OF BEGINNERS AND MINYANS: A JOURNEY TO JUDAISM

by Steven Winnett

In the beginning, for me, there was the Beginners' Minyan at Lincoln uare Synagogue in Manhattan, led then as now by Rabbi Ephraim Buchwald. I was the true beginner, the non-Jew who knew virtually nothing about Judaism. Everyone else in the room "belonged"; they weren't really beginning, they were starting over. Not that I was made to feel unwelcome, mind you; my questions, no matter how elementary, were always patiently answered. I was even permitted to give a Dvar Torah, as paradoxical as that might seem to some.

I still reflect on how incredibly ignorant I was about Judaism when I started down this road. I was well-educated in Western culture, a graduate of Canadian and English universities, a student of literature and history, but I had no substantial personal contact with Jews or Judaism. I had encountered them briefly in literature, in the character of Shylock the moneylender in Shakespeare's "Merchant of Venice", or in the somewhat crass characters of the novels of Mordecai Richler, with whom I shared the same birthplace (Montreal). The Jews and Judaism seemed but a cultural footnote on the larger scene. Viewed from the perspective of the dominant culture, they were at best some sort of living fossil. I was aware that they had suffered terribly in the Second World War, for no good reason other than other people's hatred. I was also aware that the Jews had succeeded, against great odds, in founding their own state, Israel, after that war, and I applauded the courage of that plucky nation when in 1967, and again in 1973, they fended off massive attacks from their Arab neighbors. Nevertheless, the lives of Jews, and the content of Judaism, remained things totally on the periphery of my standard, secular, Western mind.

This immense ignorance about Judaism remains profoundly disturbing for me. It is one of the primary reasons I choose today to send my child to a Jewish day school rather than to that instrument of assimilation, the public school, where I know - because I have been there - hat she would learn absolutely nothing about Judaism. But I digress

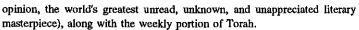
So, I was in essence totally ignorant of Judaism and of Jews until - I married one.

Now, my wife did not press her views on me, but I was curious, and so she directed me to the Beginners Service at Lincoln Square, which was three minutes walk from our apartment. So that is how I ended up there.

I found this service one of the strangest things I had ever seen. I came to think of it - and I mean nothing derogatory here - as a 3-hour solo virtuoso performance. I watched in amazement as Rabbi Buchwald conducted this service using a language of which I knew almost nothing and cheerfully - yes, cheerfully - fielded questions from the audience, who would interrupt him at almost any point - which he invited - with questions which were often hostile. I don't mean that these questions were personally hostile, but rather they were hostile to the traditional (a.k.a. Orthodox) Judaism which the rabbi would discourse upon between parts of the service. It astounded me to see his total confidence in what he was saying, his complete aplomb in the face of this barrage of questions.

My amazement at this tremendously confident - and knowledgeable display led me to begin studying what it was that was being said. And here again my eyes were opened; I found a rich tradition, a tradition not just of belief but also of study and of deeds. This total world-view of Torah Judaism was completely alien to the dominant Western culture that I was a part of, which essentially consigned "religion" to a set of once-a-week beliefs with little concrete linkage to the actions one performs in the world and in the home. I remember being amazed at the notion being expressed by Rabbi Buchwald that the home was just as important - nay, more important - to the life of the observant Jew than the synagogue.

So, I did a little more learning. I took a Hebrew course at Lincoln Square, even ventured into a Rashi course. I also went to a Shabbaton at LSS from which I obtained a booklet and tapes on observing Shabbat in the home, which I still use. I studied some of the prayers in the Siddur (in my



And yet - I didn't make the jump. Something within me made me cautious, somehow still content with the status of a friendly and somewhat knowledgeable outsider.

Time passed, we became parents, and we left New York to live in New Hampshire. We looked into the local synagogues, Reform and Conservative, joining first the one and then the other. We sent our daughter to public school for kindergarten, and to the Sunday school at the Conservative synagogue. We dug out the Shabbat materials from Lincoln Square and began to enjoy the beauty of Shabbat in the home (to me, the "state secret" of Judaism). Those 25 or so hours became a special moment in the week, something far greater than a mere vacation.

We also made the decision to send our daughter to the nearest day school, Merrimack Valley Hebrew Academy in Lowell, Massachusetts. We wanted her to learn about and to experience Judaism every day at school, in an environment where all the other children would be Jewish and where she would not be submerged into the dominant culture, with its Hallowe'en costumes, Xmas trees, Valentine cards, and Easter eggs right there in the public school.

But this was not enough. We decided to strictly keep kosher. When you make this decision, it has a profound impact on your life. It makes the simple act of preparing and eating meals a complex one involving questions of halacha. It turns the routine task of shopping for food in the supermarket into

a complex decision-making process. And it throws up a wall between you and other people, because you can no longer eat at their homes or eat out at their favorite restaurants.

At this point we were members of a Conservative synagogue. I found myself seriously thinking of converting with them. So why didn't I? Why didn't we just stay with the Conservative movement?

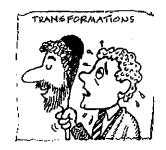
The breaking point came for me when we told other people at the synagogue that we had decided to strictly keep kosher and Shabbat and people laughed at us. It was a shock to the system. I had assumed - naively, that we would be praised. It was then that I began to see a fatal flaw in the Conservative and Reform movements. True, they would use

Hebrew to varied extents, but most people did not want to observe. Strictly keeping kosher and Shabbat, they said, was just "too difficult" or "too expensive" or "too hard on the kids." The same arguments were used against sending one's children to a Jewish day school, in addition to the argument that this would cut the child off from "normal" society. Halacha was for them something to be ignored, bent, or "adjusted", not something given once - for all time - at Sinai. I could not accept this rationalization for non-observance.

I found myself terribly disillusioned with these movements and, through a friend at Lincoln Square, Mr. Cyrus Abbe, made contact with the National Jewish Outreach Program headed by my old teacher, Rabbi Buchwald. They put me in touch with Rabbi Chaim Goldberger at Montefiore Orthodox Synagogue in Lowell, Massachusetts. He invited me and my family to spend a Shabbat at his home. He also took me on as his student to prepare me for my conversion.

Thus began my career as the invisible man at the Montefiore Synagogue. I was given this name - in friendship - by one of the regulars at the minyan because, of course, I did not count for the minyan. Here is where I left the "beginners" stage of my journey and began what I call the "minyan" stage. I found myself welcomed into this synagogue and warmly received by its members. I found myself enjoying the experience of Shabbat in this small and friendly shul. Since we lived a mere 17 miles from the shul, we made arrangements to secure a small "Shabbat apartment" within walking distance of the shul. As the weeks went by, I felt that I was part of a moving experience.

(cont. on reverse side)



LSS NEWS LSS NEWS

CONGRATULATIONS AND MAZAL TOV

ENGAGEMENTS

Gayle Dannheisser and Stewart Ashkenazy Wendy Klein and Brandon Dunn Mary Jo Montalvo and Moshe Eliovson

MARRIAGES

MARHIAGES
Joelle Levine and Eliezer Friedman
Mazal Tov to parents Renee and Irwin Levine
Ellen Levine and Dr. Michael King
Jody Spiegel and Stephen Lerner
Lori Epstein and Simon Zarour
Zene Schechter and Jack Chudnoff

Mincha Daily Mincha and Maariv

Shabbat July 8th (CHUKKAT) Shabbat Morning Services Daf Yoml & Chumash Classes

Shabbat, July 15th (BALAK) Shabbat Moming Services Daf Yomi & Chumash Classes Mincha
Daily Mincha and Massiv Monday
Thursday

nday, July 16th st of 17th Day of Tammuz

Shabbat, July 22nd (PINCHAS) Shabbat Morning Services Dat Yord & Chumash Classes Friday, July 28th Rosh Chodesh Av

Shabbat, July 29th (MAATOT/MASEI) Shabbat Moining Servi Daf Yomi & Chumash Classes Mincha Dally Mincha and Massiv

Sunday, August 6th Tisha B'Av Mouning Services

Shabbat, August 5th (DEVORIM) Shabbat Hazon Daf Yorri Shabbat Moming Services Mincha Fast begins Maaily followed by Elcha and Kinot

Moming services Mincha Fest concludes

BIRTHS
Hannah Lee and Dr. Eyal Barzel, on the birth of a girl, llana
Kaila and Barry Friedman, on the birth of a boy, Moshe Simcha
Cindy and Ed Harris, on the birth of a boy, Aryeh Moshe
Caryn Halbrecht and Tommy Haendler, on the birth of a boy, Alex (Asher)
Yaffa and Jeff Hodes, on the birth of a boy, Oren Isaac

Oren Isaac Rivka Rochel and Baruch Kramer, on the birth of a girl, Zahava ca and Michael Levinson, on the birth of a girl, Rochel

giri, roonel Hiddy Feinberg and Louis Parks, on the birth of a boy, Andrew (Asher Yitzchak) Adina and Rabbi Mark Penner, on the birth of a boy, Gedaliah Moshe

Moming Services 7 & 7:40 a.m. Kindle Shabbat Cendles 7.58 p.m. Mincha and Kabbatat Shabbat 6:45 & 8:00 p.m.

Mincha
Daily Mincha and Maariv

..... 7:10 & 8:30 a.m.

..... 6:10 n.nv

Debbie and Mark Roslimsky, on the birth of a boy, Joshua David

CONDOLENCES
Sandy Braitman, on the loss of her mother,
Pauline Braitman
Helene Feldman, on the loss of her mother,
Wilma Feldman
Marjoris Munsterberg Gregor, on the loss of her
father, Prof. Hugo Musterberg
Yocheved Radovsky, on the loss of her father,
Prof. Stanley Broskie

Michael Rose, on the loss of his mother, Claire

BAR MITZVAH Barbara and Shlomo Dov Gewirtz, on the Bar Mitzvah of their son, Zvi

TZEITCHEM L'SHALOM { To live and/or study in Israel) Jill Brandfon Dr. Jack Shershow

REFUAH SH'LEIMAH Mergot Zitter

ONGRATULATIONS

o Dr. Leonard Davidman for receiving the Special Service Award from Lincoln Square Synagogue

To Miryam Wohlgemuth, for receiving the Community Service Award from the Jewish Renaissance Center To Rachel and Richard Weinberg, for being honored at the 25th Anniversary Dinner of Neve Yerushalayim College

THANK YOU
To Stewart Ashkenazy, Miriam Cyrulnik, Gayle
Dannheisser and Peter Ferkas for the wonderful
Purim Schpiel 1995
To Adam Schlesinger for reading the Megillah at the

Purim Beginners service



Friday Evening Beginners Services June 2, 9, 16, 23 Friday Evening Beginners Dinner June 16, cost \$18 Beginners Shabbat Luncheon Sept 9, cost \$15 All Night Shavuot Learn-in Sat. June 3 11:30 pm - 6:45 am Rosh Hashana Services Sun-Tues, Sept. 24-26

SCHEDULE OF SERVICES

SCHEDULE OF SERVICE	3
Fast concludes	.m.
Friday, August 11th Kindle Shabbat Candles Mincha and Kabbalat Shabbat Last week of early Mincha and Kebbalat Shabbat	.m. .m.
Shabbat, August 12th (VAETCHANAN) Shabbat Nachanus 8:45 a Shabbat Moming Selvices. 8:10 p Lei Yori 8:10 p Chumash Class 6:55 p Flamud Class 6:55 p Mincha 7:40 p Deily Mincha and Meativ. 7:40 p	.m. .m. .n.
Friday, August 16th Kindle Shalibat Candles . 7:32 p Mincha and Kehbalat Shabbat . 7:36 p	.m. .m.
Shabbat, August 19th (EKEV) Shabbat Moming Selvices 8:45 a Dal Yomi 8:00 p Chumash Class 6:30 p Talmud Class 6:45 p Milocha 7:30 p Dally Mincha and Masilv 7:30 p	IW.
Friday, August 25th Kindle Shalibat Candles	.m.
Shabbat, August 26th (REEH) Rosh Chodesh Elul 845 a. Shabbat Moming Services B. 45 a. Dal Yorny 5.50 p. Chumash Class 6.20 p. Tallmid Class 6.35 p. Mincha 7.20 p. Daily Mincha and Maariv 7.20 p.	.m. .m. .m. .m. .m.
Sunday August 27th Rosh Chodesh Elui Moming Services	.m.
Fildey, September 1st Kindle Shahbat Candles	.m. .m.
Shabbat, September 2nd (SHOFTIM) 8:45 a Shabbat Moming Services 8:20 p Daf Yorni 5:40 p Chunnash Cless 6:10 p Takmud Class 6:25 p Mincha 7:10 p Deily Mincha and Maarty 7:10 p	m.
Monday, September 4th Labor Day Monday, September 4th Labor Day Monday Sevices 7:05 & 8:30 a Fidday, September 8th 6:58 p Mincha and Kabbiala Shabbat 7:00 p 7	.m.
Shabbat, September 9th (KI TETZE) 845 a Shabbat Moning Services 9.45 a Daf Yorn 5.25 p Chunsel: Class 5.55 p Talmud Class 0.10 p Mincha 8.55 p Daily Mincha and Maaily 7.00 p	.m, .m. .m. .m. .m. .m.

Friday, September 15th Kindle Shabbat Candles
Shabisat Septembes 16th (KLTAVO)
Monday-Friday September 18th-22nd Selichot & Morning Selvices 6:40 & 7:30 a.m.
Friday, September 22nd Kindle Shabbat Candles
Shabhat, September 23rd (NITZAVIM) Shabhat Moming Services 8:45 a.m. Shabhat Moming Services 5:06 p.m. Daf Yorni 5:06 p.m. Chumash Class 5:50 p.m. Falmud Class 5:50 p.m. Mincha 6:36 p.m. Mincha 6:36 p.m.
Sunday, September 24th Erev Rosh Hashana Selichot and Mouring Services 6:00 & 8:00 a.m.
Kindle Rosh Hashana Candles 6:32 p.m. Mincha and Kahbalat Rosh Hashana 6:35 p.m.
Monday, September 25th Rosh Hashana Services 7:45 a.m. Rosh Hashana Service 9:00 a.m. Rishlach Walk 6:30 p.m. 6:30 p.m.
Tuesday, Septembei 26th 7.45 a.m. Rosh Hashana Services 9.00 a.m. beginners Service 9.00 a.m. Dal Yorni 530 p.m. Mincha 6:30 p.m. Mincha 6:30 p.m.
Wednesday, September 27th Fast of Gedala Fast begins 5:36 a.m. Selicitot & Morning Services 6:35 & 7:30 a.m. Milcita 6:15 p.m. Fast concludes 7:16 p.m.
Thursday September 28th Selichot and Moming Services 6:35 & 7:30 a.m. Daily Minche and Maeik 6:30 p.m.
Filday, September 29th Selichot and Moming Services 6:35 & 7:30 a.m. Kindle Shabbat Candles 6:24 p.m. Mincha and Kabbalat Shabbat 6:30 p.m.
Satuuday, September 30th Shabbat Shuva Dal Yenw 8:00 a.m. Shabbat Moming services 8:46 a.m. Mincha 5:35 p.m. Idlowed by Rabbi Weinberg's Shabbat Shuva Discourse

BEGINNERS, (cont. from front) of awe that the words we were using were thousands of years old. I felt in touch with something not just ancient but also

Eventually, I went before the Boston Beit Din, was examined by them, and was converted by them. It gave me a tremendous feeling to be counted toward the minyan. I wonder how often people think about the profundity of this concept. It makes a statement that being a Jew and striving to live the life of Torah Judaism is not just a personal action, nor is it just a family action; it is also a communal action. If you gathered together the nine most learned rabbis in the world, they still could not say Kaddish, lacking that tenth man. I had never given this much thought until one Shabbat evening at Montefiore when we were one short for the minyan (as the invisible man I of course did not count). There was a sense of regret in the air, so great that one could almost touch it. It showed me that you can learn not only from the presence of something but also from its absence.

What wealth the Jewish people have in all these treasures which are hidden from the eyes of the dominant culture - Shabbat, kashrut, mitzvot, studying Torah, the minyan. How lucky I am to have gone from total ignorance of these treasures to an active participation in them. How sad it is that many of those who are born into this immensely wealthy inheritance - who own it simply by birthright - should choose to ignore it or reject it. They are prisoners of that dominant world view which sees the Jews and Judaism as nothing more than a living fossil. In truth, Torah Judaism is a garden which flourishes out of sight of that dominant world view and which brings sustenance, meaning and enjoyment to those who choose to enter it and to tend it.

Steve Winnett is a software engineer in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He lives with his wife Ilana and daughter Sarah in Nashua, New Hampshire.