

BERESHITH

"IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter
for Beginners,
by Beginners

Vol. XX No. 1

Tishei 5772/September 2011



בראשית

THE CIRCLE GAME

Rabbi Greg Wall

Just as Labor Day is a wake up call to the harsh reality that summer is over, and the responsibilities of school, office and community beckon, so too the daily sounding of the shofar in the month of Elul announces that the Days of Awe will soon be upon us. Rosh Hashana already?

Where did the year go?

As Joni Mitchell sang,

*And the seasons they go round and round
And the painted ponies go up and down
We're captive on the carousel of time
We can't return we can only look behind
From where we came
And go round and round and round
In the circle game*

A nice song, but not a Jewish idea.

We don't see our calendar as a circle, but rather as a spiral. As the spiral unfolds we need to evolve as well, growing personally, financially, spiritually.

(cont. on p. 2)

WORDS OF STRENGTH

Shoshana Raff

During the month of Elul and the holidays of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, G-d brings His presence down to this world. Because of G-d's particular closeness, this is considered an important time period for *tefillah*, prayer, and I would like to share with you some recent insight and inspiration that I've had, that pertains to davening (praying).

I have often wondered why, if everything is *bashert* (pre-determined), how can we pray to change what we are meant to have. I understand why people pray to be closer to G-d, to recognize that He runs the world and that He is powerful and glorious and good. But why do we bother to ask for things? Is it possible that our requests and petitioning can change the course that our lives take? Isn't everything in our lives already predetermined?

Prayer implies the element of request. But how is *tefillah* that brings us closer to G-d going to affect what's already been determined? The answer, I think, is (cont. on p. 3)

SUKKOT, WHY BOTHER?

BJ Rosenfeld

Judaism has always been important in my life. My house was kosher, at least as far as I was concerned. Many Fridays I made a special meal and *benched licht* (lit candles). The holidays were a natural part of the calendar in our family.

When it came to Sukkot, our rabbi invited everyone to pack a dairy lunch and join him in the sukkah at the synagogue, but I hardly, if ever, took him up on it. Why go to all that bother when I was more comfortable eating at home?

Growing up, there was a structure that my father once built in the backyard of the house. My parents called it a sukkah, but, in hindsight, it wasn't a real sukkah. It had lattice work on three sides, but the fourth was completely open. With a regular roof just like the one on my house, the inside of the sukkah always stayed dry and it was a great place to store stuff. On warm summer nights when my father barbecued burgers, we ate in the sukkah. It was fun, but I don't think it had anything to do with Sukkot. (cont. on p. 2)

CIRCLE GAME (cont. from p. 1)...

Two guys are on their way to the racetrack, when one says to the other, "Boy, I hope I break even today. I really need the money."

Cute story, but not a Jewish joke.

Being Jewish is not about breaking even.

If another year passes and we are the same person we started out as, we have not broken even—we are deep in the red.

The Hebrew words for "Days of Awe," *Yamim Noraim*, can also be translated as "Days of Fear." Many of us especially relate to the latter. What is the source of this fear?

More than the fear of having to sit through marathon religious services, and the feeling of not really knowing what we should be thinking or feeling, is the fear of accountability.

A man walks into a bar and says, "Give me a beer before problems start!"

Again, the man orders a beer saying, "Give me a beer before problems start!"

The bartender looks confused. This goes on for a while, and after the fifth beer the bartender is totally mystified and asks the man, "When are you going to pay for these beers?"

The man answers, "Ah, now the problems start!"

We need not get stuck with a tab we can't pay.

The Rambam (Maimonides) teaches that the sound of the shofar is crying out, "*Wake up, you slumberers, from your deep sleep. Take an accounting...*"

The sound of the shofar reminds us to settle our accounts while we still have time before time for judgment is rendered. This special seasonal tally is called a "*cheshbon hanefesh*," a spiritual accounting.

How do we begin? We can turn to the Talmud for advice. The sage Rabba, in tractate *Shabbat* 31a, says that at the end of one's life, the first three questions asked while being judged by the Heavenly tribunal are, "*Were you honest in your business dealings? Did you set aside a regular time for study? Were you actively trying to create a family?*"

It is significant that the first question deals with human relationships. The measure of our success as a Jew is how we relate to others, and the G-dliness we seek to integrate into our lives is first and foremost expressed in our social interactions.

Have we fallen short in this area? We still have an opportunity to make amends, and although Yom Kippur does not atone for damages done to another person, we can still personally ask for *mechila*, for forgiveness, from anyone whom we may have wronged.

Seeing ourselves as works-in-progress is crucial to Jewish growth, and regular study, even in small amounts, will go far in helping us feel that we are in fact growing. If you need strengthening in this area, then now is the time to find a learning partner, register for a class, subscribe to an email list. Rabbi Hillel in the Mishna says, "*...and don't say, 'I will study when I have time,' lest you never find the time.*" (*Avot* 2:4)

Interestingly, the question about creating a family asks, "*Osakta b'pirya v'rivya?*" Were we *osaik*, were we completely preoccupied in creating a family? This means more than just physically having children, but also being actively involved in the children's spiritual development.

Are we outsourcing our children's Jewish lives, or are we actively involved, leading by example? Why not resolve to spend a few minutes connecting with your children spiritually each week, especially on Shabbat? It is worth the investment.

After our *cheshbon hanefesh*, our "soul accounting," we can easily come up with a spiritual business plan. What are our goals for the month, for the year? Five years? Ten years?

Make a list, put it on an index card, and carry it with you, taking a glance weekly, or better yet, daily.

With the proper preparation we can change the "Days of Fear" back into the "Days of Awe," when we can confidently bare our souls to our Creator. Although we are works-in-progress, we are sincere in our desire to connect, and work on our primordial relationship.

We are truly in awe of the power of G-d in the world, and are eager to return to G-d, and to ourselves.

K'tivah Va'chatimah Tovah --"May you be written and sealed in the Book of Life, for good."

Rabbi Greg Wall has been the spiritual leader of the Sixth Street Community Synagogue since September, 2009. Rabbi Wall (also known as "the Jazz Rabbi") is a celebrated musician and recording artist whose innovative downtown blend of jazz, world music and Jewish sounds has filled the halls of top venues from Carnegie Hall to stages throughout North America, Europe and Israel.

SUKKOT, WHY BOTHER (cont. from p. 1)...

When I was in Sunday school, I learned that Sukkot had something to do with the Jewish people in the desert a long time ago. To celebrate it, you were supposed to buy a tree branch and some kind of yellow fruit. My husband never had his own lulav and etrog—until our sons insisted. You see, as our sons started to grow into adulthood, they each became interested in learning more about our Jewish heritage. Over time, and each at his own pace, they both became *Baalei Teshuvah* (returnees to observance).

I still remember the time Chaim, our younger son, insisted that we take him shopping for Sukkot. We were on the way back from picking him up after one of his many trips to Israel, and my husband and I were tired after making the arduous trip from upstate New York to JFK airport. Making a stop on Main Street in Queens was not something we wanted to do. Having not seen him for almost a year, however, we did as he asked.

"Just make it quick," my husband said, as Chaim dashed out of the car.

(cont. on p. 4)

WORDS OF STRENGTH (cont. from p. 1)...that through our *tefillah* we are able to change ourselves. By transforming ourselves through the power of our *tefillah*, we change our *mazal* and our destiny.

I would like to share some insights about this power, especially now, during the season of penitence, when G-d is setting everything up for us so that we will be successful in making this transformation.

There is a *Midrash Tanchuma* referenced in the book *No Greater Treasure*, by Shoshana Lepon, entitled, "A Sacred Trust." The story is about an unnamed woman who is widowed three times, each time her husband passes on the day after her wedding. A cousin becomes very close to this woman's father and manages to convince her father to let him, the cousin, marry this woman. Her fourth marriage! When the girl learns that she is to wed again, she is terrified and cries out to G-d, "Take my life...but don't let another man die because of me!" Her father believes that his daughter is meant to suffer as a result of something that he has done. When she marries, her *mazal* (fate) becomes intertwined with that of the groom. As a result, the groom's destiny changes, and it becomes his time to die. When the girl refuses to marry the cousin for fear that he, like his three predecessors, will die, he gently tells her, "Does G-d want you to stop living? Does He want you to give up? No, there must be a way..." And so they marry.

On the night of her wedding, the bride secludes herself in her room to pray. The *Midrash* cites her prayer because there is much to learn from it: "*Don't You place the paths of life and death before each person? Then let me choose life! The world was created for each individual. It must have a place for me as well. If G-d loves me and wants me to succeed, then I must fight with all my soul.*" She is interrupted by her new husband's urgent knocking on the door. He tells her that the angel of death has come to take him away and that he, the new husband, has pleaded with the angel,

"...please...wait here until I take leave of my wife. Let me ask her permission before I set out on my journey." The woman tells her husband, "I shall go and speak to him for myself."

The unnamed woman steps outside and completes her beautiful *tefillah* with a power that changes her destiny: "*You have taken three men from me, but for this one I will fight! I have new evidence to use in his defense, and it is found in Your own Torah. The Torah says: 'When a man takes a new wife, he shall not go out to war or embark on any journey; he shall be free in his home for one year and shall rejoice with his wife...' You are true and Your word is true, but if You take my husband, the Torah will become a lie.*"

With this prayer, the woman changed her destiny and her husband lived (*Tanchuma Haazinu* 9). This demonstrates how we can change our destiny. Nothing is too great to ask of G-d. In fact, G-d relishes our requests.

"You have already taken three husbands. This one I will fight for!"



"THROUGH PRAYER WE CAN CHANGE OUR DESTINY"

Many years ago, when I was newly religious, I had a very memorable phone conversation with an important Rebbetzin. She told me that we should not just be thankful to G-d for all that He's given us, but that we should continue to ask Him for more. She told me that we learn this from the matriarch Leah who, after naming her son "Yehuda" in order to thank G-d, stopped having children for a while. *Because although she thanked G-d, she stopped asking Him for more.* And from this we learn that we should always be asking Hashem for more.

But how do we ask? There are multitudes of wonderful books written about how to pray, how to have your prayers answered and how to talk to the Al-mighty. I encourage everyone to use these books and learn as much about this topic as they can. I would simply like to share with you here one small inspiration that I've gleaned in my investigation of this topic.

Talk to G-d as you would talk to your father--from the depths of your heart. Talk without inhibitions. If the answer He is giving you seems to you that it is preventing you from furthering your ability to glorify His Torah, like the woman in this example, don't be afraid to discuss it with Him.

May all your prayers be answered positively this Rosh Hashana and always.

Ketiva va'chatima tova!

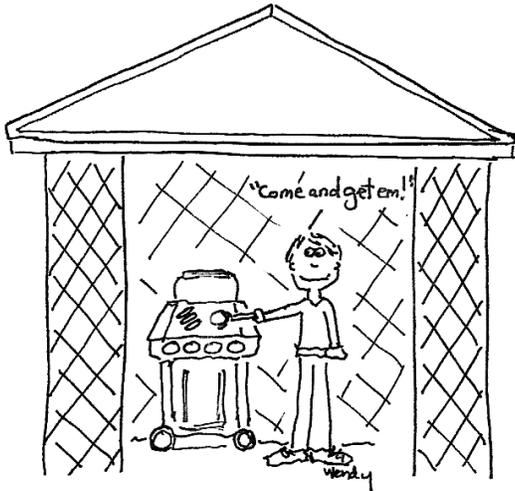
Shoshana Raff has both MScA & MSW degrees with a private consulting/coaching practice in Rockland County, NY, where she also teaches marketing, management and entrepreneurship classes. Her latest adventure is the creation of 'The Kosher Shopaholic', a fast-growing website that features the best deals, coupons, savings and reviews on 'everything Jewish.' Shoshana is forever grateful to NJOP and their Free Hebrew Reading Crash Course for helping her to find her way back to Jewish tradition. She can be found at: www.koshershopaholic.com.

SUKKOT, WHY BOTHER (cont. from p. 2)...

"No problem," our son insisted. "I know exactly what I want." Little did we realize what was involved in Chaim's quest for the *perfect* etrog. After an hour of following him from one outdoor market to another, up one side of the street and down the other, we ran out of patience.

"Enough already," I groaned. "Pick one and let's get out of here!"

"I just did," Chaim grinned, holding up his prized specimen. "This one is perfect!" I thought he was nuts. The



"OUR FAMILY SUKKAH WAS A GREAT PLACE TO STORE STUFF AND TO BARBECUE!"

etrog, which looked to me like an overgrown lemon, cost almost fifty dollars!

That day we also purchased a sukkah with our son. It has a special spot in the back of our garage now that Chaim has a family of his own with whom we spend the first two days of Sukkot. By the time we arrive at our son's home, the sukkah is usually already up and the wonderful decorations made by our grandchildren are on display.

How can I describe Chaim's sukkah? While I have fond memories of the small edifice my parents called a sukkah, Chaim's sukkah is a special world for us. No matter how cold it is outside, I feel warm inside every time I enter it. Chaim's wife is a wonderful cook, but everything tastes even better when eaten in the sukkah. Thanks to my family, I've come to realize that a sukkah is not just a random structure, it's an important part of our Jewish heritage. More significantly, it's someplace I love to be.

BJ Rosenfeld is president of Hadassah Capital District and vice-president of the Va'ad Hakashruth of the Capital District. She chairs the Community Relations Council for the Jewish Federation of Northeastern New York and serves on the board of Women's Philanthropies and the Hudson Valley Writer's Guild. Her memoir The Chameleon in the Closet, A Conservative Jewish Mother Reaches Out to Her Orthodox Sons is a tribute to all parents who stand behind their children's life-changing decisions.

Words of Torah for everyone! To receive Rabbi Buchwald's exciting and provocative weekly e-mail message, please send an e-mail to: ezbuchwald@njop.org

To receive a juicy bit of Judaism, daily, from Jewish Treats, please send an e-mail to: jewishtreats@njop.org

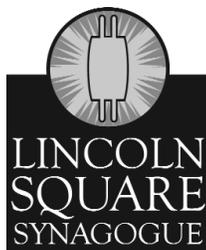


בראשית

Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Sarah Rochel Hewitt 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 contact us: 989 Sixth Avenue, 10th Floor, New York, NY 10018, 646-871-4444, e-mail info@njop.org or visit www.njop.org.

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

Illustrations by Wendy Dunn



**200 AMSTERDAM AVENUE
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10023**

NON-PROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
New York, NY
PERMIT #5047

DATED MATERIAL