

BERESHITH

"IN THE BEGINNING"

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for Beginners,
by Beginners

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בראשית

THE ROSH HASHANA GUEST

Heather Shapiro

I've come to think of myself as a "professional guest." After all, I have had the opportunity to eat at hundreds of families' homes for Shabbat, Yom Tov, and *S'machot* (joyous occasions). Thank G-d, I've mostly had good experiences, some more memorable than others.

My career as a "professional guest" began with my first Rosh Hashana away from home. I was a university student in Montreal, and I had planned to attend services at the local Hillel. I was not at all looking forward to celebrating my Jewish New Year in an unknown makeshift synagogue (Hillel used university classrooms for its services). While I did not want to pray with a group of strangers, I didn't want to go home either. I never felt that the services at our synagogue were particularly meaningful. Every year, I used to meet up with a friend in the bathroom so that we could escape the boredom. We couldn't spend too much time shmoozing, but even a few minutes was enough to revive me for the rest of the hour I had to endure watching the "show."

As luck would have it, one afternoon, as I was walking from the Arts Building to the library, I ran into Danny, a friend of a friend. I knew he was observant and soon discovered that he lived in Montreal. I asked Danny where I could find Rosh Hashana paraphernalia--cards, treats, posters--and he proceeded to ask me what my plans were for the holiday. When I told him that I would be going to Hillel, he said, "Well, why don't you come to my house." It was the first time a stranger had ever invited me to his home, and, although I thought it was very *(cont. on page 2)*

"FOR THE PRICE OF A CHICKEN YOU CAN BRING A JEW HOME!"



THE TRANSFIGURATION

Yisrael Lifschutz

This past August 14, 2004, Shabbat *Parashat Re'eh*, I celebrated my 33rd birthday, even though my birth certificate states that I was born 1/27/1943 (61—I've done the math for you). This discrepancy in age can be explained by entering a time machine known as *Before & After*--the "Before" being before that fateful Shabbat in August of '71 and the "After" being ever since. Like many firsts in one's life, that first Shabbat was "something else."

For morning services, I found myself (both literally and figuratively) seated in Beth Shalom, a synagogue in Lawrence, Long Island. This house of worship features dark, wooden paneling all around, giving it the appearance of a court room. This aura is aided, in fact, by the women's section, off to the side and resembling a jury box. So powerful was this experience that at one point I began to cry silently within, head bowed, too embarrassed to show myself. It is this moment in time that, were I a method actor, I would reach back to open the tear-gates. Indeed, I was "living within" *Parashat Re'eh*, since *re'eh* means "to see," as I was now able to observe much of the "Before" as a prolonged *(cont. on page 3)*

TRANSCENDENT EXPERIENCE

Shalom Steinberg

In 1998, when I was in Israel for Rosh Hashana, I had my first truly transcendent spiritual experience. For me, Israel was a place of refuge. I had never been there for any extended period of time, and now I was going to be there for a year. It was the beginning of something great, but, of course, at that time, I did not know what would happen. I went without needs or expectations. I was just happy that I was away from the mundaneness that plagued me in Calgary, where I went to school every day and saw only spiritually devoid people. I too was on the verge of being similarly empty--but I always harbored a hope of going to Israel, and, finally, I was there.

In Israel, I met a man named Charles Lebow from my home country and found him and his family to be very sweet, warm people. After traveling the world and living in many places, the Lebows decided to settle in Jerusalem. As the summer wore on and drew closer to Rosh Hashana, I was worried, because I had no High Holiday plans. Charles invited me to his home for the holiday, but I was reluctant to accept because it meant that I would have to be away from my dorm at Hebrew University, where I *(cont. on page 2)*

THE GUEST (cont. from page 1)... considerate, I was a bit weary. Nevertheless, I was excited by the idea of an alternative to the campus services. In addition, it would be my first "real" Rosh Hashana, with a family that actually celebrates the holiday as it should be celebrated.

As Rosh Hashana approached, Danny invited me to stay with him and his family during the holiday because they lived quite far from the university dorms. Now things started to get strange. "Should I stay over at his house?" I asked a friend of mine, who was equally ignorant of the concept of *Hachnasat Orchim* (welcoming guests). "That sounds a little strange," she replied. After careful consideration, I decided to eat meals by his family, but not to stay over.

When I arrived at their house just before Rosh Hashana, Daniel notice immediately that I came empty-handed. "Where's your stuff?" he asked.

"Well, I didn't think that it was really okay for me to stay over, and I didn't want to be an imposition..."

"I can't believe it," he replied. "I'm so insulted. You said that you were going to stay over."

"But I didn't bring any of my belongings to stay over."

"That's no problem. Tell me what you need, and we'll get it." My list consisted of only pajamas and contact solution. We went to his neighbor, a charming young lady my age who was planning to make *aliyah* at the end of the year, to borrow contact solution. When she didn't have any, we went to another neighbor, also a very sweet young lady, who did have solution. Such nice and friendly people, I thought to myself. Where have they been hiding? I now realize that meeting these friendly young people was the necessary preparation I needed before meeting the family. When Danny introduced me to his mother, she gave me a big hug, despite my being a total stranger. His grandparents were there, as well as his father and brother. Everyone looked so joyous; their happiness was contagious.

Since Danny's mother was Hungarian, they *davened* (prayed) in a tiny Hungarian *shteibl* (a very small synagogue). When we arrived there, I realized that I was the only woman wearing pants. I was embarrassed, but Danny told me not to worry. Not only that, but everyone in the women's section was wearing a hat except me. When I complained again, Danny smiled and said, "Don't worry, we'll just stone you afterwards!" It was only months later that I realized that only married women cover their hair.

After services, we returned to Danny's house and his mother brought out dish after dish of delicious food. I had never eaten so much in my life! But it was more than just eating for pleasure--there was an added dimension of spirituality. Although I couldn't identify what it was at the time, I remember the strong feeling of inner joy that I experienced that night. That's what you feel when you let G-d into your life!

Despite my efforts, I could never repay Danny's family for what they have given me. I returned to their house (fully equipped) for every holiday that year and for the next three years. They literally adopted me and treated me like the daughter or sister they never had. They invited a total stranger to their house, and loved her as though she were part of their family, because I am. As it says in the blessing over the new month: *Chaverim Kol Yisrael*—All of Israel are related/friends. Danny's family truly exemplified the trait of *Ahavat Yisrael* (loving your fellow Jews), and I hope, that in the future, I am able to continue the chain of reaching out to others as they reached out to me.

Heather Shapiro was involved with the Montreal Jewish community. She currently resides in New York City

TRANSCENDENT EXPERIENCE (cont. from page 1)...was having such a good time. The more I thought about it, however, the more interesting the proposition became. He, in effect, was offering me two days of relaxation and celebration surrounded by his fun-loving kids and an opportunity to meet intriguing, highly educated people. Rather than an opportunity to express my love of G-d, to me, Rosh Hashana had always been just another holiday that meant going to synagogue to be judged. Frankly, I wasn't much interested in a holiday based on the fear of being spiritually or physically dead for the coming year. Still, I knew that I had to go to services somewhere, so why not have a little fun at the Lebow's house while I'm not at services?! So I went.

Little did I know that the place I would be praying in was brand new, and that the services themselves were being led by a leading figure in the world Jewish community, Rabbi Nachman Bulman (z"l).

"Who's he?" I thought to myself when I first heard the name. It turns out that Rabbi Bulman is the person who translated the three volume work known as "The Book of Our Heritage," which, I was told, sits on the bookshelves in Jewish homes all over the world. It is solid yet basic composition explaining the rituals, customs and meaning of Jewish concepts and observances throughout the year. "That's interesting," I thought. "I wonder how he prays?"

The day before the New Year, I fearfully set out for the Lebow's house. I arrived sweating, suit in hand, with great trepidation in my heart. What was G-d going to do to me this year? What did G-d have in store for me? Was I going to earn money? Was I going to learn much about life? I was anxious.

Preparations for the holiday had already begun. It seemed as if we were going to attend a wedding: First there was a thorough cleaning of the house and of all the people in it, as a series of savory and sweet aromas traveled throughout the house from the great feast to be had later. This was followed by much silence and reflection about the year past and the year to come.

After much ado, the family finally proceeded across the street to a small *shteibl* (synagogue) that held approximately 100 people - 50 men and 50 women. We were all crammed in there, but we felt fortunate because that small prayer space was created expressly for Rabbi Bulman and that year's Rosh Hashana service. The atmosphere was inviting: people greeted each other somewhat cautiously, but with joy and love. It was heartwarming (and relieving) to see that everyone else had also prepared in the way that I had with the Lebows. Everyone was ready to focus - we were all there to do one thing: connect with G-d and convey to G-d that we are worth one more year of love and nurturing.

We began the prayers with silence and intensity, only the reassuring sound of the new air conditioner could be heard. I felt that G-d really desired my prayers because I was comfortable, and I was prepared to devote some serious time and energy to the communication. With confidence and choreography, everyone I was praying with slowly became a community. We were in this together - it was us, all of the men and women in that room, who were together on a mission to tell G-d that we, the Jewish People, are a good, positive people who are steadily improving the world and drawing G-dliness closer. Finally after the short service, I felt a sigh of relief. It was then that I felt that something big was going to happen.

The next morning, after much delicious food, tasty wine and holy dancing the night before, it was time to get back to entreating G-d. While we party, G-d is talking to us, and while we pray we are

talking and G-d is listening.

Rabbi Bulman began the morning by carefully going through the prayers and building a case for those praying in the room and all the Jews around the world.

I thought to myself: *Jews all over the world are doing all sorts of different things, some are in Reform services and some are in more traditional services - like me - but we are all essential. The problem is that each of us believes that we are doing the right thing and that all the other Jews are not. How sad, I thought and began to get depressed. All people want to be right, therefore they are threatened by others who do anything different. Then dislike and hate begins to set in. These are stains that may stay for a long time.*

At that point, we had reached the extra service, the *Mussaf*. I prayed silently and with extra intensity. I prayed to G-d to see that the Jewish people are okay, and that we recognize the righteousness of others, that we love instead of hate. The silence and intensity in the room was resounding - people wanted love for G-d and the Jewish people so much. Then, beginning with a screaming whisper, Rabbi Bulman began the public repetition. Through the prayers to G-d for recognition, thankfulness, and health, he conveyed to G-d out loud what each one of us was praying for in silence. It was a magical moment. There was one special prayer about what will become of each one of us: will we have water to drink or die of thirst, will we have wealth or be poor, will we stay in one place or wander throughout the earth. By this point, everyone was on their toes dancing with trepidation, directing all their thoughts to affirming the words that Rabbi Bulman was chanting and singing. Though he was in his late seventies, the rabbi banged on the podium, pleading with G-d for help and redemption. In a moment of pure transcendence, Rabbi Bulman paused for a moment, threw his hands in the air and screamed, with such power that the building almost shook, for the ABOLISHMENT OF BASELESS HATRED. Tears were streaming down his face, and mine as well. As I looked around, I saw that everyone else was also highly emotional. It was at that moment that I knew that we had done it, we had communicated with G-d and, in some way - whether it be big or small, this prayer group contributed to the survival and enhancement of the Jewish people and of humanity. Rabbi Bulman continued the service, and by the end almost collapsed, but he had accomplished what he set out to.

I will always remember that experience of intensity. It turned out to be a wonderful Rosh Hashana, and one of the best, most joyous growth years of my life. I would like to bless all those who read this article that during the High Holiday services they have their own transformational experiences of communication and transcendence with G-d. It may be hard, but the rewards are great.

Wishing you all a joyous new year, filled with growth, love and abolishment of baseless hatred. *Ken Yehi Ratzon.* (May it be Thy will.)

Shalom Steinberg, an active member of Manhattan's young Jewish community, has been active in Hazon's Jewish Environmental Bike Ride and is a leader of Havurat Kol Zimrah. He loves working with children doing Clinical Pediatric Neuropsychology, teaching Hebrew School and spreading the message of Kavanah and Jewish Unity



TRANSFIGURATION (cont. from page 1)...exercise in futility, chasing fame and fortune and epitomized by the title of a rock musical I wrote (Music by Steely Dan, with whom I used to pal around) entitled EGO.

Of course, I didn't just fall from the sky and land in synagogue that decisive Shabbat. There was a lead-in, a gestation period, if you will. For the previous nine months, I had been editing an English translation of *HaSulam*, a *Zoharic* (mystical traditions) commentary by Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag. This job came about after I finally emerged from the cocoon that I had created as a result of crashing at the close of the '60s. (A little background music: the Beatles, the Stones, Dylan, and more Steely Dan). I had bought into the mantra of that decade by dropping out, tuning in and turning on. But in the end, I was a raw, real "Nowhere Man," without purpose or hope. With my dreams of making it as a writer/creator of entertainments (besides EGO, a sitcom about a midget manager and the child star; a cartoon series entitled "FleaBag" re: a bunch of bugs performing as part of the Insecta-Side Show, and fighting off the dreaded scorpions and WASPS; and a novel entitled *Vox Pop*, based on my experiences as the editorial switchboard operator for the Daily News) shattered, along with a marriage. I became a prophet of doom; my emotional life was one of pain, progressively worsening with time.

In retro-*re'eh*, the '60s ended as badly as they had started (with the tragic passing of my beloved mother, may she rest in peace, on April 23, 1960, at the age of 53). Anyhow, I managed to make it out of my cocoon to visit my loving but disappointed-in-me, lawyer father...perhaps he would know someone who might give me a job. I needed money.

That particular visit was to become the turning point. In my father's office, I encountered a kabbalist known as Reb Feivel, who happened to be one of my father's clients. We were introduced and when I mentioned that I had worked as a writer-editor on a number of newspapers, the good Rabbi immediately produced a 400-page manuscript that needed editing.

Did I know anything about Kabbalah? No, but I had studied at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem for one year. And I was greatly taken by my teacher of "Bible Studies," the legendary Nechama Leibovitz.

I was hired at \$1.50 per page, which would result in a total of \$600, enough to keep me for a while before returning to the dreaded white collar world.

Armed with the manuscript, I took the subway and began to read what amounted to one long sentence, running on for pages with terms such as *Zeir Anpin*, *Sitra Achara*...I understood nothing of what I read. When I finally picked up my head, I had missed my stop. Taking the train back, the same thing happened. I missed my stop again.

The manuscript proved totally incomprehensible. I was spending five hours a night, and maybe, with lots of guess work, I might finish one page. At a \$1.50/hr. I was actually earning 30 cents per hour.

I met with Reb Feivel. I told him that I didn't want to embarrass my father, but I just could not continue. He told me not to give up and that when I work I should wear a yarmulke...Now that was a very funny line to me. How could wearing a yarmulke help? However, he did give me an advance.

So I put on the yarmulke and there actually (cont. on page 4)

TRANSFIGURATION (cont. from page 3)...was a bit of a breakthrough. Subsequent editorial meetings helped to further break the code, and I found in my work suggestions for personal improvement: such as overcoming my insomnia by understanding that when sleeping, the *neshama*, the soul, goes up to the heavenly *Yeshiva* (study hall) where it is refreshed.

The next breakthrough came after agreeing to immerse in a *mikveh* (ritual bath). There I was, stark naked, in some synagogue basement in Boro Park. I felt totally humiliated. But something positive was happening -- I could tell by the increase in the number of pages I was editing.

During this period, Reb Feivel presented me with *Tefillin* (phylacteries), which became a daily ritual. In addition, I read, and reread many times over, *The Ten Luminous Emanations*, excerpts on the Kabbalistic spheres, from the teachings of the Arizal.

Reb Feivel was always kind, gentle and encouraging. He frequently requested that I spend Shabbat with him, which brings us fast forward to that first Shabbat. It was a day of extremes: from stifling the tears of a broken soul to LSD-like mind blowing revelations. (Later, reading from the teachings of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, I discovered that when Hashem reveals Himself to an individual, He does so according to the latter's strongest terms of reference.)

While still not exactly convinced, I agreed to return the following Shabbat. Again, I experienced Shabbat as if I was on an acid trip. If I could achieve such a high, naturally...what else was there to say: I'm in.

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Illustrations by Wendy Dunn

בראשית *Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Sarah Rochel Hewitt, Rabbi Yitzchak Rosenbaum, and Beryl Levenson of the National Jewish Outreach Program. 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 NJOP programs, please write or call: 989 Sixth Avenue, 10th Floor, New York, NY 10018, (646) 871-4444, e-mail info@njop.org or visit www.njop.org.*

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