

ברשת

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BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

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CHOICES

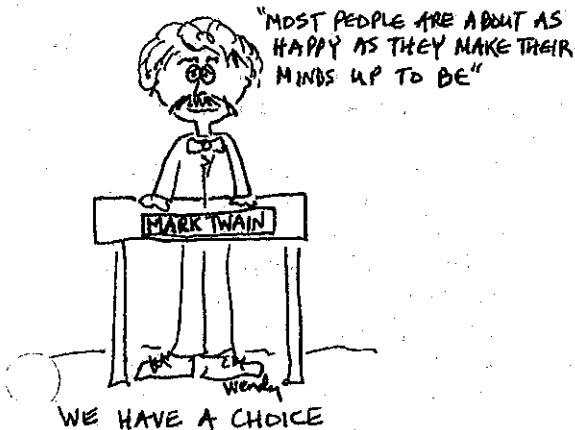
by Rabbi Ze'ev Smason

Life provides us with wonderful opportunities to experience the deepest feelings of pleasure. There are, however, few who walk away from the banquet of life with more than a few crumbs of satisfaction.

It is well known that Rosh HaShana is the Day of Judgment. On that day it is determined who will live and who will die, as well as matters pertaining to our health and livelihood. What role do we, ourselves, play in determining the outcome of what is to befall us in the coming year?

The story is told of the young boy who returned from an expensive summer camp "Nu, Tatele...how was camp??" his parents asked. Little Irving said, "Camp really wasn't so great -- I should have stayed at home." "Well...what was the problem?" Irving's concerned parents asked. Irving responded by saying, "Well, the food was absolutely terrible." "And," he added, "such small portions!"

Life, the Torah tells us, is about making choices. "See that I have placed before you today life and good, and death and evil. Choose life, so that you and your children and your offspring may live" (Deuteronomy 30:15). Imagine yourself floating lazily down a river in a canoe, when suddenly you are faced with the realization (*cont. on p. 4*)



REFLECTION ON THE HOLIDAYS

A SUCCOTH MEMORY

by Jenny Batlay Ph.D

Among all the wonderful Jewish holidays, my favorite one, as I was growing up in the south of France, was Sukkot. Sukkot usually occurs towards the end of September or beginning of October when one begins abandoning the vacation mood and the joyful freedom experienced in summer and moves into a more severe reality: school-for children, work- for parents. It occurs less than a week after the end of the High Holidays during which, traditionally, most spend whole days in prayer at the synagogue. On Rosh Hashanah, synagogues around the world are bursting with well dressed crowds--a mixed blessing for children, for whom party shoes and stiff shirts might be an imposition, even an ordeal for the very young, compensated for, however, by the pleasure of wearing beautiful clothes. At Yom Kippur there are often not enough seats to accommodate all worshipers, so synagogues require extra space to accommodate every Jew wishing to participate in the Day of (*cont. on p. 2*)

G-D COMES TO THE RESCUE

by Stephen Snyder, M.D.

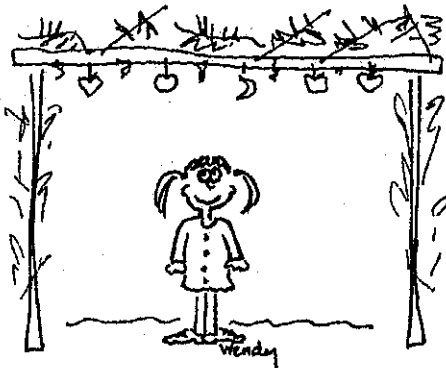
The Torah reading for the first day of the Jewish New Year is Genesis, chapter 21. It tells the story of Ishmael, who, at the age of 13, is sent away into the desert, with his mother, by his father Abraham. Ishmael nearly dies of thirst, but is rescued at the last minute by G-d, who has heard the cries of the boy. One wonders what Ishmael is doing here on the first day of Rosh Hashanah? After all, Ishmael isn't even Jewish! Everything in our writings, we have learned, has a purpose. But what is the purpose of reading this particular story, of this particular boy lost in the desert, on the first day of Rosh Hashanah?

Perhaps, in hopes of getting an answer, we might look at the reading for the second day of Rosh Hashanah. This is the story of the *Akeidah*, or near-sacrifice of Isaac, where G-d orders Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, and then at the last minute tells Abraham to let the boy live. And suddenly an idea strikes. On both days, the reading concerns someone in danger, in real

(*cont. on p. 3*)

REFLECTION... (cont. from p. 1) Atonement's rituals. There might even be two services going on at the same time. All of this differs from Sukkot; a more intimate holiday, when families build a rustic hut, a "Sukkah," where they practically move in for a week.

Although my father had lost his right arm fighting the Nazis on the French border at the onset of World War II, he was determined to build a Sukkah in our backyard. What a treat it was to read and dine in this shaky construction, flopping in the middle of a garden fragrant with wild roses and violets, punctuated by marigold and pansies, overwhelmed by designer butterflies, fashionable dragon flies, annoying fruit flies--the whole fascinating business of nature busily at work--while sitting under a loosely covered roof of leaves through which the sun at noon threw diamonds, and through which, occasionally, a summer shower inundated our meal. What fun! Whether pursued by a bumble bee or attacked by a spout of rain, these natural events were cause for unending laughter and games. Oh, how we hoped that this week in the Sukkah would never end, just as we hoped for an eternal summer! At suppertime, scintillating stars peeked through the roof's openings, under the indulgent smile of the moon. That is when life was at its best, like a dream.



"SUKKOT IS A DELIGHT, NOT A HARDSHIP!"

This was the right life, then, life à la Robinson. The late blooming peaches and ripe grapes casually hung over our head from the ceiling's branches. At Sukkot, my mother didn't use her finest china, nor was her proud silverware ever displayed. Instead of a variety of freshly polished spoons and forks competing for attention on each side of the plate, we had a plain set of flatware. The dress code was casual too: no uncomfortable clothing with bows, no smothering sashes or buckles, no irrelevant faux pockets, no hidden buttons.

For a week we "had" to eat every meal in the little Sukkah in order to remember the hardships our ancestors endured in the desert. But for the three of us, children, this command was a blessing. Hardships? What hardships? Was playing house a punishment? For a child, isn't it the greatest pleasure to temporarily leave the "comfort" of home and move into a tent, hut, cabin, boat or any other dwelling under the stars? And doesn't a child usually prefer a picnic to a banquet?

So what comfort did we leave behind in our home? Can pompous French table manners or an authoritarian code of the proper use of table utensils be called comfortable? Can the fear of dropping this or that on a bouffant skirt, or of soiling a virgin table lace with a twist of the wrist, or the recurring anxiety of breaking a collector's plate be seen as comfortable? Whoever has not experienced the tremendous enjoyment of Sukkah life for a week, has not really had a Jewish childhood!!

My parents left the comfort of their home and moved into the Sukkah in order to experience the hardships our ancestors went through in the desert, and the road that led to where we are. But, I admit having felt slightly guilty because I never felt any hardship in the Sukkah, never! On the contrary! There was freedom there, and the infinite possibilities of fantasy.

Most holidays are enjoyable to children: Hannukah is magical with lilac, turquoise, rose pink, flaming red, and burnt amber candles, little jewels set afire on the crown of a Menorah. A jewel is added, then sacrificed, at each sunset for eight days. Hanukkah, redolent of Provencal garlic and sizzling olive oil in which latkes simmer, is all glitter and gifts, chocolate, *soufganiot* (donuts), *gelt*, joy! Yet, there is undoubtedly some competition out there, with monuments to human consumerism in the holiday 'boutique', ad nauseum. Vanitas vanitatum...

Passover Sedarim are great fun, with the intriguing Seder plate and the breathless search for the Afikomen, with the questions to which we thought we knew the answers last year, but discover more possible answers at the return of each Passover. Pesach, like Chanukah, is also slightly shadowed by some strange rite out there, an invasion of plush bunny rabbits laying chocolate eggs--an Alice in Wonderland type of absurdity, with commercial appeal.

But, to my limited knowledge, Sukkot, like Shavuot, has no equivalent in any holidays around the world. It is truly our own, unimitated, the Jewish holiday *par excellence*. It has not been copied, monkeyed with, stolen, or appropriated by other cultures. Sukkot (and Shavuot) remain our very own.

Sukkot commemorates a previous time when our ancestors wandered in the desert under Moses' guidance. The Jewish soul was shaped there, and today's values originate in its 40-year long soul searching, when each Jew confronted the world, and his/her own conscience, protected from frivolous distractions, a unique and long seclusion. We too, are told to step aside from our materialistic world, and embrace another reality whose preoccupation is not mercantile. In a natural setting, meditation and prayer come more spontaneously than in a trophy-cluttered livingroom. The Sukkah experience opens us to spiritual concerns, as the Jew rejuvenates him/herself at the source of his/her spiritual Jewishness. And there is nothing wrong if your child, or the child within you, enjoys this and sees it as an opportunity to play. After all, time "on his winged chariot" has moved us closer to Messianic times; our baggage of learning has grown; even in remembering suffering and hardship, Jews wish to experience joy. Joy first of all, above all: gratefulness for having been created by G-d, for having been nurtured and saved, and selected; for expanding, multiplying in a world given to us by our Creator. And at Sukkot, a sense of uplifting at appreciating who we are, remembering where we started, and where we are heading, spiritually. All of this is perceived profoundly and with intensity when staged in a natural surrounding. There is no paradox here: all our holidays are blessed with joy, but in the middle of it, there is a core of sadness that gives a bitter-sweet taste to our past. On the background of painful remembrance, our present happiness is dearer. After a week in the Sukkah, we love our home even more, eight-year old adventurers included. I thank my parents for giving me a good home--and the loving experience of the Sukkah.

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G-D COMES TO THE RESCUE ... (cont. from p. 1) peril for his life. On both days, the person in peril, someone's child, is rescued at the last minute because G-d took note of the situation and stepped in. At the last minute. The Jewish tradition is that during the days of repentance, G-d takes note of our individual perils, and steps in to help, if we allow it. Jewish tradition teaches that the High Holy Days are indeed days of peril, where each person's fate hangs in the balance.

For me, these days recall a peril that my own family suffered several years ago. My wife, Bluma, had a stroke 10 weeks after we were married, when we were really still newlyweds. The stroke left her unable to talk, or to fully understand normal speech, permanently paralyzed in her right arm and hand, and permanently in need of a cane in order to walk. I can recall the terror and confusion of her first few days in the hospital. I remember late one night finding a pamphlet of prayers for the sick that had been produced by the hospital Chaplain. I wasn't very religious, and the idea of prayer seemed foreign to me. I don't think I'd ever prayed in my life. All I knew was my own sense of helplessness and confusion. I don't remember what I did with the prayers.

My wife survived, but was left permanently disabled. I brought her home from the hospital after two months, and we began the long and difficult process of rebuilding a life together. She began to walk again with a cane, and she began to go out in the neighborhood. Although she still was unable to speak much at all, her friendly manner and bright personality led her to make many friends, and, beyond all expectations, she thrived.

Not only that, but our marriage thrived, beyond either of our expectations, and we found ourselves even happier and more in love with each other than before the stroke, with the deepened gratitude for every small pleasure which only great suffering can confer on a person or on a couple. I learned much from her about faith. I once asked her if she ever prayed. She indicated, yes, to G-d. I was a little startled. She had never even mentioned that she believed in G-d. I began to be more curious about this G-d that my wife prayed to, and to wonder if I too might pray to G-d.

After a few years, my wife told me she wanted to have a child. This terrified me. The prospect of raising a child with this disabled woman was so overwhelming, that I knew instinctively I could never do it unassisted. I knew I needed help from somewhere. To my surprise, I eventually found myself praying to G-d, although I still don't know exactly how this happened. To my surprise, I discovered that I even believed in G-d. In time, I even learned to pray to G-d as a Jew. And in time, a few years later, G-d answered my prayers, and granted me the strength and the courage to become a father.

Our baby was born in the month of Elul, the month of repentance before the High Holy Days. Together with my wife and sister-in-law in the delivery room, with just a few minutes to go before the baby would come out, I cried with joy and relief that G-d had remembered us in our moment of peril, and that after our long struggle, G-d had helped us reclaim our lives.

After the pediatricians suctioned the baby's nostrils, I stood over our son and said to him in Hebrew the last verse of the last of the Psalms of King David: "*Kol Han'shama T'hallel Ya, Haleluya*" -The breath of all the living shall praise G-d, Haleluya.

Eight days later, the morning of our son's bris, I came to the

synagogue early for morning prayers, put on my *tallit* and *tefillin*, and watched, as one by one, our family and friends entered the synagogue and prepared to pray with us, and for us. I was unprepared for how deeply moving this would be. The sight is still etched indelibly in my mind: the men in their *tallitot* and *tefillin*, the women holding the baby--everyone praying together. Each one quietly and inwardly, but with great purpose. I felt each person's prayer moving and building together with the others, until I felt swept away, carried off on a great wave of prayer.

I also felt that if I concentrated very hard I could even hear the prayers of our ancestors. My wife's departed father, grandparents and great-grandparents on both sides, and generation upon generation of Jewish men and women, long since departed, surviving despite terrible dangers, praying the same Jewish prayers as we do now, at the exact same seasons, and with the same hope: the hope that life would go on.



Our son was born in the month of Elul. We prayed for him that he would be inscribed in the Book of Life, and that G-d would remember him and protect him from all danger and all peril. Because life is perilous. And we prayed for him that G-d would teach him, and teach us, how to pray.

And that G-d would remember all our prayers, on this and every Jewish New Year (as G-d remembered the prayers of Ishmael, and of Isaac, and of generations and generations since) for a good year, a sweet year, and, we hope, a safe year.

Stephen Snyder, M.D. is a psychiatrist and is a graduate of the Lincoln Square Synagogue Beginners Service in New York City.



Virtual Shabbat CD-ROM

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CHOICES... (cont. from p. 1) that you're coming dangerously close to a cascading waterfall. Who amongst us wouldn't choose to paddle to the safety of the shore?

The 'choice of life' involves the decision to proactively improve the QUALITY of life we experience. Peace of mind and happiness result from commitments and decisions to live life to its fullest. "Death" is the result of choices that lead to frustration, anxiety and meaninglessness.

On occasion, unmarried individuals tell me how lonely they are, and how difficult it is to meet people. When asked whether they make an active effort to network among friends, to search out matchmaking professionals, or if they attend singles events, some say, 'No -- it's too hard.' We have a choice: We can experience the pain that comes from being passive and taking the path of least resistance, or experience the discomfort that results from actively seeking to better one's situation.

Two elderly women were sitting together on a park bench, with the young grandchildren of one matron playing noisily nearby. "My," Nettie said to Clara. "Those are lovely grandchildren that you have. How many children do you have?" Clara responded, "Three children and five grandchildren, G-d bless them. They are all wonderful, and give me such *nachas*. Please...tell me...how many children and grandchildren do YOU have?" Nettie said, "Well, I've lived a full and active life, but the Almighty has never blessed me with children." Clara put her hand on Nettie's shoulder, and in a sympathetic tone of voice said, "So, nu....what do you do for aggravation?"

Imagine a young woman, we'll call 'Rebecca,' seated at a table, with two tape recorders before her. She knows that one

recorder contains a soothing, calming, self-esteem building message. She is similarly aware that the second has a cassette filled with words of pessimistic skepticism and negativity. What would you think if Rebecca forgoes listening to the optimistic tape, and presses the 'play' button of the pessimistic one?

Under most circumstances, we have the choice, at any given moment, to determine on which thoughts to focus. Mark Twain once said, "Most people are about as happy as they make their minds up to be." Do we tend to focus on the blessings that we have....or upon the ones that we don't?

Finally, the quality of our lives can be measurably improved through the discriminate use of key words and phrases. "I'm totally furious and angry." "You had no right to say that to me." "Things never seem to go my way." Replacing such utterances with alternative, less belligerent expressions such as, "I'm feeling very uncomfortable with what is taking place," "Your comments weren't helpful," and "I'm having a trying day," will create very different emotional responses within us compared to the former more toxic phrases.

Our task for the upcoming *Yamim Noraim* (High Holidays) is clear: to 'Choose life' through our decisions, thoughts and words. The seemingly elusive "Holy Grail" of a better life is ours for the taking - if we choose to make those decisions that are truly in our best interest.

May we all have a year filled with *Shalom* and *Bracha* for ourselves and our families. And may it be a year of wise choices.

Rabbi Ze'ev Smason is Rabbi of Nusach Hari B'nai Zion Congregation, St. Louis, MO with an active outreach program and Beginners Service. He thinks that the Beginners Service is "the thing since sliced bread."

Illustrations by Wendy Dunn



Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Rabbi Yitzchak Rosenbaum, 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, e-mail info@njop.org.

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