

ברשת

Vol. XI No. 1

BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

Elul 5757/September 1997

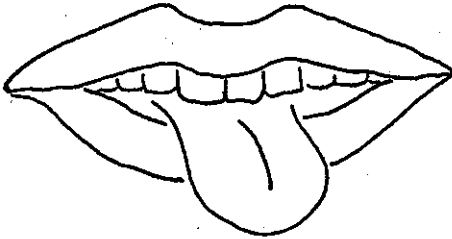
WORDS: WHAT DOES JUDAISM SAY ABOUT THEM?

by Rabbi Barry David Hartman

As Jews living in America and involved in American society, we often forget, or perhaps never even know, the Jewish position on various issues which we confront in our daily lives. One such topic is "words." What does Judaism say about "words?" Are words meaningless expressions, or do words have a "backbone"--meaning that the individual who says something is responsible for what he or she said.

On Yom Kippur eve we recite a most important prayer, *Kol Nidrei*. This prayer focuses on the use of words. The word "*neder*" means vow. A person promises to do something for somebody and doesn't do it. When asked why he/she didn't fulfill his/her promise, the answer is often very flippant-- "So what?" Obviously, people don't take words seriously.

(cont. on p. 2)



"LIFE AND DEATH ARE IN THE 'HANDS' OF THE TONGUE"

INTERNAL MARKETING-

A STRATEGY FOR JEWISH REVIVAL

by Sheldon Stern, D.D.S.

Every discipline has its own catchphrases, but dental consultants have an entire vocabulary at their disposal. The dental consultant who visited me didn't provide much "bang for the buck" but he did clue me in to the concept of "internal marketing." He explained that when advertising for new customers, a business should never lose sight of the existing patient base. It is this irony, that of losing sight of the existing client base that I wish to address.

Tremendous energies and resources were expended on behalf of Russian Jewry both in facilitating their exit and in teaching the emigres Torah values. While lauding these efforts, I often wondered if perhaps the disenfranchised Jews here in America were being ignored, for they were as spiritually starved as their Russian brothers and sisters. With time, this need was addressed, and we now have magnificent organizations such as NJOP, NCSY,

(cont. on p. 2)

"ONE STEP AT A TIME"

by Ted Sandler

Just a few short years ago I thought I'd arrived in the temple, the temple of success. Driving my fancy red convertible down the coast highway and living in California for 20 years, I thought I was pretty cool. But The Loma Prieta Earthquake (during the World Series) dramatically changed my life. After 20 years, G-d decided the party was over. It was my time to return.

The discontent had been stirring for some time. If the plagues that have ravaged San Francisco weren't enough, the earthquake finally shook me up enough that I looked for a deeper answer. There had to be more than fruits and nuts, so many lifestyles and fault lines. I wanted something more. And so, twenty seven years after my Bar Mitzvah I sought a spiritual answer, and took the first step on the journey I continue today. It began in the Bay Area, but after a visit to New York and my first experience at the Kehilath Jeshurun Beginners Service, I knew that this was where I belonged.

(cont. on p. 3)

INTERNAL MARKETING... (cont. from p 1.) Aish HaTorah and others which have helped thousands of Ba'alei Teshuvah.

This article, however, focuses on another group, one that is rarely mentioned, yet is sorely in need of the Jewish community's outreach efforts. There are hundreds, nay thousands of young Jewish men and woman who, despite extensive Yeshiva backgrounds have allowed their "Yiddishkeit" to flounder. There exists an attitude among those who remain religious, that these people can't be reached because, unlike the typical Ba'al Teshuvah who is searching for religion, they have tasted the waters of the Torah and found them not to their liking.

This notion must be summarily rejected, and I offer my situation as Exhibit A. After spending twelve years in Yeshiva I left with little more than the Yarmulke on my head. Thankfully, G-d's hand interceded as I befriended three dental colleagues, all Ba'alei Teshuvah who actually looked to me for guidance. Their enthusiasm for Judaism profoundly moved me, while I, in turn, was able to resolve certain difficulties which they faced in adjusting to a new way of life. So we grew together. One friend gave me a set of the Steinzaltz Talmud which piqued my interest, while another gave me a set of *Me'am Lo'ez* (commentary on the Torah), which I devoured. But the third friend gave me the greatest gift of all, words of encouragement. He called me a true "Ba'al Teshuvah," one who was religious, walked away, and then returned.

THE BA'AL TESHUVAH FACTORY



In short order I found my way to Yeshiva Zichron Eliezer, a fantastic Yeshiva in Flatbush, which caters to professionals and Ba'alei Teshuvah. Now, seven years later, I still attend classes, but I also travel and lecture to others while maintaining my dental practice on the Lower East Side.

Dear friends, there are literally thousands of fine young men and women with similar stories lacking only the happy ending. You see them babbling in shul instead of davening, idling in front of the TV instead of learning, chasing the

almighty buck instead of the Almighty. This segment of our population can and must be reached, and this must be done with kindness and not rebuke. One never knows the key to kindling the Jewish *nesboma* (soul), but remember, when you give the gift of Torah, you give the gift of

Dr. Sheldon Stern, a dentist practicing in Manhattan, is deeply involved in Yeshiva Zichron Eliezer's (Brooklyn) Outreach Program.

WORDS... (cont. from p. 1) People often use words to promise to do something for somebody, or to insult someone, without thinking about the pain and anguish that is inflicted upon the person who has been insulted, or who depended on another person to keep a promise.

The colloquial American expression "talk is cheap" is not acceptable in Judaism. In fact, Jewish law requires that every word we utter be measured.

The story is told of a person feeling remorseful about regularly insulting other people, who went to the Rabbi to ask for advice on how to achieve forgiveness for his misdeeds. The rabbi told him to take a feather pillow, cut it open and scatter the feathers in the wind and return to see him. The man dutifully obeyed the Rabbi's advice and returned to report that his mission was accomplished. Much to his surprise the Rabbi told him that he must do just one more thing. "What is it?" asked the petitioner. "Go and gather all the feathers." "But, Rabbi, it's impossible," the astounded penitent said, "the wind has scattered them!" "Precisely," the Rabbi said, "To recall the words which you already uttered is as difficult as it is to collect the feathers."

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin in his book *Words that Hurt, Words that Heal* tells how in high school, he was regularly compared to his older cousin and sister who were straight "A" students, and questioned publicly as to why his academic grades were not as good as those of his relatives. This hurtful use of critical words adversely affected him, until his grandfather, Rabbi Nissen Telushkin, a famous scholar, spoke to the principal and teacher about teaching with sensitivity, and asked them to educate Joseph to the best of his ability without comparisons to others.

This is the challenge we face on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, to understand the value of words from a Jewish perspective, and to know that Judaism takes each word very seriously, and we, as individuals, are responsible for what we say.

Let us think Jewishly and let Judaism impact on our lives.

Rabbi Barry Hartman is Rabbi of Ahavath Achim Synagogue in New Bedford, MA, where he also leads the Beginners Service.

ONE STEP AT A TIME... (cont. from p 1.) I moved East to pursue my spiritual connection.

I began to attend services regularly. Soon I began to see the faces of my own parents and grandparents, my ancestors, the aunts and uncles just a few generations removed. No longer distanced from the stories, I began to feel closer, as I realized their story was mine. For the first time in my life I wasn't just a Jew, I was becoming Jewish. I began following the weekly *parsba* (Torah reading), and pictured myself trekking through the desert, a member of the tribe following a dream and a promise. Wandering in the desert 3000 years ago I evolved into what I am today. But what have I really achieved?

It was easy to distance myself before, secure in my worldly success. Everyone around me was doing it, sucked into dreams of grandeur. Why not me? I danced like an idiot around a Golden Calf of my own creation, feeding my ego, but starving my soul. My Golden Calf was a fancy car, a house on the beach, a condo in the mountains, a new pair of the hottest skis. I'd been trained since childhood to crave the newest toy, whether it was a computer, a car or a boat, so this exercise was not difficult.

I focused on satisfying the cravings of my head, but not of my heart or soul. My free will was shaped by temptations created by TV, like a child, defined by what I controlled, not by what I shared. I took, rather than gave. I was consumed by *being* more, but by *having* more -- obsessed, manipulated and controlled by my own greed and desires. When I started attending services I didn't know the difference between an Aleph and a Bet. I took a couple of crash courses in Hebrew and started reading a Chumash instead of *Esquire*. The changes began slowly but deliberately. I knew my life was changing. I shared meals with families and people who had committed themselves to Judaism. I felt a bond and spirit far different than the dysfunction I perceived all around me, and began to reshape my self-centered view. I considered questions I never considered before: Would I have had faith for 40 years of wandering through the desert or would I too have been dancing around the Golden Calf, then as now? Would I have had the inner strength and motivation to cross the oceans and flee as did my ancestors?

Removed by centuries and oceans from the reality of what oppression really means, I was fortunate that I realized that it is never too late to change. I had squandered advantages rather than accept my responsibility to those souls who had sacrificed so much. I intellectualized the slogan "never forget," but in reality I had forgotten. I'm not sure if I ever really knew. I was giving up my heritage and buying into modern day conversion, only it was called the "melting pot."

Two years ago, on a Friday night after beginning my "transformation" I met some friends in a bar. As I looked around, I felt out of place, and wondered what in the world I was doing there. I knew it was Shabbat, but hey, I wasn't working! At services the next day, I told Rabbi Yitz Motechin that I wanted to start volunteering time on Friday nights. About an hour later, Chava Rose spoke to the Beginners Service about *Bikur Cholim* (visiting the sick). What perfect timing!! The following Friday night I began visiting hospital patients in order to make Kiddush for them. They call us the "Shabbotones." Some say that what I am doing is an act of *chesed* (kindness), yet I know that I am the lucky one, even though we don't finish making our rounds at the hospital until 11 or 12 at night. The last thing we do before we leave for home is to say the Kiddush for people who have never heard it before, new born babies and their mothers. I watch the babies as we sing a prayer that will remain with them for the rest of their lives, a prayer that has been repeated for thousands of years. And I know that I am the one that has been blessed.

"THE LOMA PRIETA EARTHQUAKE"



It is during the month of Tishrei that we think of *Teshuvah* (repentance). Our sages tell us that there are three books open during this time of the year: one for the most righteous, one for the most evil and one for everyone else. The most righteous are immediately inscribed for life, the most evil have their evil sentences decided immediately as well, but the rest of us are judged by our daily actions.

As "Beginners" we are given special consideration. We are not expected to have mastered all the prayers, or to know when to sit down, stand up, or even to comprehend the difference between an Aleph or a Bet. It is our sincere efforts that count the most. We're expected to try to do better and continue trying. We're expected to be the best *we* can be. Our small steps are given more weight than even the giant leaps of the righteous. The Talmud states that "Where penitents stand, even the most righteous cannot stand!" But it's not just enough to think it, or even feel it, we must begin to do it. Just one small step at a time. Surely, there are ups and downs, (cont. on p. 4)

ONE STEP AT A TIME... (Cont. From p. 3) and fits and starts. Family and friends may be skeptical (my family thinks that I have been kidnaped by aliens) but your heart will know. You'll feel your soul come alive.

Preparing this D'var Torah gave me the inspiration to finally go to Israel. Like so many things that have happened since I began my journey just a few years ago, the timing was perfect. I spent the entire visit in Jerusalem, like a sponge, soaking up everything around me. I prayed at the Kotel (the Western Wall), comfortable in the feeling that my prayers in English and broken Hebrew were heard along with everyone else's. While visiting the Western Wall excavations, I reached the area directly across from the Holy of Holies, where Abraham was to have sacrificed Isaac. Instinctively, I put on my tefillin (I had already prayed at the wall just before the tour), opened my mini Artscroll siddur and began to recite Psalms in English. I felt the strongest connection ever to the presence of Hashem. By the time a guard came and told me it was time to close, I realized that I was drenched in sweat, and over two hours had passed. It

was the most moving experience of my life.

Each year, like travelers through time and eternity, we come back to Yom Kippur, the Shabbat of all Shabbatot, "*Shabbat Shabatone*." Like our ancestors before us, we have an opportunity to repent and repair our relationship with G-d. He is closest to us and most open to our prayers right now.

If you too have a stirring in your heart, a feeling of not quite being satisfied by what this world has to offer, this could be your time to start. Just take one small step at a time, but start.

If you need someone to ask you, allow me! Please start! . . .

If someone needs to beg you, I'm begging you. If you take this one small step with your heart and soul, the benefits will spread from you to your family, to your friends, to the community and to all the people of Israel.

Ted Sandler is a businessman in New York, where he is a graduate of the Kehilath Jesburun Beginners Service.



Illustrations by Wendy 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.

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

DATED MATTER

PRE-SORTED
FIRST CLASS MAIL
US POSTAGE PAID
Newburgh, NY
Permit No. 252

