

ברשת

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BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

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MY FIRST BEGINNERS SERVICE: A Rabbi's Point of View by Rabbi B.Z. Halberstam

In the early 90's, I had the honor and privilege to serve as the Assistant Rabbi at Manhattan's Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun (KJ). My duties included the delightful role of serving as the Beginners Service Rabbi. The period of my involvement with KJ left an indelible imprint on my spiritual persona, and shaped my Jewish "world view" forever. While I often think back to the memories I have of the year, there is one incident that stands out in my memory:

I spent the second half of the summer of 1993 preparing for the High Holiday Beginners Service at KJ. George Rohr, one of the founders and continual leaders of the service, conveyed to me the critical need for this program to be a run-away success. You see, a successful beginning to the year (with hundreds of new faces) was expected to be a harbinger of a breakout year for the 2 year old program. For the first time, the service was to be held in the gym, to provide ample space to accommodate all those who wished to attend. Thus, filled with the weight of responsibility, I spent most of August reading texts about the meaning of the prayers and the sanctity of the season, trying to find that perfect message to share with the uninitiated. *(cont. on p. 4)*



FRUM

by Tara Knel Eliwatt

When I first heard the word "frum" I thought people were saying, I'm "From." And I thought, From what? From where? From whom? From how? What do you mean you're from, and how is it that I'm not? So, I thought about it...

Okay. I'm from what? I'm from a long line of...well, I don't know... people. I am from a long line of people.

I'm from where? I'm from New York. That's something to think about. I'm from Broadway and 44th Street because that's where I spent many evenings thinking about my future and envisioning my name flashing in lights next to all the other big letters that spell out names. That's where I walked past on my way to auditions and jobs, on the way to the music shop on 49th Street where the windows were plastered with show boards and music sheets.

From whom? Well, two parents -- they made me from somewhere. From? Well, I'm from a family of four kids and we once had a dog named Samson that I loved very much. That's right. I'm from a family that had a dog. He was a miniature collie and my dad put him to sleep when I was ten without telling us. I came home from camp, and Samson's leash was hanging from the basement door. I ran down to the garage where he was living out his life -- as an elderly canine with a bladder control problem sometimes must. And I knew it; he was gone. *(cont. on p. 2)*

CREATION AND REPENTANCE

by Rabbi David Kalb

On Yom Kippur evening, Jews recite a moving prayer called *La'brit Habet*, which describes how G-d forms humanity. In this prayer, G-d is referred to as the *Yotser*, the potter, or, more literally, the Creator. Humanity, in this analogy, is the clay, spinning on G-d's wheel and being formed by G-d's hands. This comparison reflects one of the most important ideas of the High Holiday season -- that what happens to humanity, and to every individual, is decided by G-d - the Creator.

Yet, according to Rav Joseph Ber Solovetichik, z"l, in the book *Reflections of the Rav*, the Torah's detailed description of creation in Genesis is intended to help us realize that every human being is, and must be, a creator with G-d.

So what is the answer? Are humans also creators or merely creations?

Before answering that question, let us look at the other major theme of the High Holidays -- *teshuvah*, repentance. According to the Mishnah Brurah, there is a special 40 day period of *teshuvah*, repentance, from the beginning of Elul, the month preceding Rosh Hashana, until Yom Kippur. What else took 40 days? The flood. It rained for 40 days and 40 nights while Noah was in the ark. The medieval commentator Rashi (Genesis 8:5), explains that this took place between Rosh Chodesh Elul and Yom Kippur, *(cont. on p. 3)*

FRUM (cont. from p. 1)...Samson had a difficult life in his latter years — waking every morning to the sight of rusty bikes and the smell of gasoline and mildew. Even for a dog, it was lonely. So... my father did the right thing. But I was angry that no one told me and that I didn't get a chance to say good-bye. That's the worse thing in the whole world, and even a child of ten knows it.

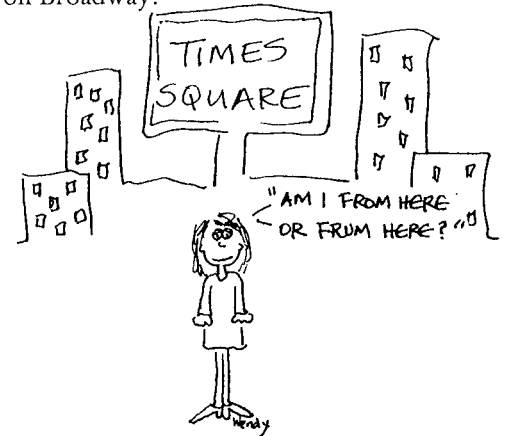
I'm from Thanksgiving dinners where Grandma "Ma" made turkey, chicken and veal. Ma always stained her shirts and ran around the kitchen checking on the potatoes and the soup and cracking the ice cubes into the ice cube bucket. She let us sneak bites of the turkey before it was time to sit down for the official meal. She bought me red Chinese pajamas and black slippers. I wore them both on New Year's Eve, the year my father dressed up as Baby New Year and I got to eat the M&Ms from the wooden bowl that was usually on a table I couldn't reach. Grandma let us jump on her bed, and we jumped and watched ourselves in the big, gold-framed mirror until my brother slipped and fell. His head hit the metal bed frame and he started to bleed. I thought he would bleed to death. My parents were in Italy that year, and I wasn't quite sure how we would save him without my father. My grandmother took him to her Russian neighbor and I think she did something for him, but I don't remember what. And we used to pile into Ma's silver Cadillac. Man, that car was big. They just don't make 'em like that anymore. This was in Brooklyn, on Ocean Parkway. When we drove to McDonalds on Saturday afternoons, my dearest Grandmother pointed out all the orthodox people with their wigs and eight children walking home from Temple. "They dress very well those people," she would say, admiring their suits and shiny shoes. Grandma Bubbie would nod her head in agreement.

And they did dress very well -- next to me, anyway. I had a thing against wearing clothes that matched. I really didn't understand the philosophy behind it. Just as my older brother didn't understand the philosophy behind wearing a tie and I don't think any of us beside my sister, maybe, had any clue as to why a person needed to make his/her bed in the morning. I didn't start matching until I was 24 and I heard the word "Frum" for the first time. Well, it took some practice before I started to really match like the pretty girls dressed in suits, those girls sporting pageboy haircuts -- the ones that used that word "from" so darn much.

They were "from from birth," those girls. That's an interesting way to look at yourselves, I remember thinking: "From, from the very beginning," did that also refer to conception? If I wasn't "from from birth" as everyone seemed to intimate -- then when in the world did I start being from somewhere? Did it all begin when Samson died? That was a traumatic enough experience for me to change and grow and move from a certain state of existence to another. Or two years later when a jump rope buddy from kindergarten was hit by a motorcycle and killed, at the intersection I could see from my house. Maybe that's really when the ideas of death and life first stuck me and I asked, where do we go when we humans die? No, I think I asked that when I was seven while my mom was folding sheets. I don't remember what she responded, but I knew she didn't have any idea. How could it be that I wasn't FROM anywhere if I had all these memories of BEING from somewhere? And did this really have anything to do with life and death?

And then, the truth was revealed to me by the man in the black hat, the woman crying at that big wall in Jerusalem, by the girls with the pageboy hairdos and nice suits, by the teenage boy wearing a colorful yarmulke, and by the little boys and girls quoting Hebrew texts like academic scholars. They revealed the truth to me: Frum is a Yiddish word. It means you are an observant Jew. You believe in G-d and observe the 613 mitzvot of the Torah that were given by G-d at Mt. Sinai some three thousand years ago. Frum is, in fact, a state of being -- being connected with G-d. Frum had nothing to do with from what? From where? From whom? From how? And then again, it had everything to do with the what, the where, the whom and the how.

But wasn't I from a long line of people with goals and dreams, searching for meaning in their lives in one way or another, trying to be good and to succeed as best they could in this very difficult world? I WAS from somewhere, wasn't I? That somewhere just lacked the Frum, they told me -- the being with G-d. I was from a state of moving. A state that moved me to stare at billboards with big letters and to believe in the absolute truth of those beautiful lights on Broadway.



I moved all over the place searching to understand why life dies slowly and quickly and sometimes without a good-bye. I moved to find out how people survive and heal themselves when they are hurt and there is no father around to bandage the wounds. I moved to find out how a person can give so selflessly and to discover why a bed needs to be made in the morning and a person needs to match. I was from a world of moving and then I met some people from a world of being. "Being" in the sense that they had enough answers to just stop and be for a few moments or even 25 hours as they did on Shabbat -- on the day I used to eat a Big Mac, fries and a coke in M'cky D's, when I would admire the beautiful people walking along Ocean Parkway with Grandma Ma and Grandma Bubbie and my siblings.

When I learned more about this idea of FRUM, I saw that I could stop moving for a bit and just rest. Rest from all that physical activity that made me move even faster because time was passing and I was getting older and nobody seemed to have better answers than the ones I had received at age seven.

When Grandma "Ma" passed away, I was in Israel celebrating Shabbos. Resting. Being. Connecting. Deciding if I was going to be From along with Frum, if I could continue to stand on Broadway staring into the bright lights at the same time as I stared into the light of the Shabbat candles,

(cont. on p. 3)

FRUM (cont. from p. 2)... if I could be tranquil and settled and still moving. Frum and From.

Then, they called and cried to me: "How could you not answer the phone? Your grandmother died. How could you be so selfish?" (How could you be so settled, so tranquil?) Because, I thought, the same G-d that caused this death, also commanded me to be at rest. Certain things in this life I have no control over and I just have to have faith that G-d is all around us moving the world. And even if flights left Israel on Saturday afternoons, I could not change something so final as death. I could only believe in G-d, an ever present father -- who is there when the dog disappears and the brother falls and the friend dies and the dreams seem all encompassing.

When I first heard the word FRUM, I had no idea what people were talking about. Maybe life would have been easier if someone explained it all to me when I was seven. But maybe not. Maybe, I still wouldn't have understood. Maybe, G-d gave me great *mazal* and this enabled me at age 24 to understand what it all means. Not everyone is so lucky...I can only pray that it continues and that I can learn more deeply this idea of Frum, how to be a self-respecting, dignified and giving Jew, and, more importantly, a Jew that is in touch, really, with *all* the levels of from-- from what, from where, from whom and from how.

Tara Knel Eliwatt is a graduate of several Manahattan Beginner Programs. She is currently "from" Passaic, NJ, where she lives with her husband, Heath.

CREATION AND REPENTANCE (cont. from p. 1)... impelling us to look at the events of the flood in order to understand what this period of 40 days of repentance truly represents:

In Genesis 6:17, G-d says: *Behold, I am about to bring the Floodwaters upon the earth to destroy all flesh in which there is a breath of life from under the heavens; everything that is in the earth shall expire.*

G-d was planning on destroying humanity -- so why was Noah saved? Because having evaluated His creations, G-d chose to begin anew. However, unlike the initial creation, wherein G-d worked alone, this re-creation was in partnership with humanity, with Noah. It took 40 days of flood before Noah was ready to join G-d and help re-create the world. Noah first needed to prepare himself, to re-create himself, in order to help re-create the world. Those 40 days of the flood were days of *teshuvah*, repentance.

The same is true for humanity today: The period of repentance between Rosh Chodesh Elul and Yom Kippur are our 40 days to re-create ourselves. This is the connection between *teshuvah* and creation; and, this is why they share the focus of Rosh Hashana. Through *teshuvah*, humanity re-creates itself.

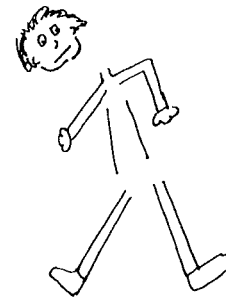
Teshuvah, it must be understood, is a multi-faceted process. One may repent by working on bettering certain character traits, such as controlling one's temper or being more patient. *Teshuvah* may be done by accepting upon one's self the responsibility of following more mitzvot (commandments). It can be a monumental change or it can be the small steps towards change. In fact, the Rambam (Hilchot Teshuvah, the Laws of Repentance) points out that part of the *teshuvah* process can be as basic an act as renaming one's self or moving. Of course, the true essence of *teshuvah* is meant as a deeper and more introspective process.

The truth be told, if one does not look at *teshuvah* as re-creation then, at best, it is only cosmetic. The High Holidays are not just a

time for coming to synagogue -- they are our period of re-creation.

Teshuvah, however, is not limited to Rosh Hashana. It is not done only once a year. If it took Noah 40 days before he was ready to go back to the world, can we really re-create ourselves in just two days of Rosh Hashana and one day of Yom Kippur -- in just 3 days? One needs to use the full 40 day period between Rosh Chodesh Elul and Yom Kippur (or, at the very least, one should concentrate on the Ten Days of Repentance between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, the *Aseret Yimei Teshuvah*).

In truth, if humanity really wishes to re-create itself, even the full 40 days is not enough. Re-creation is a constant process of self-evaluation. A person can, and should, do *teshuvah* all the time. This is highlighted by the fact that immediately after Yom Kippur concludes, it is customary to begin building a sukkah -- even before one eats. While this act represents, on one hand, the desire for Sukkot, which is only a few days later, it also represents the need for constant *teshuvah*. Right after Yom Kippur it is easy to be complacent, to feel as if one can stop working on one's self because of the rigorous atonement of the day. Sukkot, and the immediate building of the sukkah, however, teach us that we must jump into rebuilding ourselves even when it is not the "High Holiday" season. By engaging in building, in creating this new "home," one makes a symbolic statement of re-creating one's self.



TRYING TO PUT YOURSELF TOGETHER

Self re-creation is not an easy process. In order to re-create one's self, one has to spend time alone. In the twenty-first century, no one spends time alone. We begin our day with the clock radio blaring the headlines of the day. We get dressed while watching a morning news program. If we drive to work, a radio program is on. If we take the train, we talk on our cellular phones, read or sleep. Or we have responsibilities at home with our families. As the day ends, we eat dinner, we take care of our bills and then back to sleep. When do we make an accounting of ourselves and our lives? When do we have time for ourselves?

Time for ourselves does not mean rest and relaxation. It means time alone, time to take stock and see who we really are and what we are doing with our lives. What are our relationships with our friends and family? What is our relationship with G-d? What is the Jewish content of our lives? Where are we going?

It's a goal, an aim, to be able to make this time to be alone. Take it one step at a time. Perhaps, just take a look in the mirror and say "Shalom Alaichem, Hello!" to yourself. Re-acquaint yourself with your self.

Rabbi David Kalb is the Rabbi of the Beit Chaverim Synagogue in Westport, CT, where he leads a broad range of Beginner programs.

MY FIRST SERVICE (cont. from p. 1)... Finally, the big day came, Rosh Hashana 5754! By the time Shofar blowing began, over 500 congregants had filled the room. The blast of the Shofar cut through the air with perfect clarity, reaching into our souls, and the Hazzan (cantor) began chanting Mussaf (the additional service). We appeared to be “in the zone.” Success was ours -- things were going even better than planned.

Up to that point, I had been serving mostly in the “meet and greet” role. I figured that George probably thought I was still a bit too raw, a little too green, to be given a speaking part. When he finally gave the signal to the bullpen, I quickly trotted over.

“How about introducing the *Aleinu*?” he asked. I was flattered to be given such a prominent slot. At the same time, I was a bit unsure how to proceed. The Rosh Hashana *Aleinu* is not for newcomers, but for the hard-core, veteran shul-goers who have learned from the masters how to bend, kneel and lay face down all the while shouting: “*Baruch Shem K’vod Malchuto Le’Olam Va’ed!*” (Blessed is the name of G-d forever and ever).

“George,” I asked, “Do I tell them to fall for *Kor’im*?”

(During the *Aleinu* prayer, one generally bows at the waist when saying “*v’anachnu korim, umishtachavim, u’modim..*” “But we bend our knees, bow, and acknowledge our thanks...” At the Rosh Hashana service, however, it is customary to fall on our knees and bow to the floor.)

George replied confidently, “Upstairs, maybe a handful of people will actually bow down. At the Beginners Service,” he boasted, “everyone will be participating.”

I was surprised, but excited. I began putting my thoughts together about how to present the prayer, and was mindful of George’s admonition to always translate every word, to fully explain what things are all about, and to take nothing for granted.

My moment arrived. After George introduced me to the congregation, I confidently began explaining the history of the prayer and the symbolism of reciting it at this point in the service. Then, together, we began reciting *Aleinu*, and, as we reached the climax of the prayer, I led the bowing ritual by exhorting everyone, “Now we **prostate** ourselves.”

As the first titter began to cross the room, George, never far away, hissed gently in my ear, “Prostrate, B.Z., prostrate.” Already bowing, I hid my blush and convinced myself that no one had picked up my slip of the tongue as we continued to sing the *Aleinu* together.

By the way, George was right, as usual; almost all of the 500+ people “**prostate**,” I mean, prostrated, themselves to honor His mighty and omnipotent Name.

Currently CEO of Discus Data Solutions, a NYC based software company, Rabbi Halberstam received rabbinic ordination and a law degree from Yeshiva University. He has helped run a variety of outreach programs, and is currently involved with the Manhattan Jewish Experience.

THE NATIONAL JEWISH OUTREACH PROGRAM WISHES YOU AND YOURS
A HAPPY, HEALTHY AND SWEET NEW YEAR!

Illustrations by Wendy Dunn

בראשית

Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Sarah Rochel Reid, Rabbi Yitzchak Rosenbaum, and 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 programs of 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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