

בראשית

Vol. VI No. 1

BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

Tisrei 5753/September 1992

"WHERE ARE YOU?" A ROSH HASHANA MESSAGE

by Rabbi Simcha Weinberg



The boy lay on the ground, dying of thirst. He was not a good person. In fact, he was evil. Yishmael was his name. He was fifteen, exiled from his home by his father Avraham. G-d saw Yishmael suffering and decided to save his life. "No!" cried the angels. "How can you save a boy so evil, whose descendants will be so destructive?"

"I see him 'Ba'asher hu sham', as he is right now," says G-d, "and right now he is innocent!"

We treasure those words, "Ba'asher hu sham": for generations we have understood them to mean that when G-d examines us on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, He sees us too "Ba'asher hu sham," in our temporary High Holiday righteousness. When judged as such, we emerge meritorious. Those moments of goodness are an expression of the latent goodness within us, and it is that manifestation which is judged.

There is another meaning to the perspective of "Ba'asher hu sham." It can also mean that we are judged by the subjective standard of who we are and where we are in our lives. It is difficult to repent and feel that our Teshuva is meaningful. It is almost impossible to feel that
(cont. p. 3)

A LITTLE BIT GOES A LONG WAY

by Ken Firestone

There is always some discomfort in doing something new, and presenting a D'var Torah is certainly unfamiliar to me, and more than a little uncomfortable. I'm doing it, though, because some of you are also choosing to do something a little uncomfortable today, specifically, attending this Beginners Service, and, "discomfort loves company."

Some of you were not here last Shabbat, or the Shabbat before that. Perhaps you came today because you felt that a service with less Hebrew and more explanation might be more comfortable. On the other hand, coming here today involves getting together with people you do not see every day, and doing things which you may feel you do not do very well.

The objective here is not masochism. The point is that we have to go through the process of giving up something to get something else. In nature, it is the process of something breaking down a little,
(cont. p.4)

JOURNEY INTO JUDAISM

by Esta Fischer

Yom Kippur, 1989. It was a crisp evening. The synagogue's doors were left open. I remember enjoying the cool, fresh smells of wood polish and pine trees as I listened to the prayers being chanted. I had no idea my journey into Judaism was about to begin.

My parents, my son, my daughter and I were attending services at the Wurtsboro Hebrew Congregation. The tiny, white, stucco synagogue, located in rural upstate New York, was too small to have its own rabbi. The Rabbi leading the service was a retired, elderly and frail man. He traveled from Spring Valley for holidays, bar mitzvahs and an occasional Shabbat. The Holy Ark was filled with Torah scrolls donated by other synagogues in Sullivan County which had closed. But the remaining Jewish families in the area cared lovingly for the synagogue, and on this night the sanctuary looked particularly radiant as light from the many naked light bulbs bounced off the freshly painted white walls. The synagogue seemed to glow as the bright light poured out the stained glass windows into the dark country night.
(cont. p.2)

JOURNEY ... (cont. from p.1)

My son, Erick, sat beside me on the aisle. He was fourteen years old at the time and not yet Bar Mitzvahed. Shortly after services began, Erick started squirming in his seat. He was bored and wanted to leave. After a few minutes of heated, whispered arguing, Erick decided to disobey me and began walking defiantly up the aisle toward the opened door. An elderly gentleman in the congregation stopped Erick just inside the sanctuary. As he put his arm around Erick, he unobtrusively wrapped a tallis over Erick's shoulders. The gentleman asked Erick if he could read Hebrew. Erick replied, "No". The gentleman said, "Then come...sit here, and hold this". He walked Erick back up the aisle, sat him down, and delicately placed a Torah in Erick's arms.

I stared, transfixed, at my son, as he sat near the bimah, wrapped in the talis, and holding the Torah. I watched in stunned silence, as if time had stopped, oblivious to the service going on around me, until I could gather my thoughts. "What's going on here? Something very important is happening." Why was Erick, during his act of defiance, pulled back into the synagogue by this unfamiliar man? And not only pulled back, but made to sit and hold the Torah. I sat and stared until I could finally summon the courage to admit what frightened me so. Incredulously I thought, "G-d is telling me...my son must be Bar Mitzvahed."

Although I had always wanted to believe in G-d, I had been unsure. And what did I know about G-d anyway? I had no religious training. Even if I had decided G-d existed, so what? So He was up there. What did that mean to me? This was the first time I ever actually acknowledged G-d's existence in my life, and it was a very overwhelming and scary feeling.

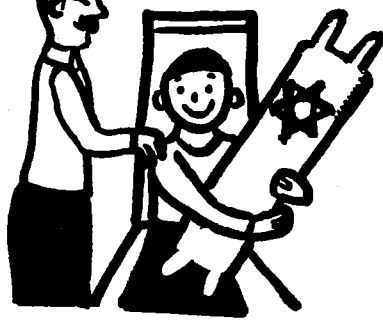
That evening, I told my parents I decided it was time for Erick to be Bar Mitzvahed. I was afraid to tell them what made me arrive at this decision for fear of seeming vulnerable. My parents, of course, agreed with my decision but were unable to grasp the depth of my feelings.

Immediately after Yom Kippur, I began my search for a rabbi and a synagogue where Erick could have his Bar mitzvah. I made phone calls and visited synagogues. However, because Erick was very involved in several sports, he spent every afternoon and weekend either at practices or at games. I couldn't find a rabbi who could accommodate his schedule. And he wasn't about to give up his starting positions to sit and study Hebrew! In desperation, and about to give up, I walked into a synagogue near my office and asked if there existed a directory of synagogues in New York City. The Rabbi's secretary said that she had never heard of such a book and inquired as to why I would need a directory of synagogues. I explained my problem and she refused to let me leave. She said "Sit down. Erick will be Bar Mitzvahed at Congregation Mt. Sinai." She immediately telephoned the Rabbi on his car phone, and shortly after Yom Kippur, 1990, Erick was Bar Mitzvahed.

The Bar Mitzvah was a small affair -- the service and a kiddush -- but it was beautiful. The Rabbi and the congregation made the day very special for us. People we never met surrounded us with love and made us feel as if we had always been a part of their family. I felt as if I had come home after a long absence.

I felt so proud of Erick, yet so sad at the same time. My son's Bar Mitzvah was the first Shabbat service I had ever attended in my life.

NOTHING IN THIS WORLD IS MERELY COINCIDENCE



I couldn't follow the service. I didn't understand what was being said. Non-Jewish friends asked me questions about the service. I was embarrassed that I couldn't answer their questions. For the first time in my life, I realized I knew *nothing* about my own religion. I felt like an alien in a strange environment. How could this have happened? I was Jewish. I was raised in a Jewish home. We celebrated some holidays, observed a few traditions. My parents spoke Yiddish on occasion. All of a sudden there was this large gap in my life that needed to be filled.

Much to the surprise of the Rabbi, I began attending services every Saturday. But I still couldn't understand what was being said or follow the service. I needed to learn Hebrew. A friend told me about the "Hebrew Reading Crash Course" given by the National Jewish Outreach Program. I took the course at a synagogue near my home. Through the Hebrew course, I learned about TURN FRIDAY NIGHT INTO SHABBOS, and then, about the Beginners Service. That was exactly two years ago.

During the past two years I have continued learning. My life has been enriched immeasurably by learning about G-d, Torah and Judaism. I look back at my life now, and I am aware of so much evidence of G-d's presence in my life and its direction. I now recognize so many fortuitous incidents that have happened to me and my children that I just cannot explain away as accident, luck or coincidence. I now know that it is with G-d's help that we are alive to "reach this very day". Life is a miracle, and I try to recognize the gift of life every day, and to see beauty and significance in small events that might seem trivial or "accidental" to other people. My mission for the future is to continue my own education and, at the same time, transmit as much of my joy of learning about G-d, Torah and Judaism to my children.

I remember reading a passage during the past several months in a memorial prayer that stated, "We honor the memory of departed relatives by our present actions." In Lynn Davidman's book, *Tradition in a Rootless World*, several of the women she interviewed stated that one of the reasons they returned to Judaism was their fond memories of their grandparents. There is no doubt in my mind that a very special bond exists between grandparents and grandchildren. There is not a day that goes by that I don't think of my grandparents and how much I love and miss them. And I see that special bond exists now between my parents and my children.

Someday, hopefully, I will have grandchildren of my own. I want my grandchildren to remember me with the same warm feelings of love and respect. I want them to remember their grandma -- old and wise -- lighting the Shabbat candles. I want to celebrate all the holidays with them and "kvell" when they perform in the Hanukkah play. I want to tell them the stories of Esther and Ruth. I want to cook chicken soup and make them wear two sweaters and a hat when it's sixty degrees outside -- just as my grandparents did for me!

Grandma and Grandpa, I love you. This is your tribute and your legacy that my children and their children will carry on. I do this for you, and for them, and for 5,000 years of Jewish history, and for all the millions of men, women and children who died either just because they were Jewish, or because they refused to be anything else.

Esta Fischer is a paralegal and a member of the LSS Beginners Service.

Last year I decided to pick the temple.

It was the High Holidays, that time of the year when I break down and attend services with my wife.

Usually Rachel picks the temple. The year before we went to a floating Reconstructionist hootenanny in the San Fernando Valley. The year before that we went to Reform services at the Directors Guild Theater in Hollywood.

So last year I said, "I'll pick the temple." I went through the ads in the *Los Angeles Times* and found one I thought I'd like. It was for the Beth Jacob Learner's Minyan, and it was free. I have a thing about temples charging high admissions to High Holiday services. Instead of it being a time of income opportunity, I think it should be a time to open doors. Idealistic as it may seem, that's my thinking.

So I liked the idea of Beth Jacob. Their hearts seemed to be in the right place.

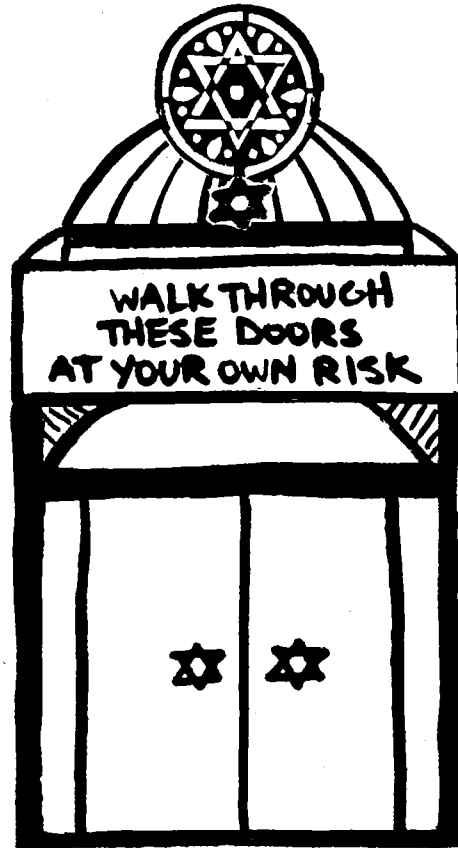
"Let's go here," I said.

"That's an Orthodox service," Rachel warned me. But even that appealed to me. I have traditional tastes in music, and the chance of running into another hootenanny at Beth Jacob were slim. And my mother-in-law, whom I love dearly, has always considered me something of an anti-Semite. I have always told Sunya that I would gladly start going to temple if I could find a rabbi who is not into real estate. This was a real coup — taking Rachel to Orthodox services.

Suffice it to say that the Jewish kid who grew up with a Christmas tree is now a member of the Beth Jacob Learner's Minyan. And I am absorbing my own culture, and perhaps faith, slowly.

Like last Chanukah, when I had my first Jewish dancing lesson.

I have never been much of a dancer. I barely got through the Hava Nagila at my wedding six years ago, which is terrible, because my wife's relatives are such good dancers. Like cousin Mark, who used to teach disco and who can



touch his forehead to his toes, bending over backwards. Or Rachel's brother Allen, who is the best white dancer in Washington DC. Rachel herself is really quite lovely on the dance floor.

What is it about Jews that loves to dance?

Rabbi Brian Thau loves to dance, which is why he brought an Israeli dance teacher to the Learners Minyan's pre-Chanukah Chanukah party. Judah the Incredible Hulk played, and we all sang and danced. And I got a few steps down. I would have asked for a Hava Nagila, but I didn't think it would have been fair to the others.

Like I said, slowly.

Next week I start studying for my Bar Mitzvah with Cantor Rabinovicz.

And Rachel and I just finished koshering our house. So we can have guests.

Is duck kosher? Just kidding.

Arnold Mann is a member of the Beth Jacob Beginners Service in Beverly Hills, CA, and is a Los Angeles based columnist for the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences Emmy magazine.

WHERE ARE YOU?...(cont. from page 2)

we have affected a new *Bereshit*, a new beginning. We perceive the process of recreation of self as nearly impossible, and thus the Teshuva becomes even more difficult.

However, G-d sees us not as new human beings created through Teshuva. "*Ba'asher bu sham*" means that G-d measures our repentance by the standard of who we are, not as new human beings.

To affect this subjective Teshuva we must have a deep awareness of our potential, our limitations, and of what we are capable. We must begin with an appreciation of our "*Ba'asher bu sham*". Our mistakes of the past were real. The most effective manner of dealing with these mistakes and using them constructively is to use the strengths we, who have erred, possess. We are not expected to create a new human being.

The Almighty's message, then, of "*Ba'asher bu Sham*" is that we must

realize that much of the frustration with the Teshuva process is a result of our mistaken belief that Teshuva will create a new person. It won't, not as much as it will use the strengths which we already possess to accomplish more than we have in the past.

We are not expected to reject our past as much as we are charged with channeling all of the past into future growth and development. After Teshuva, we retain the same past as we had before our repentance, but through Teshuva, that past can be expressed in new ways by using it differently.

That fifteen-year-old boy was not looked at as a new person. He was seen by G-d exactly as he was at that moment and before. He was not a tzaddik, but Yishmael. G-d was telling him that even Yishmael, as he was, could do Teshuva, as we can.

Rabbi Simcha L. Weinberg is rabbi of Lincoln Square Synagogue in New York City.

A LITTLE BIT ... (cont. from p.1)

before new life can sprout. At the end of the process, we are better off. But what is it we want, and what are we looking for? An opportunity to grow personally? An opportunity to feel part of something larger than ourselves? To feel something more profound than our daily work routine? To experience a sense of community with people with whom we share an intangible relationship? Or, perhaps, the opportunity to share personal and private things with old friends, even though some of us have met just today for the very first time.

The Jewish people as a nation have also gone through a similar experience. Our forefather Jacob and his entire family went down from Israel into Egypt due to a famine in the Land of Israel. Like it or not, this was the beginning of the *galut* (exile). Jacob died in Egypt, followed by Joseph, and soon there arose a Pharaoh "who knew not of Joseph". In other words, there was no more protection, no more free rides, no more special status for the Jews. In fact, the privileged life of the Jews in Egypt soon became slavery.

Only then did the realization of the harshness of the exile set in. "G-d's people"...the Chosen Ones!!... and nevertheless we have been destined to spend countless generations outside of the Holy Land, outside of the land promised by G-d to Abraham.

What was, and is, G-d's objective in putting us in a land in which we *stand out*? A place where we feel a sense of separateness, where we don't exercise control over our destiny?

Perhaps, just perhaps, the hard work and pain of exile are the means to an end. Through these experiences we are to be liberated, elevated to a higher spiritual level. This trial by fire prepares us to receive the Torah more fully, and with greater comprehension, than had we not experienced the alienation of exile.

I was raised in the suburbs of Lancaster in a secular Jewish home with strong Jewish values. I then spent several years in a yeshiva after finishing college. For a period of time, while in the yeshiva, I almost forgot that I was in exile. I was surrounded by people who looked like me, and, even more important, *thought* like me.

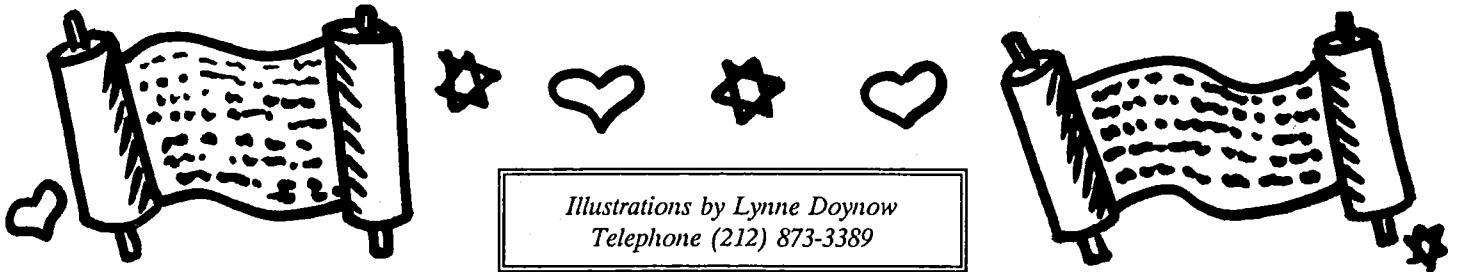
Now I'm back in Lancaster.

I do not mean to equate living here with experiencing the harshness of exile, but it is certainly exile. And even though people in Brooklyn might forget that they are in exile, in Lancaster, we cannot.

One of the special things that helps me cope is getting together with other Jews weekly at the Beginners Service. I also learn Torah with the Rabbi twice a week, for an hour each time. That's just a little bit of learning, but I guess that is all you get out here in exile -- a little bit. But a little bit can go a long way, so let's do a little bit together.

Welcome to the Beginners Service.

Adapted from a D'var Torah presented by Ken Firestone at the Beginners Service of Congregation Degel Israel, Lancaster, PA.



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.

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



485 Fifth Ave. ~ Suite 212
New York, NY 10017

DATED MATTER

