

# בראשית

## GOOD NEWS AND BAD NEWS ABOUT THE HIGH HOLIDAYS

by Rabbi Barry Freundel



Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur embody values very much at odds with today's pop culture, yet very real in terms of what is needed to make the spiritual quality of our lives the best it can be. Two ideas jump out at me, and they form a sort of good-news/bad-news pair.

First the bad news: Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur demand personal responsibility. I am responsible for what I have done wrong. And ultimately, regardless of the rationalization and the shared blame, I have to face the music. This is an uncomfortable stance to take in our society. We tend to blame our past society, our parents, our government, or whoever else is handy. None of that works when we stand before G-d. He knows the truth and no spin-control is going to work. On the High Holidays we all know this to be true.

(cont. p. 4)

## WHY AM I HERE?

by Natalie Cohen

What is the purpose of life? Why am I here? I have been debating these questions myself for some time now. It's quite frustrating at times since there never seems to be a correct answer, and all responses seem to lead to more questions. It was time to find an explanation, but I wasn't sure where to turn. I decided to try my roots. Maybe by looking into my background I would be able to find some answers. I started with what I already knew.

I am a Jew. I have been told this time and again. I grew up with all the beliefs and traditions of Judaism. But what does it mean "To Be A Jew?" In today's society it is hard to retain the values of Judaism. I had always believed that involving myself with my religion would be a burden and an inconvenience. I have realized that this attitude was based on my lack of understanding.

My experience with Judaism has been superficial, my knowledge of it elementary, my  
(cont. p. 3)

## ROSH HASHANAH — REPENTANCE, REFLECTION, REBIRTH

by Susan Rothenberg

This year, I will observe Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur for the first time. Of course, I had heard of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur before. They were two holidays grouped together and known as the High Holy Days that seemed to be taken very seriously by observant Jews and were a good excuse to take two days off work by non-observant Jews. I vaguely understood that Rosh Hashanah was the Jewish New Year and that Yom Kippur had something to do with atonement.

I could relate to celebrating the start of a new year. Every year I went to a New Year's Eve party on December 31st. Amidst the celebrating, we rehashed the past 12 months, cracked the usual jokes about surviving the old year and expressed hopes that the new year would be better. There was also the fun of comparing New Year's resolutions. I always made mine on New Year's

(cont. p. 2)

## ROSH HASHANAH — REPENTANCE. . .

(cont. from p. 1)

Day. As I nursed a hangover, the first resolution was always the same — never to get drunk again on New Year's Eve. I don't remember any of the others because I never kept them either.

As for Yom Kippur, I scornfully dismissed the concept of atonement as some sort of medieval, guilt-ridden, religious thing.

As the High Holy Days approached this year, it seemed clear that, as a newly religious Jew, I had a great deal of learning and thinking to do. The more I studied and understood the meaning of the High Holy Days, the more I realized that Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are the embodiment of the process that brought me to religion in the first place.

One thing most Ba'alei Teshuva have in common is a sense of incompleteness in our lives. It is not just a feeling that something is missing — it is a void that goes much deeper. It was the desperation to fill this void and make myself complete that finally lead me to religion. Having tried everything else (drugs, psychotherapy, group therapy, etc.), for me it was Judaism that finally started the healing process. It certainly didn't happen overnight — it is an ongoing life-long process that involves a great deal of soul-searching and struggle. To me, this process is what the High Holy Days are all about.

The High Holy Days occur in Tishrei — the month that G-d created the world. This is appropriate; Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are really about re-creation and rebirth. Once a year we are given the opportunity to re-evaluate the course of our lives, to make peace with G-d and the world, and to begin anew. This should be an exciting and rewarding experience and yet, it is so difficult to do. Perhaps one reason is that birth is not just a beautiful and miraculous event, but also a very painful happening.

One of the hardest things to do is view ourselves through a spiritual mirror. Our defense mechanisms are legion and, to some extent, necessary if we are to interact with others on a day-to-day basis and still maintain our self-esteem. But once a year, we are given the opportunity to strip away the secrets, the pretenses and the defenses and see ourselves and our acts through G-d's eyes. This can be a truly shattering

experience. So why do it? As any armchair psychologist can tell you, guilt is a destructive emotion.

I thought about this for awhile and realized that, while guilt by itself is destructive, true honesty and self-evaluation is *constructive* when it leads to positive commitment, healing and growth. If I am uncomfortable with certain acts or characteristics, then the only logical path is change. Consequently, teshuva or penitence must lead to change. And while I know that it will be difficult to ask forgiveness from people I have wronged, I also know that I cannot put these acts behind me until I do. This too is part of the healing and growth process.

While it is true that the High Holy Days are a time of repentance and rebirth, to me they are also a time to reflect on the blessings I have received in the past year. It has been a year of wonderful firsts for me. I will never forget the excitement of reading my first Hebrew word, of learning my first bracha, of lighting my first Shabbat candles and experiencing my first real Shabbat. And, most wonderful of all, this is the year that I was introduced to the beauty of Torah study.

I am grateful to the generous families who have opened their homes and their hearts to me on Shabbat and the holidays. Through them I have experienced Jewish family life for the first time.

I am grateful to my teachers who have not only introduced me to the beauties of Torah, but have also guided me through the struggle to reconcile my secular values and lifestyle with the values of Torah and Jewish life. They have answered my questions, addressed my doubts, and endured my temper tantrums with far more patience and understanding than I would have had in their place.

This New Year celebration, on the surface, will have many things in common with past New Year celebrations. I will once again "review" the past year, make "resolutions" and hope for a "better" year. But this time the perspective will be uniquely Jewish and, to paraphrase Robert Frost, that will make all the difference.

*Susan Rothenberg attends Beginners Services at Lincoln Square Synagogue in New York and is a computer consultant.*



## WHY AM I HERE? *(cont. from p. 1)*

understanding of it incomplete. I have always felt that there was more to learn about my Jewish culture and the meaning of the phrase "To be a Jew." Until now I was uncertain about how to obtain this information. I decided that one source of knowledge could come from reading about Jewish culture. I bought the right books and began my quest to educate myself. As I began, I hit a major obstacle. Where do I turn when I have a question or need a clarification? Who do I discuss my feelings and views on these topics with?

I also realized that not only was there no one around to answer these questions, but that knowledge requires understanding and the greatest understanding is derived from personal involvement and not merely from textbook learning.

Where could I turn? -Who would know the answers? After asking myself these questions, I came across the obvious... the synagogue. However, I was not comfortable with this solution. It would mean going into an unknown environment with a lack of knowledge of the process, and exposing my ignorance on a subject that I felt I should have known more about.

I took a first step though towards opening myself to this unknown milieu. I attended a community TURN FRIDAY NIGHT INTO SHABBOS dinner on my own. For me, this was

a substantial step. I usually try not to go into an unknown social setting alone. By taking this first step I learned a great deal about myself. I began to realize that my fear of the unknown is not as great as it had always seemed. I met many people who were also using this dinner for a similar purpose. Through my interaction I was told about the Beginners' service. I realized that this would mean putting myself in another uncertain environment, alone!

Until I actually got to the synagogue the next morning, I was sure that I wasn't going to attend. For the last month and a half I have continued my quest for learning by attending these classes. Not only have I been reminded of the importance and meaning of being a Jew, but I have gained an understanding of myself.

To this day I am not sure what motivated me to attend the first service, but it was a pivotal point in my life. I have come to realize that the Shabbat is an essential part of the Jewish religion, and a beginning step for me is to observe it. The support of the Beginners Service has motivated me to continue on this path, and I am beginning to understand my role as a Jew.

*Natalie Cohen is a member of Congregation Tifereth Beth David Jerusalem Beginners Service in Montreal, Canada, and an elementary school teacher.*



*Entering a synagogue may be one of the most heroic acts for a Jew in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.*

## GOOD NEWS AND BAD. . .(cont. from p. 1)

The silver lining in this is Judaism's insistence that the human being is fortified with the ability to stare responsibility in the face. We won't collapse; we won't explode; we won't be exposed as totally inadequate. We are G-d's best and most important creation and He has is confident that we are able to handle the confrontation with ourselves and our actions.

That brings us to the good news which is man's absolute capacity to change. I can find no more depressing sentiment than that which insists that "I am who I am" with no possibility of growth or development. Yet in many ways we fall victim to this state of mind, never focusing on the fact that such an attitude leads to a static life of unfulfilled potential.

In contrast, Judaism believes in the power of change. *Teshuva*--repentance--means not only saying one is sorry for the past, but resolving to change one's future behavior as well. The future is undetermined and it is within our power to make out of it what we will.

Judaism goes even further and makes the remarkable claim that we can even change the past. Repentance may come from fear of punishment or

negative consequences, in which case past sins are forgiven. Repentance may also come from love of G-d or Torah, in which case the rabbis say that past evil deeds are transformed into good deeds. Were it not for the past experiences and events of my life, I would not have been capable of making this "love" commitment. These events serve as a prelude to my repentance and, as such, are viewed as positive and not negative. While some are busy denying our capacity to change the future, Judaism insists that we can even change the past.

With the gift that allows us to change both our past and our future comes a great challenge. If the future, and even the past are in our hands to mold, then we are expected to shape our lives and the world around us in the best way possible. This is the purpose for which we were created. On Rosh Hashanah, the anniversary of man's creation, we are reminded that to do any less makes us less than human. On Yom Kippur, the day of forgiveness, we are reminded that we always have another chance to try.

*Rabbi Barry Freundel is the rabbi of Kesher Israel Congregation (the Georgetown Synagogue) in Washington, D.C.*

*Illustrations by Lynne Doynow  
Telephone (212) 873-3389*

**פראשית**

*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.*



200 AMSTERDAM AVENUE  
NEW YORK, N. Y. 10023

Non-Profit Org.  
U.S. POSTAGE  
**PAID**  
New York, N.Y.  
Permit No. 3507

**DATED MATTER**

