

# בראשית

Vol. IX No. 1

BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

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"It's my birthday  
HAPPY NEW YEAR!"



## THE REAL ROSH HASHANA & YOM KIPPUR

by Rabbi Moshe Shulman

As we approach the High Holidays, it is important to remember one of the primary distinctions between the holidays of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur and every other holiday in the Hebrew calendar. Every other holiday reflects some historical event associated with it. Pesach is associated with the Exodus from Egypt, Shavout with the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai, and Succot with the Divine Providence watching over our people throughout our journey in the wilderness of Sinai. Yet, Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur have no such historical context. Rosh Hashana is called Yom Hadin, the Day of Judgement for us and the entire world, and *Yom Kippur* is the "Day of Atonement". They seem to be completely void of any historical significance.

Our Sages explain that there is, in fact, an historical context to these holidays as well. According to one opinion in the Talmud, Rosh Hashana is the birthday of **Adam Harishon**, First Man. The hint to this is in one of the Rosh Hashana prayers: "**Hayom Harat Olam...**" "Today is the birthday of the world..." And careful calculations of the chronology of the events in the desert after the Exodus will indicate that Yom Kippur is the day on which Moses descended from Mt. Sinai with the second set of Tablets after the Jewish people were forgiven for the sin of the golden calf.

(cont. p. 3)

## THE HOLINESS OF EVERYWHERE: A D'VAR TORAH FROM SCRATCH

by Jonathan Raffes

In the beginning, a legal pad and a television vied for my attention. On one, a D'var Torah needed to appear within thirty-six hours. That was when Rabbi Buchwald was going to introduce me to the Beginner's Service, and that was when I would presumably have something to say. On the other, the MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour featured a live interview with a man who embodied every boy's wildest adventure fantasy. Dr. Kent Weeks, an American archaeologist, had just discovered an Egyptian tomb the likes of which no one had seen since Tutankhamen's. A chateau of funerary architecture, it had sixty-five rooms and was fit for a king—and not just any king. This tomb held the pharaoh whom Moses confronted before the exodus. This tomb belonged to Ramses II. The D'var Torah could wait.

Proud but demure, Dr. Weeks recounted his effort. He layered fact upon scholarly fact, offering precious little of his state of mind after seven years' hard labor and one great moment of discovery.

MacNeil allowed this, until, credibility established, he

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## THE FIRST STEP

by Stacey Abrahams

When I met my husband through a mutual friend three years ago, changing my spiritual lifestyle was the last thing I had on my mind. After all, I grew up in a home where my family celebrated only certain Jewish holidays and observed Judaism only in its most basic form. Our family was unaffiliated with a synagogue and rarely went to shul. Nevertheless, my parents instilled in me a strong sense of pride and belonging as a Jew.

As a child, I had one brief encounter with a real Jewish education - I attended a Jewish day school for the sixth grade. Even though I was only 11 years old, my experience there was both moving and meaningful. That year was very special to me. It opened up a whole new world that I had never before known - a world of festivity, warmth, tradition, history, and new friends. For the first time I could remember, I attended High Holy Day services, and enjoyed them wholeheartedly.

Unfortunately, after a year, my parents decided to enroll me in a secular private school. At the time, I could not understand why, but apparently, my parents felt that as long as their lifestyle. If they did not reinforce at home what I was learning in school I would become very confused. And they had no plans to change.

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## THE HOLINESS OF EVERYWHERE..

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saw an opening. He leaned forward, suppressed a smile and asked the question I was waiting for.

What was it like to dig up something like this?" he said. "Were you surprised? Did you run amok in the halls, or was it a more serious moment? What were your emotions?" Now I was on the edge of my seat.

The professor let out a huff, as if to suggest how futile it was to try to put these things to words. But he was on TV and on the spot. "Well," he said, "I was struck with joy. The whole team was. We knew we had the find of a lifetime. We were jubilant, even if there wasn't any room to run around. But then," he said, "then we were overcome with a sense of awesome responsibility over all the work that would go into excavating, cataloging and interpreting the material."

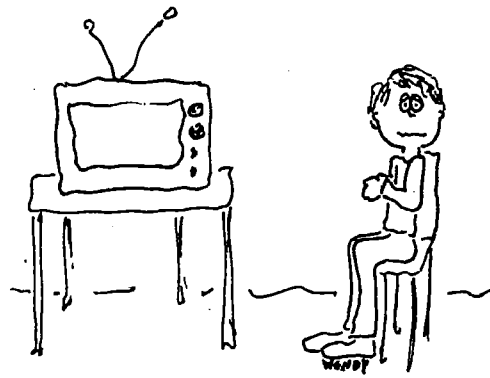
Joy followed by a sense of awesome responsibility. The words galvanized me. They suggested an adult's reaction to a boy's dream, a seamless integration of wonder and obligation. More than that, they captured feelings that had come over me recently in synagogue and by complete surprise. While at the Beginner's Service I found myself drawn into the Jewish community, swept up by Rabbi Buchwald's enthusiasm, erudition and generous affection. Like Dr. Weeks, I felt an emphatic joy in uncovering something so close at hand but so long out of reach; I felt the press of work ahead of me should I decide to embrace an orthodox lifestyle. And yet, there's a big difference between a tomb's riches and those rediscovered in Judaism.

It's no less than the difference between life and death. Although Dr. Weeks, a career archaeologist, considers his discovery part of a vital, personal mission, is this true for the rest of us? Doesn't our fascination with ancient Egypt hinge on its obsolescence as well as its grandeur, the fact that something as great as a culture (one hesitates to call it a civilization) has been unearthed after three thousand years? Its origin is so distant that its artifacts appear otherworldly, a fact Hollywood exploits whenever it needs an interstellar ambience, as in last year's *Stargate*. The distance is temporal, not spatial, but the effect is the same, a shock of *discontinuity*.

Quite a contrast to the sensation of reading the Torah and finding stories and ethics that guide the way we live *now*. Call it a shock of continuity; the expression established itself after I read the last passage of the parsha (B'har) and found a prohibition against idols and images of God. This is the stuff of Ramses' tomb, covered by sand, sealed off from life, relics of a lost tradition. Judaism, of course, has no such artifacts. It continues to thrive. The Jewish people form a continuous spiritual chain that predates this very tomb.

All right then, here was the subject of the D'var Torah: What accounts for our spiritual continuity and vitality, when discontinuity and death pervade history? Why had Jews flourished when others failed? A popular question, it's inspired many answers. The parsha itself, however, seemed to offer some clues. I turned the TV off and picked up the material Rabbi Buchwald sent in the mail.

Enduring truths are often practical truths forged in the crucible of everyday life—and that is B'har's domain. Appearing toward the end of a great book of sacred law, B'har takes holiness beyond the synagogue's walls into daily affairs. While other nations and other religions find G-d in their rulers or ritual objects, B'har finds Him in holiness, and holiness in human relationships. It is about the sanctity of ethical behavior.



"I Get my ideas for a D'var Torah from the most unusual sources!"

What a difference from ancient Egypt's ethics! Where Pharaoh ruled with divine entitlement and appalling cruelty, B'har launches an ethical challenge to totalitarianism and brutal enslavement. It is a cry for social righteousness and civic responsibility. It advocates practical love of one's neighbor and compassionate treatment of servants, who are freed every fifty years at the Jubilee. At that point, agricultural land is also "emancipated" and returned to the Jewish families who occupied it after the first conquest. Inhumane behavior is prohibited, the land's exploitation discouraged, for it is G-d's land. Master and servant are equal tenants.

Democratic? B'har's words are inscribed on the Liberty Bell. Contemporary in spirit?—even more so. But does this explain our continuity? It does insofar as it suggests the deeper reciprocity underlying this parsha, a sense of pervasive holiness that effects a radical change in Jewish community. Once secular, now sacred, community itself expresses G-d's infinite love. Hashem is not a place or a thing. He is a "You" and an "I", and the sacred bond between us, as Martin Buber observed. Compare a tomb's treasures to the diamond-hard core of humanity at the soul of this parsha. One can be kept. The other keeps *us* and endows everyday life with the sanctity of the holiest ceremony.

That changes things. It changes our aspirations and even our concept of time. Although B'har is known for extending "sabbatical time" to longer cycles of sacred holidays, I think it actually condenses it. It enhances holy time by focussing on the period *between* one Shabbat and the next—for isn't one a Jew at those times too? Is life at mid-week six-seventh's devoid of Sabbath principles, as Walter Kaufmann asked? Is it forty-nine-fiftieth's lacking the spirit of the Jubilee in an off-year? With an eye on community, an observant Jew lives in an eternal present, a steady-state of holiness suggested by Hillel's question, "if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?" It is just such little, local gestures of respect that can get pushed aside between the "now" and the "then" (not to mention the summer months). And I can think of two stories that dramatize the consequences.

Washington Irving wrote about a man who slept through the here and now. Rip Van Winkle fell asleep with a picture of King George on the wall and woke up, twenty years later, to find George Washington's. It seems like a child's story until one realizes this poor man slept through a revolution. In only twenty years, and without his effort, a country changed hands and became a democracy. After that, he wandered aimlessly, a broken man.

Rabbi Rosenbaum, Program Director at NJOP, directed me to a beautiful Talmudic story with a similar theme. Choni, a rabbi, appears in the Tractate Taanis. He encounters a stranger planting a carob tree—very slow to flower—and asks why this is being done if the man will not be alive to see its fruit. The man answers, that he is preparing for the next generation, just as others prepared for him. With only a dim understanding of this message, Choni falls asleep for seventy years and, hidden from view, is presumed dead. He wakes to find the stranger's grandson picking the tree's fruit, and realizes he has slept for two generations. He is learning to ensure continuity through practical as well as ritual means.

Disoriented, Choni gravitates to the synagogue and finds the town's rabbis at work. They have heard of Choni. His commentary still clarifies Talmudic passages. They just don't believe this wandering soul is in fact the same man! And despite the lasting impact of his work, Choni prays for death. Lost in time, he finds

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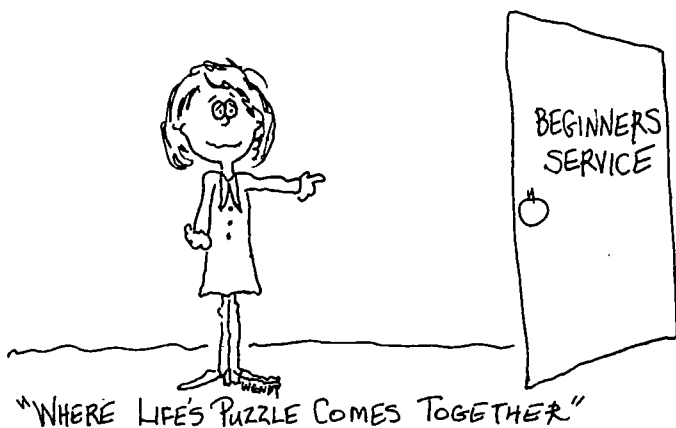
## THE FIRST STEP, (cont. from p. 1)

After this experience, my life continued on as it had before, and soon I put my spiritual feelings back in a place where they would lie dormant for years to come. The only reminder I had, was an awakening I had each year when Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur would arrive. At that time, as I watched our neighbors walk to shul, I would feel an unfulfilled longing to pray, celebrate, and be a part of a holiday so important and special to so many Jewish people.

When I met my husband, a Yeshiva educated and observant Jewish young man, my feelings toward Judaism were reawakened. Together, we planned to share a traditional Jewish home - a home in which our faith in G-d would always be felt. Having made this decision, we agreed that I would need to become reacquainted with Judaism, and I certainly had a long way to go.

Since I had heard rave reviews from a friend about NJOP's Beginners Programs, I decided to give one a try. At the time, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur - the High Holy Days which had impressed me so greatly many years earlier - were just around the corner.

On Rosh Hashanah, I walked toward the gym-turned-shul at Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun, feeling nervous and lacking confidence. My Hebrew was very rusty. I would never know what page we were on, how would I keep up? No one could possibly know less than I did - all these thoughts ran wildly through my mind. I might as well have gone home.



Somehow I fought these negative thoughts and managed to muster up enough courage to follow through. When I finally opened the door to the shul, I saw hundreds of friendly faces - people with little or no Jewish background just like myself, hungry to learn, to take part in a tradition thousands of years old, to belong to this larger-than-life Jewish experience. I felt relieved, and sat down, ready to embark on an exciting, new adventure.

I was very impressed by the leader of the services (George Rohr) who not only spoke eloquently, but also displayed a heartfelt sensitivity toward the eager congregants. I felt encouraged to see regular participants sharing their newly found spirituality as they took on active roles in these High Holy Day services. This Beginners Program offered something for everyone: I truly appreciated the explanation of prayers in English, while others could pray in Hebrew, if they chose.

By the end of the second day, my understanding of the Jewish New Year had undergone a complete transformation. I no longer had to watch others walk to shul, nor did I feel that sense of emptiness. I would never again have to look in, from the outside. I had become part of this universally Jewish holiday, and I felt prouder to be Jewish than ever before.

I was apprehensive that the upcoming Yom Kippur might be unpleasant, as it is for many Jewish people because of the fast. But

for me it would be yet another enlightening experience, linking me, once again, to thousands of years of Torah, Jewish tradition, history, and spirituality. What could be more important than that? For the first time in years, I could repent, ask for atonement - and with the help of NJOP Beginners Services and teachers, understand the reasons behind my actions.

Pieces of the puzzle were slowly coming together. And my attendance at both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services inspired me to come back for more.

NJOP reignited my interest in Judaism. Although I am still on this exciting journey and have so much more work to do, I look forward to what lies ahead. All I had to do was take the first step.

*Stacey Abrahams is a full time mom and a free lance writer. She attends the Beginners Service at Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun in New York.*

**THE REAL ROSH HASHANA** (cont.. from p.1) Yet neither of these two "events" are explicitly written about in the Torah, nor are they given any more than a passing mention in the liturgy of the day.

My grandfather, of blessed memory, *Harav* Yechiel Michel Kossowsky of Johannesburg, once suggested that the reason the Torah intentionally de-emphasizes the historical background to these days is because, more than any other holiday, Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur receive their significance, their sanctity, their very quality not by what happened on them, but rather by what we do on them, by our own actions. To the extent that we imbue them with prayer, introspection, proper repentance, and a commitment to G-d and to Judaism - to that extent they become special days, Holy days. It is our own service to G-d which stands at the center of our attention, and G-d's attention, on this day!

A great Rabbi of the previous generation, known as the Chafetz Chaim (Rav Yisrael Meir Hacoheh of Radin) once said that "On Yom Kippur, it is not he who pounds his heart who is forgiven, but rather the one whose heart pounds him!" It is our commitment to Torah ideals and the Torah way of life that is the central focus of these days. And it is up to us to ensure that in some way this coming year is a stronger one Jewishly than the previous one.

If we can stand in the synagogue on Yom Kippur and know honestly that we have made efforts to become just a bit more committed to Jewish learning and Jewish living this year than the previous year, then we will have fulfilled the purpose of these days. And we must continue that growth process. We must continue to commit ourselves to becoming stronger and more deeply committed Jews. Next year must see an even further growth in Torah and Mitzvoh. That is our responsibility this year during the High Holidays.

In all our communities, there are many opportunities available for each us to learn and grow in our Judaism. There are Beginners Services throughout the country, courses on Judaism, on Hebrew reading, on Jewish law. We can no longer offer the excuse that we do not know how to live Jewishly, because the opportunities are there to learn. Each of us should make a commitment this year to attend at least one class more than last year. Let us decide to add one more Mitzvah to our list this year. In such a way, we can give the holidays of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur their true meaning.

May we all be inscribed in the book of life for a good and healthy year. May the Almighty look down upon the Jews and smile with pride (metaphorically speaking of course) when He sees all who are eagerly seeking to learn more about their Judaism. And may this be a year of peace for us all and for all of Israel.

Shana Tova!

*Rabbi Moshe Shulman is rabbi of Congregation House of Jacob-Mikveh Israel in Calgary, Canada, where he founded and continues to lead the Beginners Service*

**THE HOLINESS OF EVERYWHERE** (cont. from p 2) life unbearable without *chavrusa*—es teem, support and brotherhood.

The story is a poignant reminder of discontinuity's dire consequences. A community nurtures us even as it is nurtured, and a break in the psychological oxygen it provides can be deadly. Piety and hard work are not enough. Now holiness means an investment in others by whom one is changed in return. This is much the same way the Beginner's Service changed me. And it is also a source of Judaism's vitality. For a holy community, given time, becomes a holy nation, whose aspirations extend across generations and over millennia.

How did Judaism survive? Here is the beginning of an answer: through a never-ending search for holiness, and its locus in relationships. Community is the future and the future is now. Choni's farmer seemed to know that, and his little carob tree holds

an additional message about the Jubilee and our continuity. Both involve more than the good earth's repossession every fifty years. They also require its cultivation. Ownership is not enough. What one *does* with the land is what matters. To draw a comparison: I have my Judaism; you have yours. Now, what will we do with it?

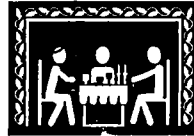
Follow the news, for one thing, but with the knowledge and benefit of a *living* tradition, more joyous and involving a responsibility more awesome than an archaeologist's. Where he sifts essentials from the desert sand, we search our hearts, more complex by far, for holiness, compassion, and the strength to send this message to the next generation and to hundreds beyond.

*Jonathan Raffes is a Clinical Psychologist at The Albert Einstein College of Medicine, and attends the Lincoln Square Synagogue Beginners Service.*

**SUKKAH**  
by Marjorie Ordene, MD

Plastic food platters  
Erupt through open window:  
Chicken, kasha, and kugel.

"You hold the bone,  
And I'll pull,"  
Entreats a red-hatted matron,  
Shoring baby in lap.



Well-fed men with thicket beards  
Fervent Hebrew whirling round the room

Weedy grass underfoot  
Azure sky pokes leafy roof.  
Rainbow-clad kinder gallop through  
Chasing dessert.

*Marjorie Ordene is a holistic physician in Brooklyn. She is a graduate of the Beginners Service at Lincoln Square Synagogue.*

Illustrations by Wendy Klein Dunn



**בראשית** Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Beryl Levenson and Amy Gugig 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 701, New York, NY 10017, (212) 986-7450.

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