

# בראשית

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BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

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## INTENSIFYING OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH G-D

by Rabbi Steven Prebor

And so it arrives. *Rosh Hashana*. The Day of Judgement. The day on which we pray to G-d for a good and sweet year. Everything about the day, from the *shofar* blowing to the apple in the honey, serves as a reminder that on this day we stand before the heavenly court. The *Machzor*, the High Holiday prayer book, is replete with references to G-d as our King and our Judge. To that end, the Torah reading on the first day of *Rosh Hashana* discusses the birth of our forefather Isaac, and how through his birth, Sarah, who had been barren for so many years, was remembered by G-d. Abraham and Sarah were thus recipients of G-d's beneficence, and the birth of their son Isaac presents a very positive image of divine justice. This image is consistent with many of the rituals of the day, especially the use of honey at the meal, which implies a confidence that we will indeed receive a positive judgement from the "heavenly court."

The Torah reading on the second day, however, which relates the story of the "binding of Isaac," seems much less reassuring. Abraham is told by G-d to sacrifice his son, which is hardly an example of the rosy image presented thus far. G-d ultimately stays Abraham's hand so that

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## RULES, RULES, RULES.... BLESSINGS OR BANE?

by Lloyd Lampell

I am told that many of the commentators consider the parshiot Acharei Mot and Kedoshim (Leviticus 16 through 20) the core -- the key concepts -- of the Torah. At first glance, I found that hard to believe. All the detailed instructions for the High Priest to follow before entering the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur! The detailed laws about sex and holiness and justice! Are rules the core of the Torah? These read like the instruction books that came with my computer!

And then I realized that is exactly what it is -- a book of instructions on wisdom and discipline.

We live in an era where we want to be totally free to do whatever we want, think whatever we want, and say whatever we want. We want to be free from commitments so that we can change our minds in a moment if something becomes too difficult, too dull,

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## AN ANCIENT HERITAGE

by Diane Schulder Abrams

The ram's horn sounded, calling us to dinner. It was August 1971. We were in Mendicino, California, in the mountains north of San Francisco where the hills come down to meet the Pacific Ocean, one of the truly beautiful places on this earth. I was driven to come to this farming commune in the hope of finding a sense of purpose, a mission, a sense of who I was.

That summer the end of the Vietnam War was in sight, and so were the "Sixties" as we knew them. The years of marches, legal battles, demonstrations, letter writing, and political activism were behind us.

For the last five years I had been actively involved, giving legal counsel to young men who felt that their consciences would not allow them to fight in what they considered to be an illegal war. I helped in the trial of Dr. Benjamin Spock on charges of conspiracy, for giving a speech in which he urged young men to burn their draft

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**AN ANCIENT HERITAGE (cont. from p. 1).** cards. I helped in the defense of Rev. Daniel Berrigan and Rev. Philip Berrigan, two Catholic priests who also took actions to show their opposition to the war. I met with many young men like the court-martialled marine who told me, "While in Vietnam I took aim at what I thought was a "Vietcong" soldier hiding in a tree. When I shot at that figure, out fell a 16 year old girl, dead. I threw down my rifle and refused to pick it up again."

It is hard to describe the political intensity and fervor of those days. Americans on both sides passionately debated the national issues. My mother often said to me, during this period, "If only you'd use some of that energy that you put into your other projects to find a husband, I'm sure that you could do very well." Why couldn't they understand that there was no time or energy to focus on such trivial matters? We thought, then, that we had a fix on the truth, that we could change the world, that we could make it a better, more honest, more just, more fair place. We were young, and idealistic, and a bit naive.

However, by the summer of 1971, there was an empty place in my heart, an anxiety I couldn't explain. The community that had seemed so solid was splintering into thousands of pieces.

A friend, Ginny, and I were determined to make a trip, almost a pilgrimage, to a West Coast farming commune we had heard of. It was one of a number of communes that had sprouted in the area during the Sixties. This one was touted as one of the most avant-garde spiritual outposts of the time. I had seen photographs showing one of the fathers assisting in the birth of his child while commune members gathered round, chanting, to provide support as he cut the umbilical chord. Some lived in tepees and were said to smoke peyote at the solstices in an effort to reach the spiritual heights and connectedness to the land of the Native Americans who had done so before them. They had reputedly decided to live simply, without the hypocrisy and materialism of the "bourgeois" society.

Curious to see this communal way of life, Ginny and I arrived one day at about 4 p.m. to stay for dinner. We were impressed by the tepees and hexagonal igloo-type structures as we drove through the grounds. We saw young people working the earth. At the dinner area, we were delighted to find freshly baked bread ready and waiting for dinner. Soon, it was time for the communal farmers to be called for the evening meal and one of the members of the commune, ceremonially, took out a ram's horn and blew on it to call the rest to dinner.

That was the first jolt to my memory. The ram's horn reminded me of something. It was the instrument used on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, to call people to return to G-d. The next surprise came as, gathered for dinner, commune members and guests linked hands and chanted OM... for a minute. Once again, I was reminded of a

tradition I'd grown up with -- the Hebrew prayer over the bread before eating. These avant-garde people had developed a clear-cut set of rituals for themselves.

If ever I experienced a moment of "epiphany", it was upon leaving the commune that night -- and it was not at all the reaction I had expected. Even today, almost twenty years later, I remember so clearly my thoughts: "Even human society needs rituals, needs prayers, needs festivals, songs, dances, special foods. If these people can smoke peyote at the solstices, then I can celebrate the ancient Jewish harvest festivals of Succoth and Shavuoth, which occur near the Autumn equinox and Summer solstice and seem more in keeping with who I am. "Also," I continued to myself, "I don't need a Guru from India with a long white beard. Each of my four great grandfathers had a beard as white and long as any Indian Guru. They are my ancestors and people for whom I have the greatest respect. If I am to follow any rituals, why should I follow someone else's?" "Besides," I continued, "despite my earlier claustrophobia in the stifling suburbs of the 50's, in the heyday of McCarthyism, conformity, Babbitism, and grey suitism, the American suburb is not my true heritage. My roots are in the Jewish shtetl."

At the end of August, still enveloped by a strange feeling of emptiness, I returned to New York determined to find out more about my roots, not sure exactly how to begin.

I located photographs of my four great-grandfathers, each with a long white beard and distinguished bearing. They soon hung on the wall of my new apartment on East 9th Street on the outskirts of Greenwich Village. It was there that I set up my own kosher kitchen, like the one I had grown up with.

It was then that I took out of storage the two graceful, handmade silver candlesticks that my grandmother had left me upon her death ten years earlier. I lit them for the first time, on a Friday night, at precisely the proper time. A great peacefulness descended upon me and my new home.

Despite multiple pulls, I have never wavered since that first *Shabbat* candle lighting. On the contrary, I have only grown stronger in my study and observance since that day.

As the sun begins to set on Friday evenings, I light my *Shabbat* candles with my daughters, now 19 and 9, standing beside me. Throughout the apartment is the scent of freshly baked *challah* and other special foods prepared for the evening meal. Each daughter lights one candle, as she has since she was 3 years old. Together, we bless and greet the *Shabbat*. In over 20 years, my husband, Bob, has never missed being with the family and our many guests, no matter how hectic the political campaigns were, or how pressured the law practice is now.

Almost a quarter century ago, I came home to find my roots. The *Shabbat* that I reclaimed became the centering force of my existence and the anchor of our family. We

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IT'S A SOUND THAT PENETRATES THE HEART

**INTENSIFYING OUR RELATIONSHIP... (cont. from p. 1)**

Isaac is not actually sacrificed, but the story is still troubling. Is it a display of G-d's mercy and beneficence when He threatens you with the loss of a loved one and then decides to let the person live? Wouldn't it be better if the threat were never made? And if, on the other hand, this portion of the Torah was chosen for Rosh Hashana in order to show that divine justice includes punishment and not only reward, a more appropriate choice could have been made. The story of Adam and Eve and the "tree of knowledge" presents a much more direct picture of divine punishment. In short, the "binding of Isaac" seems to be inappropriate for a High Holiday Torah reading. Neither the rewards nor the punishments emanating from G-d are dealt with in a clear fashion.

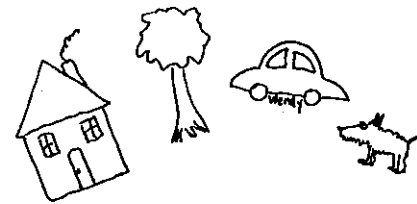
Upon further analysis, however, the "binding of Isaac" emerges as a very crucial example of the type of relationship with G-d that a Jew must try to create. Abraham and Sarah had been previously promised that they would have a son who would father a great nation. This promise was given when Abraham and Sarah were beyond the age that people normally procreate. Miraculously, however, Sarah conceived, and gave birth to Isaac. Abraham and Sarah were overjoyed. G-d had kept his promise, and indeed a great nation, the Jewish nation, was born with the birth of Isaac. But then one day, Abraham hears another statement from heaven, which completely contradicts G-d's original promise. Abraham must slaughter Isaac and sacrifice him to G-d. Imagine Abraham's state. Shocked. Distraught. Perhaps angry. The hope of so many years, starting to come to fruition, would now be dashed. How could this be? G-d makes a promise. For years, due to fertility problems, it seems like it can never be. Then the gift is delivered. And now it will be taken away?

Perhaps Abraham felt all of this. But we do not see him express it in the Torah. The next morning, he gets up, and calmly and unquestioningly prepares to sacrifice his son. Why does he not protest? Because his trust in G-d does not allow him to. This trust has been built through so many prior trials and tribulations, where it seemed like the end was near, but G-d came through while Abraham exhibited unswerving faith. Finally, in this, the greatest of all of Abraham's tests, Abraham knew that there was an answer. G-d had made him a promise, and it would be kept. Abraham didn't know how, but he trusted G-d enough to know that it must be so.

This is why we read about the "binding of Isaac" on *Rosh Hashana*. During the High Holidays, while we focus on the concept of divine justice, this story from the book of Genesis shifts our focus from pure reward and punishment to something much more complex but much more enriching. It teaches us about trusting G-d, and about retaining and even strengthening that trust in an atmosphere of adversity. It teaches us that our relationship with G-d must be a real and active one. We may not be able to hear messages as our forefathers did, but we can look around us and find signs of G-d's involvement in our lives. If we find these signs, we will hopefully be inspired to intensify our role in the relationship.

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"OOPS! I FORGOT TO TURN ON THE LAW OF GRAVITY TODAY. SORRY!"



**RULES RULES RULES... (cont. from p. 1)** or too inconvenient. We want to be able to change our jobs, our homes, and our mates as easily as we change the style of our clothing. We want to live a "no boundaries" life.

In reality, life is filled with boundaries, but these boundaries do not limit us; rather they liberate us by making life more predictable, hence easier. For example, when a power failure caused the traffic lights to go dark, traffic slowed while we were forced to determine who had the right-of-way. Should I wait for her to go? Was she waiting for me? What if we both proceed at the same time? When we use our computer we need to know the form and sequence of instructions that the computer requires, otherwise "garbage in -- garbage out." We want some unambiguous rights and wrongs so that one plus one equals two, without having to put it to a vote and without having some savant tell us that there are alternative number systems that can be used under special conditions in which one plus one equals ten. We want to know that all the players in the poker game are playing by the same rules.

While Hashem has the ability to live without boundaries, He has chosen to play by the rules. No "Oops! I forgot to turn on the law of gravity today. Sorry!" Absolute power requires absolute control, otherwise there is absolute chaos and absolute corruption. And if Hashem follows rules, what about humankind?

Details count. Errors have consequences. Important actions require planning, preparation, and practice to insure that they are done correctly. A surgical team plans carefully and rehearses before a difficult procedure. Football teams spend each week preparing for the weekend's "game." The High Priest, with responsibility for the well-being of the Jewish people, planned, prepared, and practiced for his single yearly opportunity to appear before Hashem.

To insure that His people know that there are boundaries, Hashem details some of them in areas most important to us -- sex, holiness, justice. He requires us to pay attention to our actions, and not to behave absent-mindedly on automatic pilot. He expects us to work at being alive, rather than treat life as an extended vacation.

The problem is that this takes a lot of work. A LOT of work. Ten commandments. Six hundred and thirteen mitzvot. How can I ever hope to observe them all? If I can't observe them all, all the time, wouldn't it be easier to just ignore them? If you know that you are going to fail, why bother to even try?

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**AN ANCIENT HERITAGE....** (cont. from p. 2) rejoice together. We sing, pray, share meals, talk, laugh. In doing so, we sanctify the day. The *Shabbat* that binds my husband, my two daughters, and myself with each other, also connects us to history, tradition, and the larger community. And, is that not precisely the power of ritual? To completely envelop you, engage your emotions and yet connect you to something much larger than yourself? Traveling out west as a young person, I began to realize that everyone needs some form of community and some kind of ritual. In a flash, I realized, also, that I was heir to rituals; I had my own, in my family and through my ancestors.

Now, as I participate in the centuries-old stream of Jewish tradition, some part of me is aware that I am simultaneously educating my children and contributing to the continuity of my people. As a link, I have the chance to assist in the survival of these rituals -- and perhaps even of my very self -- into the next millennium.

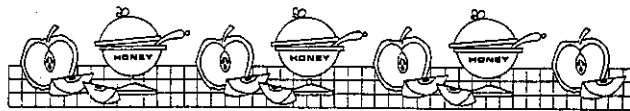
*Diane Schulder Abrams, an attorney, is now a partner in the oral history firm, CHRONICLES. She is on the steering committee of "Shabbat New York." This article is excerpted from her forthcoming book.*

**RULES RULES RULES...** (cont. from p. 3)

My answer to this question came in a letter to the editor that I read in a Jewish publication. The writer wrote of being a student at the University of Pennsylvania during the nineteen-twenties and reading that a Hasidic Rebbe had been loaned a house in Philadelphia. He and his fraternity brothers called upon the Rebbe and challenged him, asking him why modern young Jewish men should be bound by old-fashioned rules set up for desert nomads over three thousand years ago. In his answer to them, the Rebbe told them a "secret" -- that even he, the Rebbe, had a hard time being fully observant, but did the best that he could. And all that he would ask of them would be the same: to do the best that they could.

I've adopted this as my credo. I'm not in competition with others. I'm not better than others because I do and know more; I'm not inferior to others who do more and know more than I. I simply strive each day to do more than the day before. I will do, and I will know...

*Lloyd Lampell is a government manager. He presented this article originally as a D'var Torah at TFNIS in the Baldwin Jewish Center, Baldwin, New York.*

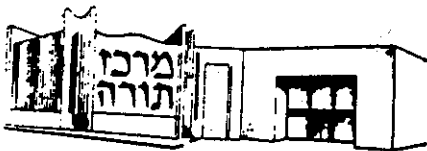


Illustrations by Wendy Dunn



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