

בראשית

Vol. VIII No. 1

BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

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WHAT I CAN TEACH MY CHILDREN

by Devorah Thau



When I first started becoming an observant Jew, I took as many classes as I could. I wanted to know everything. But the more I learned, the more I realized that there was a wealth of knowledge that I didn't have, and that I would never have, unless I could turn back the clock or quit my job and study full time in yeshiva. I finally concluded that I would have to settle for the night classes that could fit into my schedule.

After I married and had two boys, I wondered how, with my limited knowledge and Hebrew skills, I was going to "teach" them and help them with their homework. I wasn't the only one who wondered. People would ask me what I planned to do. I would shrug my shoulders and say, "We'll see."

As the years went by, I found my answer. While it's true that I will never be able to help my children read and translate Rashi, I can give them something that school can't — the love of Torah, and the love of being a Jew. With all this love to give, it doesn't matter how much or how little specific knowledge I can give them; my impact will, hopefully,

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ROSH HASHANAH 5755 "HAKOL HOLAYCH ACHAR HAROSH - EVERYTHING GOES AFTER THE BEGINNING"

by Daniel H. Olgin

What does Rosh Hashanah mean? Literally, it means "head of the year." It is the beginning of the year. The very first Rosh Hashanah was marked by the creation of Adam, 5754 years ago. That seems like such a long time ago. Why should modern, sophisticated Jews want to celebrate a holiday that is a mere commemoration of an event long past? In order to answer the question, and arrive at a deeper understanding of what Rosh Hashanah is and means, we must first talk about the concept of time in Judaism.

To the sensitive Jewish eye, our travel through the yearly cycle of the calendar and its Holy Days is a spiraling progression, like a vast corkscrew, ever moving upward

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THE PRESIDENT'S WIFE AT THE BEGINNERS SERVICE?

by Ellen Epstein

Last Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur I attended a Learner's Minyan for the first time in my life. No, this was not my first time in a synagogue. On the contrary, at age 46 I have probably attended at least 40 Rosh Hashanah/Yom Kippur services. But never have I had such an intellectually rewarding, spiritually uplifting, and emotionally fulfilling holiday period. I grew up in a reform synagogue, and for me, the holidays meant being together with family and worrying about buying new clothes. My only memories of going to Temple are of people telling one another how nice each looked, hardly an intellectual, spiritual, or emotional experience. Something was lacking, only I had no idea of what it was, or how to go about finding it.

Twenty-two years ago I married my husband, who only half-jokes that when I told my parents about him

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"... AFTER THE BEGINNING" (cont. from p.1)
 and onward. As we travel through the cycle of days, we re-visit places in time where we have been before. Once again it is Pesach, then Shavuot, followed by Tisha B'Av, leading us back to Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Sukkot. But each time we pass by one of these places, our experience is different from the previous time. Because of the spiral shape of time, no two moments are ever identical, and the way we relate to each moment in time requires a specific effort to connect with the spiritual energy that charges that specific moment.

At each one of the different Yomim Tovim (Jewish holidays) there exists a specific type of energy that is directly related to whichever holiday we are experiencing. I use the term "experiencing" because that is what we are supposed to be doing. By becoming sensitive to the unique spiritual energies present at each holiday, and by observing the holiday according to its prescribed rituals and laws, we can utilize that energy to accomplish the tremendous spiritual growth and development made possible at that place in time.

So when we celebrate the anniversary of a past event, such as the Exodus from Egypt, or the creation of humanity, we might perceive those specific events as the reason such moments are special. This is not the case at all. The time is special because inherent in that specific place in time is the energy that made the event possible. So when we come to these specific places in time, it is our responsibility to not merely sentimentally commemorate the anniversary of an important event, but instead to use it for spiritual growth. This is the answer to our question. Now we can return to Rosh Hashanah.



In Judaism, we say "Hakol holaych achar harosh" — everything goes after the beginning. This is because it is at the beginning of any process that the intent, motivation and preparation we invest in our endeavor set the foundation for everything that follows. As we cycle through time to Rosh Hashanah, we are reminded of the source of the special spiritual energy of the day: that climactic, final component of the six Days of Creation, the Creation of Adam and Eve — humanity. Thus, when we truly put forth the effort to try to make a change in our lives for the better, to elevate our personalities, we

identify with the energy of the day, that of the creation of the human, and we are affected by it to the extent that we can re-create ourselves for the better.

It is not enough for us to be aware of these energies inherent in the Holy Days. We must know HOW to identify with them if they are to have any real meaning and impact upon us. With each Yom Tov, the way of relating to its energy is by participating in an action that connects us to the root of the day. On Pesach, we celebrate our freedom and we have a Seder that consists of rituals that remind us of the elements of the day. We can taste the bitter herbs and relate to the bitterness of slavery; we can drink the wine and experience the feeling of freedom.

"CHESHBON HANEFESH" TAKING INVENTORY OF OUR SOULS



On Rosh Hashanah, we are involved in "Cheshbon Hanefesh" — taking inventory of our souls. By looking deep within ourselves in an honest and sincere fashion, we can see what we have been during the past year, what we are at that moment, and what we wish to become. We stand on the threshold of a new year. We have not yet fallen into the constraints and circumstances of everyday life. We are free of all that. There is a feeling of freshness, of unlimited opportunity for growth, if only we take the proper steps towards it at the beginning of the process.

There is an element of the Rosh Hashanah service that helps us in this endeavor, the blowing of the Shofar. The piercing, unarticulated cry of the Shofar is a primal sound. It is the cry of the Jewish soul, longing to unleash its potential. By listening intently to the Shofar, we can focus on the energy of the day and use it to reach our potential as human beings and as Jews.

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THE PRESIDENT'S WIFE . . . (cont. from p. 1)

I said that I had "some good news and some bad news." The good news was that he was Jewish, but the bad news was that he was very Jewish! Together we joined an Orthodox shul which he had begun attending nine years before we met.

Frankly, for many years this Orthodox synagogue on the High Holidays was, for me, not very rewarding. By attending weekly Shabbat services, reading, studying, re-learning Hebrew, and adopting a more traditional Jewish lifestyle, I had picked up quite a bit about the weekly service. Over the years much began to fall into place, and I began to feel more at home. But on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur it was different.

These holidays came only once a year. The prayer book was entirely different... the pages were rarely announced... there was a great deal of flipping back and forth... there seemed to be more mumbling than usual. One could easily lose one's place and not be able to find it for long periods of time.

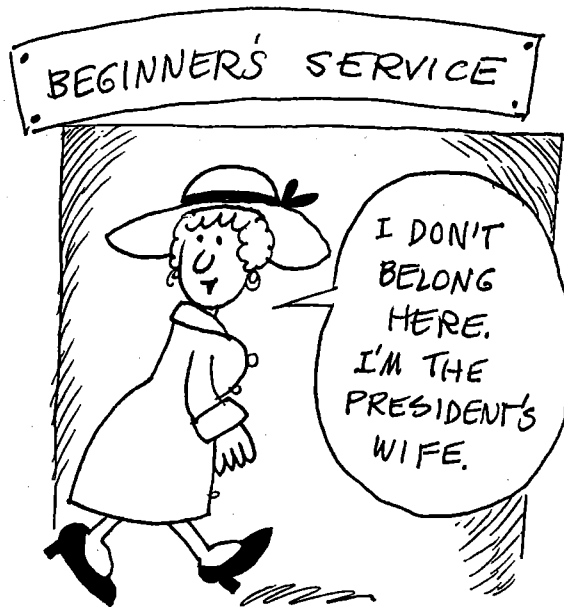
On top of all this, managing our five children on these holidays became a logistical nightmare. Our tiny shul would run two services which left me with nowhere to take the children except out on the street—rain or shine. In those days, we and two other families were the only ones with small children. I spent more holidays than I wish to recall, outside, by myself, feeling miserable. One year I remember staying home for Yom Kippur thinking I would feel more spiritually and emotionally connected if I read all day on my own. It didn't work.

On those years that I did spend time in shul, the rabbi would tell us to express our feelings of "teshuvah," yet I felt nothing. He'd tell us to have the right mind-set during the "*Unesaneh Tokef*" (the stirring poem of accountability) but I had no idea what he meant. He'd say that the shofar blowing should penetrate your soul, but I never felt anything of the sort. All of these comments only made me feel worse, since I was not experiencing what I was told one should experience, and I didn't know how to go about getting these feelings — until this year.

This year I used our oldest son's girlfriend as an excuse to attend the Learner's Minyan. She had grown up in a conservative synagogue, and last Rosh Hashanah in our shul she felt nearly as lost in the prayerbook as I. I decided to go to the Learner's Minyan "to help her." After all, how could I, the wife of the president of the shul, not show up at the main service? Now I had an "excuse." I am told that the Talmud says that it is okay to do the right thing for the wrong reason, so the two of us went together to the Learner's Minyan.

For the first time in my life I gained an understanding of the structure of the prayer book. I finally understood prayers that had for many years seemed like only meaningless words. I read the

"*Zachrenu L'Chaim*" (remember us to life) with new eyes. The words "*Ashamnu*" (we have sinned) and "*Vidduy*" (confessional), now meant something. An explanation was given as to why this year, on Yom Kippur which fell on Shabbat, we did not say the "*Avinu Malketnu*" (our Father, our King), except in the closing moments of the Ne'ilah service. We had a series of different leaders who had completely different styles of teaching, but each of them was warm, friendly, open, and non-judgmental. Everyone was made to feel comfortable with his/her questions, no matter how simple or complicated.



The levels of the learners varied greatly, but it was not easily discernible as to who knew what. Some who were called to the Torah didn't know their fathers' or even their own Hebrew names. One asked what the "*Kriat*" in "*Kriat Shema*" meant. No questions were off limits; no one snickered or rolled their eyes at any of the comments or queries. When I thanked one of the leaders after the Rosh Hashanah service and commented that I was embarrassed to tell her how much I had learned, she (who was the product of an Orthodox day school) replied, "I am embarrassed to tell you how much I learned in preparing for this class." With this one brief comment she made me feel wonderful.

I believe this is what many Jews need. Yes, even Orthodox Jews can benefit from a Learner's Minyan. Some may be "Baalei Teshuvah"; some may not have had the benefit of a day school education or any meaningful Jewish education; some may have only learned the prayers by rote over the years and now have a chance to reach a deeper level of knowledge. Some may know nothing at all about their heritage; some may be potential "new Jews." Whatever your reason, I strongly encourage you to try it. You won't know what you're missing until you do!

Ellen Epstein is an oral historian and the co-author of "Record and Remember" and "The Bar/Bat Mitzvah Plan Book." She attends High Holiday Beginners Services at Kesher Israel Synagogue in Washington, DC.

WHAT I CAN TEACH MY CHILDREN (cont. from p.1)
 be indelible. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik z"l said that he learned the laws of Shabbat from his father, but the beauty of Shabbat from his mother. Similarly, the Chofetz Chaim z"l, claimed to have learned the laws of prayer from the Code of Jewish Law, but how to pray from his mother.

My oldest son, Yori, who is almost four years old, loves the holidays. He looks forward with great anticipation, as we prepare for each holiday by reading about the holiday, learning its special songs, and baking traditional, and not so traditional, cakes.

Each Shabbat, Yori insists on having his own kiddush cup and saying the Kiddush along with his father. Yori also has his own rolls and challa cover, in order to make his own Hamotzi. His hero isn't Barney, but

Lenny Solomon of Shlock Rock, who sings songs such as *Yo Yo Yo Yarmulke*. One Friday night when Kabbalat Shabbat was late and Yori hadn't napped, I wouldn't let him go to Shul. Through his tears he said, "But Imma, I have to daven in a minyan at Shul, I can't daven at home!" And, even though he's not yet four years old, when we go someplace, Yori isn't afraid to ask "Is this kosher?"

So I can't sit with him and help him learn the translation of a *posuk* (verse from the Torah). But I can give him what my Rabbis gave me; the love of Torah, the love of mitzvot, and especially, the love of Hashem.

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Illustrations by Stu Hample

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 the programs of NJOP, please write or call: 485 Fifth Avenue, Suite 701, New York, NY 10017, (212) 986-7450.*

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