they personal, familial, social, or religious, have the incredible effect of binding and grounding one to a foundation. Foundations lend support and stability to life, allowing one to venture out and explore, without ever losing sight of the homebase. Even within my limited Reform background, I always found comfort and strength looking forward to, and experiencing, the Jewish holidays. Family would be together, my sense of community was heightened, and I had a benchmark by which to judge the year gone by.

But as much as tradition has tremendous value and pull, (especially in today's quickly changing society), it is certainly insufficient to justify a dramatic changing of one's lifestyle and belief system. After all, I had already invested almost thirty years developing my values, opinions and practices, and it would take much more than a *feeling* to convince me that any change in my very happy life was necessary. I wanted proof, hard core evidence, that all those people observing all those laws weren't just doing it out of habit, insecurity, pressure, or lack of exposure to "a better way." So I started exploring. I can be relentlessly inquisitive when I want to be.

My quest began three years ago at a party where a casual conversation with a stranger turned into a two hour discussion on religion and life. He had just returned from two weeks of study in Israel, and I was finishing my Master's degree in Psychology. As I talked with pride and enthusiasm concerning all I had learned about human nature and how to help people achieve happiness in the world, he kept referring to similar lessons he had learned. "It's all in 'The Book'," he said. "What book?" I asked. "The Torah -- it's a blueprint on how to live life." Funny, I thought. I'd always assumed the Torah was a collection of stories that a bunch of men wrote, which never warranted all that much attention in today's world. He invited me to a class, and I was curious enough to attend. This was to be the first

encounter I was to have with Orthodox Judaism in my entire life!

Shortly afterwards, I attended the Beginners Service at Lincoln Square Synagogue. So eager was I to explore, that I arrived 15 minutes early, only to be bewildered when I learned that I had to sit on "the other side" separate from the men! That issue aside, the service was pleasant enough. I enjoyed the singing, the spirit, the people and the laughter. I was also drawn to the discussions about values and beliefs. Rabbi Buchwald can sure put on a show! But let's be real -- sure I liked it, even enough to go back once in a while, but start changing my lifestyle because I agreed with a lot of what I heard? Not likely. I had always believed in G-d, but I needed *proof*, something tangible to show me that G-d actually wanted me to act a certain way, live a certain life, that His presence was still as active in this world today as it was when He created it.

Shortly after, I attended Aish HaTorah's Discovery Seminar. All I can say, is that when I left, I was in a semi state of shock and amazement for weeks to come. I walked out of that room knowing in my gut that G-d still exists, that He wrote the Torah, that it's the same exact Torah we read today, and that our actions as Jews really *can* and *do* effect the world. Well, what was I to do? I certainly had enough reason *now* to believe that there was compelling cause to explore this whole "observance" thing more closely.

So what *did* I do? I chose to ignore those troubling conclusions, because I really wasn't ready to change life so drastically. But once you've experienced something as powerful as the truth, it has a way of not letting you ignore it. Very slowly, very cautiously, I started exploring again. I went back to the Beginners Service, started reading a lot of books, attending lectures, and, perhaps most importantly, I sought out contemporaries to whom I could relate, and badgered them relentlessly with questions and challenges.

So here I am, just shy of three years since that party changed my life in so many ways. Shabbat has become a way of life -- a life I love, I must add. I have also learnt to be conscious of the fact each day that, for better or for worse, we really *are* a chosen people, who have been given the Torah, and received G-d's guidance in order to make a positive difference in this world. For those of you reading these words who don't believe, I realize that my radical conclusion must be quite unsettling for you. But it is precisely my belief in the Jewish mission, that adds meaning to my life, and empowers my great desire to touch others.

The changes this past year haven't always been smooth, after all, I don't live in a vacuum. The changes in my lifestyle have meant that my relationships with family and friends were bound to be effected. But a year ago I made a promise to myself, and to those close to me, that my commitment to observance would not mean trading one world for another. The people in my world are too special to abandon. Trust me, it's not always easy.

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LOOKING BACK... (cont. from p. 2)

But if you are willing to keep coming back to square one, and remember the love that has bound you, you slowly find a way to accept each other's differences and build on the common ground.

As much as I still think of my self as a "Beginner," I guess I really no longer am. Oh, I still have tons of basics to learn, not to mention actually mastering davening in Hebrew. But as I sit in the Beginners Service each week, I find, more and more, that it's *me* people approach with the same questions and challenges I posed to others not so long ago. It's a great feeling when I can really answer them, and often very frustrating when I can't. You see, there are very practical reasons for most of the Jewish laws and customs. While the reasons aren't always obvious, if you're persistent, the answers are usually there to be found. I know that in my own search, I have found answers which truly satisfy me.

While it is upsetting not being able to answer others' questions and challenges at times, I know that my inability does not speak of the weakness of the system, only of my own lack of knowledge or ability to master and convey the information. Unfortunately, as with most learning, unless you really achieve mastery of a subject, you tend to remember the conclusions, but often forget the steps leading up to the conclusion. So when

people challenge me with "why this?", "how come that?", and "what about this?", if I can't answer them to my satisfaction or theirs, I simply refer them to a more knowledgeable source. They deserve the same opportunity to get answers which I had.

So as I look ahead, what *do* I want for the coming year? Lasting health, happiness, and success for my friends, my family and myself. The time and diligence to continue my learning. The wisdom and the opportunity to help others discover the richness of our heritage and the challenges we face. Peace and understanding in Israel, our homeland, which we hope to build as a model for others to follow. Finally, I hope to remain forever a "Beginner," so that I not become complacent in my knowledge and stop seeking answers to the complex questions that are part of my faith. I may not always find the answers I like. That's okay though, because I trust that G-d's wisdom is supreme and His intentions pure. In fact, I think it's reasonable to conclude that questioning is probably the most effective way of achieving knowledge of His word.

Shana Tova!!

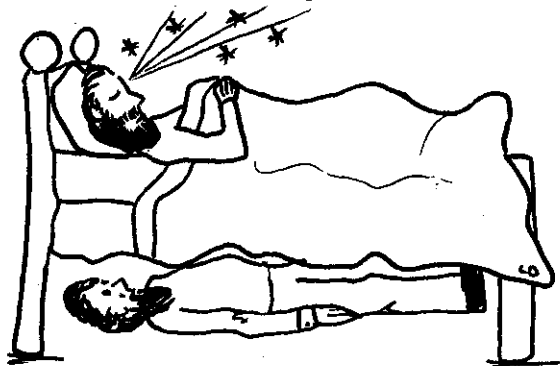
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TADDIK (cont. from p. 1)

Chassidism -- came into town. And when he heard the story, he laughed. You know how those Lithuanian Jews are; they know the Talmud and nothing else -- nothing else exists for them. And Talmud to them means logic. And logically the Tzaddik could not go up into Heaven, since Moses himself had to stop ten levels *below* Heaven. Now, tell me: what is the use of arguing with Lithuanian logic?!

Still, they did try. They asked the visitor, "And where do you think our Rebbe goes?" That is no concern of mine," he answered, shrugging his shoulders. But secretly, he made up his mind to solve the mystery.

When the evening prayers were over, the Litvak slipped into the Rebbe's bedroom and hid under the bed, ready to spend the entire night there and see where the Rebbe went when the others ran to recite *Slichot* in the synagogue. Anyone else would have dozed off. But not a Litvak -- no! He kept awake by concentrating on a complicated Talmudic passage.



Just before daybreak he heard the beadle as he went from house to house, from door to door, calling out: "*Shtet oiff zu slichos* -- it's late! Get up for *Slichot* services!" The Rebbe needed no one to wake him; he had been lying in bed moaning for hours. Anyone who heard the Rebbe moan knew that the moans expressed all the woes and sufferings of his people; they were enough to make you burst into tears. But a Litvak's heart is as cold as stone. He lay still under the bed listening, while the Rebbe tossed in his bed.

Soon the Litvak heard the house come to life. A few whispers, the splash of water, doors opening and banging shut. Then, with everyone gone, silence reigned again, and all was dark, except for a faint beam of moonlight creeping in through the crack of one of the shutters. The Litvak admitted afterward that when he was left alone with the Rebbe in the dark and empty house, he was frightened. To be left alone with the Rebbe at dawn, just before *Slichot* -- that's nothing to joke about. But a Litvak is a Litvak; obstinate beyond reason. So he lay there, trembling. Waiting...

At last the Rebbe got up. He washed his hands, his face. Then he went over to the closet, pulled out a bundle containing peasant's garments and put them on. And, dressed like a peasant, the Rebbe left the room -- with the Litvak trailing him like a shadow. The Rebbe stopped in the kitchen to pick up an ax, tucked it into his belt, and left the house. Now the Litvak was trembling even more, but he followed the old man nevertheless. His heart was pounding hard as he followed the Rebbe, who was making his way through the

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TZADDIK (cont. from p. 3)

silent, unlit streets leading out of town. They came to a forest and the Rebbe kept on walking. After a few minutes, the Rebbe stopped at a young tree. The Litvak was astonished to see the Rebbe pull the ax out of his belt and start chopping away at the tree until he had felled it and split it into logs and kindling. Then he tied the wood into a bundle, threw the bundle over his shoulder, tucked the ax back into his belt and started back to town. At the end of a narrow road, there stood a wretched hut. He knocked at the window.

"Who is there?" a frightened woman's voice came from within. "It's me," answered the Rebbe with a thick accent, sounding like a peasant. "Who are you?" asked the woman. "Vassili," the Rebbe replied. "Vassili who? What do you want?" "I've got some wood to sell -- cheap, very cheap, almost for nothing. I saw no smoke rising from your chimney so I thought you could use some of my wood."

And without waiting for an answer, he entered the shack, while the Litvak hovered near the door. And the Litvak saw the inside of the hovel. Under ragged bedclothes, a sick woman was lying helpless. "Wood?" she said. "You sell wood? I have no money." "It doesn't matter," said the Rebbe. "I trust you. How much is it anyway? Six coppers? I trust you for six coppers." "But how will I

ever manage to pay you? I'm sick, don't you see how sick I am?" "Foolish woman," said the Rebbe. "I trust you -- why don't you trust G-d in Heaven? Isn't He worth six coppers?" "And who will light the stove for me?" the sick woman groaned. "I am a widow, my son is away at work -- do I look like one who has the strength to get up and light a fire?" "Don't worry," said the Rebbe. "I'll do it."

And, stooping down to put the wood into the stove, he whispered the first *Slichot* prayer. And when the fire caught the kindling, he said the second prayer. And the third. Then it was time to replace the lid on the stove.

And that's how a Litvak became the Rebbe's most devoted follower. And whenever a Chassid would tell how the Tzaddik of Nemirov would rise early on the solemn days of *Slichot* to ascend straight into Heaven, the Litvak no longer sneered but said quietly, "To Heaven? If not higher."

May you have a happy, sweet year suffused with the truest essence of our Torah.

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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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