

BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

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by Beginners

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בראשית

GROWING READY TO RECEIVE

Risa Goldstein

After 7 years with a growing family in a two bedroom townhouse, my family and I moved into a house in our suburban town. Among the benefits of more space, more privacy, and a great new location, I was also looking forward to having my own piece of planet earth for gardening and enjoying nature. The first spring was glorious, as surprise-after-surprise from the previous owners sprung out of the ground. First were the sprigs of hyacinth -- the first taste of spring. The maples stretched magenta leaves over our front and side yards like a red carpet. I knew I had azalea bushes -- but who knew they would flower in an eye-popping shade of hot pink? The lilies were gorgeous three-toned purple princesses. The rhododendron unfolded next -- colossal blossoms of deep purple and white. The roses by the picture windows were pink and red.

The biggest surprise were the peonies -- my favorite flowers -- which were hidden beneath the ground all winter. They started as determined stalks that looked startlingly like burgundy asparagus before filling in with (cont. on p. 3)



COMING FULL CIRCLE

Penina Taylor

I was raised in a secular Jewish home. What that meant was that being Jewish was an explanation for why I had a big nose, why I talked with my hands and why I liked Chinese food. Other than that, Judaism had no relevance to my life.

Years of abuse by friends of the family, a low self-esteem and alcohol and drug use put me in a very desperate place. By the time I reached high school, my life had reached a downward spiral from which I was sure there would be no rescue. I saw no purpose to life.

When I was at this point of desperation, a classmate who was a born-again Christian explained to me that what I needed was a relationship with G-d. And so, at the age of almost 16, I was introduced to G-d and to Christianity. My newfound faith gave me the strength to stop drinking, smoking and doing drugs. My life turned around so completely that my mother also became convinced that Christianity must be the truth.

Because of the dramatic changes in my life, combined with my ability to speak publicly and the fact that I was Jewish, I was invited to share my story in churches up and down the east coast of the United States. I finished high school and went straight to Bible College. I was certified in Evangelism, served as a counselor for the Billy Graham Crusade, and ended up marrying Paul, who was a trained Pastor. (cont. on p. 2)

SHAVUOT: SEPARATING MILK AND MEAT

Rabbi Yaakov Bienenfeld

Shavuot, the holiday that commemorates *Kabbalat HaTorah*, receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai, is quite an unusual holiday in that it is not associated with any religious object or ritual. In fact, on Shavuot we are commanded to do absolutely nothing! We need not sound the shofar, fast for 25 hours, take a lulav or etrog, eat in a sukkah, light a menorah, nor read a megillah. The only Shavuot ritual that comes to mind is the consumption of cheesecake and other dairy foods -- which, though enjoyable, hardly ranks with the religious rituals of other holidays.

What is the origin and significance of eating dairy foods on Shavuot? And why doesn't the Torah provide us a specific mitzvah to perform on Shavuot?

The abundant reasons given for eating dairy on Shavuot don't really seem to explain the widespread nature of this custom. One reason offered is that upon receiving the Torah, and learning the laws of keeping kosher, the Jews discovered that all of their cooking and eating utensils -- pots, pans, dishes and cutlery -- were *treif* (not kosher) and therefore unusable. As a result, they were forced to eat only those foods that required no preparation, such as milk and cheese. Another reason offered for eating dairy products is that Moses was on Mount Sinai for 40 days and nights receiving the Torah, and the numerical (cont. on p. 2)

COMING FULL CIRCLE (cont. from p. 1)...Before marrying Paul, I became concerned about my family. My parents had divorced when I was 4 years old, and I had only seen my father once in the subsequent 15 years. But, I had a dream that my father would walk me down the aisle at my wedding. So, with the approval and assistance of my mother, we invited my father to come for a visit to get to know us. My father fell back in love with my mother and asked her to remarry him. But, my Mom had a problem, since he wasn't Christian. I knew exactly what to do. I began to share with my father from the Christian Bible, and, as a result, he also decided to become a Christian. My parents remarried seven months before Paul and I wed.

One day, shortly after the birth of our first child, I was praying and felt very strongly that G-d wanted me to start lighting candles on Friday night in honor of the Sabbath. There was nothing recognizably Jewish about my life, I didn't even know the blessing for lighting the candles. I asked my husband what he thought, and he told me that I should go ahead and light the candles, if this is what I felt G-d was calling me to do. So, I began lighting candles on Friday night ... and, still going to church on Sunday!

Several months later, my husband came to me and said, "I've been reading the Bible, and it says that there are some things that G-d commanded the Jews that are forever." He said that IF forever meant FOREVER, then it was his responsibility before G-d to make sure that his Jewish wife and children kept those commandments. Specifically, he was referring to the prohibition of not eating pork or shellfish. So, there went my ham and cheese sandwiches.

Sometime later, I came across a passage in the New Testament that speaks about head coverings. Understanding that it meant that married women were supposed to cover their heads when praying, I began covering my hair.

What an interesting picture was beginning to unfold. I was lighting candles on Friday night, not eating pork or shellfish, covering my head and going to church on Sunday! Something was happening to me that I did not understand. Only years later did I realize that there was a battle going on inside of me. Today, I refer to it as my spiritual identity crisis. My Jewish soul was locked in a battle with my Christian beliefs.

Not long after this, my parents introduced us to Hebrew Christianity (sometimes called Messianic Judaism) -- Jews who practiced Christianity but maintained some level of Jewish identity. Some even kept kosher.

Thinking this might be the solution to my inner conflict, my husband and I and our growing family found a Hebrew Christian congregation to attend. It did not take long before my husband and I began serving in leadership positions within the congregation. We stayed there until my father felt the need to have a congregation closer to where we lived and asked my husband and me to join him and my mom in co-leadership.

After praying and deciding to go for it, I thought to myself, "If we are going to be running a Messianic Jewish congregation, we should probably know a little more about Judaism!" I purchased books on traditional Judaism and learned as much as I could from them. We began to teach the members of our congregation about Torah and Shabbat, Kashrut and *Tzniut* (modesty).

Several years later, we had an unexpected opportunity to purchase a home in Upper Park Heights (the Orthodox (cont. on p. 4)

SEPARATING MILK AND MEAT (cont. from p. 1)...value of *chalah* (milk in Hebrew) is also 40. We therefore consume milk products to commemorate receiving the Torah. One need not be a great Torah scholar to wonder whether justifying holiday menus with math or a Farberware shortage might be a *halachic* (legal) stretch.

However, there is one genuine *halachic* source for eating dairy on Shavuot which is cited by Rabbi Moshe Isserles (known as the Rama) in the *Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim* (The Code of Jewish Law), Chapter 494. The Rama writes that in the Temple, on Shavuot, there was a special offering called the *Shtei Ha'lechem* – the two loaves of bread that were set out to be viewed by the Jewish people and were then distributed by the High Priest. In order to properly commemorate this special offering, two different meals are required on Shavuot, each one accompanied by its own loaf of bread. Since we are prohibited from having milk and meat at the same meal, the custom developed of eating a dairy meal followed by a meat meal. Because the bread used for the dairy meal cannot be reused at the meat meal, we are compelled to use two loaves of bread, corresponding to the *Shtei Ha'lechem*.

The Rama's explanation concerning the origin of eating dairy is supported by the Biblical text in Exodus 23:19, where the Torah states: "*Reishit bikurei admatacha tavee beit Hashem Elokecha, lo tivashel g'di b'chalev eemo* - The first and best fruit of your land shall you bring to the house of Hashem your G-d; you shall not cook a kid (goat) in the milk of its mother."

What is the link between the first part of the verse in which we are commanded to bring the first fruits to the Temple, and the second part which speaks of the prohibition of cooking a kid in its mother's milk? The Torah is obviously connecting these two concepts. In addition to being the time when the two loaves were offered (commemorated by separating the meal in two), Shavuot is also known as *Chag Ha'bikurim*, "the festival of the first fruits." The Torah verse shows us that the emphasis of Shavuot (when we eat the first fruits) is actually the very separation of milk and meat ("don't cook a kid in the milk of its mother"), rather than the specific requirement to eat dairy.

What is so significant about separating milk and meat and why was this chosen as the only custom to be observed on Shavuot? I believe that the requirement to separate milk and meat is a primary example of a concept that is so central to Judaism that it became the defining custom of Shavuot, the holiday of receiving the Torah. The essence of Torah is separateness and making distinctions. As Jews, we are called upon to make many distinctions: we must distinguish the seventh day of the week from the other weekdays, the land of Israel from all other lands, foods that are permissible from those that aren't. The rule of separating milk from meat is a perfect example of this concept. Each substance is kosher on its own, but to be fit for consumption, each must remain separate and distinct from one another.

Seen in this light, what emerges is that there is really no ritual more fitting for Shavuot than the tradition of eating a dairy meal followed by a meat meal. If we focus on the fundamental concept of separateness and distinction, we will have laid the groundwork for all the ritual observances found in the Torah. Keeping this in mind when eating cheesecake will prepare us for receiving of the Torah properly, as well as raise our level of spirituality...along with our cholesterol.

Rabbi Yaakov Bienenfeld is the rabbi of the Young Israel of Harrison, which offers numerous Beginner Programs. This article was originally published in *Bereshith Sivan* 5763/June 2003.

GROWING READY TO RECEIVE (cont. from p. 1)...rich green leaves and then the beloved bobbing balls of pink and white. The last of my little lovelies was the pear tree. I knew it was a pear tree because the flowers that bloomed in the month of Nissan had morphed into tiny green orbs that grew steadily throughout the summer. I am not sure which I enjoyed more that year -- the actual flowers, or the process of unfolding discovery of my new floral bounty as spring flowed into summer.

Oh that summer! The Northeast was dealt the hottest summer on record since the dust bowl era -- and I didn't have central air conditioning. With a newborn and twin toddlers, it took us a very long time to settle into our home, which needed a lot of retrofitting in order to work efficiently. All of this taxed both my brain and my nerves. Every day was a struggle of putting one foot in front of another. I knew that it would pass, that I would feel more in control of the day to day -- someday. I just didn't know when. I *davened* (prayed) that it would be soon. Ironically, even the September weather was extreme, with only 8 rain-free days in the month. It was close to Rosh Hashana, and I was over my fairytale fantasies of gardening because I knew that I would never have the time or the *koach* (strength).

In the fall, the pears were at their peak. However, unlike all my spring discoveries which filled me with delight, these pears were a massive disappointment. I had fantasized about fruit pies and crumbles eaten in the sukkah, made from our homegrown, organic, locally sourced cruelty-free pears. Alas, the cruel joke was on me. The pears were hard, dry and occasionally wormy. They littered the driveway, and, unless they were scooped up and disposed of in airtight cans, the pears' decaying smell of cider vinegar beckoned flies to a veritable smorgasbord that I could live without. Needless to say, this tree and its pitiful fruit did not fit into my game plan.

There is a *halacha* (Jewish law) that one may not cut down a living, fruit-bearing tree. Unimpressed, I sought dispensation and was thrilled to find out that by selling the tree to my non-Jewish gardener, I could thereby disown it and he could remove it [but be sure to ask your own local rabbi, or read on, before trying this at home]. But when it came to actually doing it, I had second thoughts. I talked it over with my husband. Maybe we would save the couple hundred dollars and wait until next year to deal with this irksome tree. At least that was the pretext.



The next spring, in the Hebrew month of Nissan, my family and I dutifully made a blessing on our blooming fruit tree [*birkat ha'ilanot*, a once-a-year mitzvah], without the zeal from the year before, knowing that this tree only produced duds, and was living on borrowed time.

Time passed. We had another hot summer, but somehow we had settled into a groove. We even had a chance that summer to go to the mountains for a cool summer getaway. When we came home, a surprising sight awaited us. The pears on our tree looked.... normal! Like Whole Foods, farmers market, quite perfect and delicious. We plucked a few and were able to make a *shehechyanu* (blessing of thanks for having the opportunity to partake of the new fruit) on a new fruit. Hey, that's the second mitzvah that this tree had brought! We enjoyed our 20 or 30 pears and shared some with neighbors. We learned to get rid of the fallen, damaged pears as quickly as possible, which kept pests away. I studied up on pear-tree management and realized that a tiny bit of pruning could help improve the yield, so I pulled out my garden shears and strategically pruned away the unproductive branches.

The next year brought a huge bumper crop of pears. It was bountiful enough for me and my little helpers-in-training to make pear sauce, pear crumble, pear and almond tart, and still have more pears left over for lunch boxes. We left a ladder in the yard for neighbors to come by and pick a few pears on their own and make a *shehechyanu* and enjoy. Who knew this erstwhile oppressive and burdensome tree would become such a gift and bring us such joy and richness?

Shavuot is a holiday where we see that patience is needed to achieve big things. It is the culmination of a promise made over 400 years earlier when Abraham was told by G-d that his children would be enslaved, then freed and made into a great nation. The slavery that followed almost completely broke our national will, but G-d brought plagues that were a sign not just to the Egyptians but also to the Children of Israel that the Master of the Universe was in charge of their fate. They slowly began to believe in the possibility of salvation. But, could they really believe? After 210 years of servitude they lived and thought like slaves.

In the blink of an eye, the Children of Israel were brought out of Egypt and their enemies were drowned in the sea, at which time extreme joy, inspiration and the heights of prophecy were experienced by even the lowliest handmaiden. But, this experience was fleeting! They were not yet ready to receive the eternal Torah directly from God's mouth. There needed to be an additional seven weeks of spiritual preparation before the nation of Israel could receive the gift that G-d wanted them to have.

Shavuot reminds us to take the long view. Slow, incremental changes make a difference. Our patience and small efforts add up to big things. They can even prepare us to help reveal real greatness in this world. Sometimes there will be trials. Sometimes the thing that looks like an impediment is really a blessing. But the lesson of Shavuot is to get ready! Prepare! Don't lose hope and think that tomorrow will be the same as today. Because when your bumper crop comes, you don't want to miss it!

Risa Goldstein hails from Birmingham, Alabama and has transitioned from life as a Georgia attorney to that of a real New Jersey housewife.



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COMING FULL CIRCLE (cont. from p. 2)...Jewish area of Baltimore). We asked our congregation to pray concerning G-d's will as to whether or not we should buy that house. The congregation was unanimous -- it was definitely G-d's will to buy the house. After all, who better to convert Orthodox Jews to Hebrew Christianity than Messianic Jews who look and act like Orthodox Jews, right?

Immediately after moving in, we realized that our congregation was not within walking distance of our home. If we drove to our congregation on Shabbat, no one would listen to a word we had to say. So we decided to visit a local Orthodox shul on Shabbat. We met many very nice people and began almost immediately to make friends.

After a couple of weeks, my husband, being a man of tremendous integrity, insisted that we talk to the rabbi of the shul and let him know that we were Messianic. I didn't think it was a good idea, but he insisted. The rabbi, knowing that I was Jewish and that my husband was not, assumed that we had called him to speak with him about conversion. My husband told the rabbi what we believed. At one point the rabbi stopped my husband and said, "But you don't believe that anymore, do you?" My husband said that he actually did. In the few minutes it took for shock to register on the rabbi's face, I began to see my world fall apart.



After a long silence, the rabbi told me the most important thing anyone has ever told me along my journey. He told me that I was a Jew no matter what I believed, even though what I believed wasn't Jewish or Judaism. He explained to me that regardless of what I believed, I had a responsibility to fulfill the commandments that G-d had given the Jewish people.

That day changed our lives forever! The conversation that ensued resulted in my understanding that pretty much everything that I had believed in the previous 17 years was not true. One by one, the bricks of the foundation of my faith were being pulled out. How many bricks need to be pulled out of a foundation before it begins to crumble?

I was faced with the daunting task of figuring out what I actually believed. My studying led me to embrace Torah Judaism and so began my Orthodox journey! About a year after I came back to Judaism, my mother and father came back too. Three years later, my husband, now Pinchas Moshe, converted to Judaism and we were married according to Jewish law. It was a supreme culmination to a very long and difficult journey.

Penina Taylor is a world-renowned Jewish inspirational and motivational speaker and author who lives in Israel. Her two books -- Coming Full Circle and Scripture Twisting are available on Amazon.com and she is available to speak in the United States as well as other countries. Her next US speaking tour is scheduled for the end of December. For more information, please visit her website at www.peninataylor.com.

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