

## ME A CULPA

Mark Ellman

Oh, how I cherish “The *Ba'al Teshuvah* Gap”—that glorious gulf between me and my more firmly established *frum* counterparts, the cultural divide that frees me from having to think about levels of commitment I don't even want to think about.

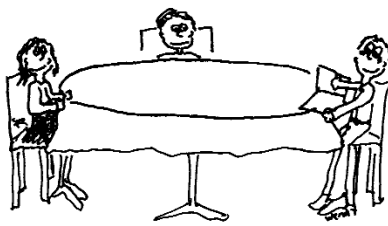
Don't get me wrong. I love the ideal. The ideal I love. That G-d looks to our people to serve as His “kingdom of priests” and “light unto the nation” is a premise I fully accept. And I know that more than righteousness, this requires holiness—to strive at all times to emulate G-d, to be as consistently godlike as is humanly possible, 24/7. This I embrace and uphold. Absolutely. Except when I don't.

Let's face it, the challenge can be daunting.

I remember the first time I felt personally challenged by Orthodox standards. It was many years before I even considered becoming Orthodox myself. In fact, I don't think I even knew an Orthodox Jew. Well I knew one, distantly, but being a devout secularist, had long ago dismissed him as a zealot. And then I heard from a third party that he had made some sort of crazy commitment to study Torah with his young son every night for a year. Every night! For a year! Even worse, this was already a year later, and he had actually done it! I couldn't help but be impressed. And distressed. I had to admit, it was distressingly impressive.

And what's interesting now as I recall early memories of having my opinion of the Orthodox raised against my will, is how many of them seem to revolve around a commitment to learning. Whether it was noticing the unnatural extent to which a Jerusalem yeshiva *bocher* optimized his time, nose in his tome as he waited behind me in a supermarket check-out line, or discovering that a perfectly normal suburbanite I knew—a businessman just like me—was spending nights studying at something called a Kollel, the effect was always the same—grudging respect followed by a vague concern that I was somehow failing to assume my share of the responsibility.

And even up to the present. A close friend of mine recently attended the worldwide celebration of the completion of the *Daf Yomi* cycle honoring those stalwarts who learn a Talmud page a day for seven-and-a-half years—and live to tell the tale! Not a participant himself, the sight of so many dedicated *Yidden* moved him to step up and join their ranks. This surprised me because I knew his workload. As headmaster of a large day school, his schedule was already a killer, and though unlike me he did have



"ALL HE HAD SAID WAS THAT IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE -- NOT THAT HE WAS GIVING UP!"

advanced learning skills, with no time to sit with a partner he would have to be doing it all on his own.

Sure enough, shlumping into *shul* a month later, he confessed to me it was impossible. The strain of working through that much Talmud a day had proved overwhelming. Admittedly, my reaction was not exactly what you would call disappointed. A

more accurate term might be “happy,” or “grateful,” or “relieved.” Not that I'm prone to the phobic, but when it comes to bars being raised, I've a definite fear of heights.

A few weeks later with Passover looming, I found myself concerned for my friend's health. Every night that week he had been up cleaning with his wife till one or two in the morning, then up again at five for *minyan* and work. We had dinner together that *Shabbat* in a corner of his basement, and he fell asleep twice. Naturally I tried to eat, *bentsch* and get out of there as quickly as they'd let me so that I could let them both get to sleep, but crossing out the door something out the corner of my eye stopped me cold: Still at the table, he was opening his Talmud!

That's right. All he had said was that it was impossible—not that he was giving it up!

So what's the take away? Since my friend's learning skills are far beyond mine, its unlikely I will ever feel pressed to match his scholarship. *Vive la gap!*

But in a different but no less real sense, I can close the gap. I can match his effort. I can match his diligence. Though I'm loathe to admit it, it is well within my power to apply the same level of commitment to my own level of learning. In that sense, we are all on a level playing field.

There's one more learning memory that stands out, perhaps most dramatically of all. It's walking into a *bais midrash* (study hall) on *Shavuot* night for the first time. Is there anyone who has witnessed that phenomena of sight and sound—scores of Jews arguing, straining, striving together in the pursuit of Torah—who has not been moved by the palpable holiness that fills the room?

As we approach *Shavuot* night, here's hoping this sacred opportunity inspires all of us to learn, grow, and who knows—even close that beloved gap.

*Mark Ellman is a screenwriter living in Los Angeles and former member of the Lincoln Square Synagogue Beginner's Service. Comments on this article may be sent to markellman@comcast.net.*

## CONGRATULATIONS AND MAZAL TOV

## ENGAGEMENTS

Toby Birnbaum and Mark B. Fisher

## WEDDINGS

Shoshana Doktor and Guglielmo Lichtner

Amy (Yehudit) Elfman and Richard Schultz

Susan Kent and Mark Esposito

Elaine Witty and Lawrence Komito

## BIRTHS

Rivka and Shia Cohen, on the birth of a girl, Ayala

Mazal Tov to grandfather, Dr. Stuart Blaustein



Karen and David Fishof, on the birth of a boy,

Mordechai

Tracy and Sander Gerber, on the birth of a girl,

Sari Orah

Yona and Joshua Shoshan, on the birth of twin girls,

Esther and Tamar

Aline and Dr. Dovid Smolanoff, on the birth of a boy,

Simcha Zissel

## BAR/BAT MITZVAH

Jennifer Rachel Katz

Mazal Tov to parents Vicki and Sam Katz

## CONDOLENCES

Susan Banner, on the loss of her father,

Dr. George Schneider

Bruce Simon, on the loss of his father, Joseph Simon

Lori Wagner, on the loss of her mother, Miriam Wagner

## CONGRATULATIONS

Joan and Arnold Stark, Guests of Honor at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale 31st Annual Dinner

## THANK YOU

Ari Moses, for donating copies of the Artsroll Transliterated Linear Siddur



# BERESHITH

## "IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter  
for Beginners,  
by Beginners

Vol. XVIII No. 4  
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# בראשית

## DISTINCTIONS

Channah Ruth Valderamma

It was my exposure to the Jewish prayer of *Tashlich* (the casting away of sins on Rosh Hashana), in August of 2001, that marked the beginning of my transformation. I had started to collect prayers, and while I didn't go out and look for specific prayers, whenever I would come across one that spoke to me, I'd add it to my collection. *Tashlich* was my introduction to Jewish prayer and thought. Just over a year later, my discovery and examination of this prayer led me to my first Shabbat experience, but that is not the story I wish to share with you today.

Since that first Shabbat, I cannot help but look at the world from a Jewish perspective. I didn't really understand why, until a few months ago when I attended a shabbaton in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. At *seudah shlishit* (the third meal of Shabbat), everyone was asked to stand up and say a little bit about themselves, keeping their remarks to under a minute.

When it came to my turn, I was short and to the point. "I'm Channah Ruth Valderrama. I was once a 'goy,' and now I'm a Jew." It actually got a few laughs. As I sat down and others took their turn introducing themselves, a man from the next table motioned to me and asked to have a word with me after *bentching* (Grace after meals).

"You are wrong," he said when we later spoke. "A 'goy' (cont. on p. 2)



## SHAVUOT--EVERY JEW'S BIRTHDAY

Anonymous

Five days before our wedding, my husband celebrated his third birthday. Really. From a Torah perspective, it had been three years since his conversion to Judaism, marking the birth of his Jewish soul.

Following the traditional Ashkenazi custom, D— and I did not see each other the week before our wedding, so I sent him a "birthday present" through a mutual friend. As I placed the "Happy Birthday You Are 3" card in the gift bag, cute cartoons and all, I was struck by how significant the day was. This man was my *bashert*, my divinely intended mate, and yet only three years prior, our marriage would have been impossible.

How had it all come to be? My husband's story is really his to tell. I can only summarize that during a visit to Israel he felt a connection to something far greater than himself and realized that he wished to be part of the Jewish people. Returning to his hometown, D— first reassessed his intentions carefully, and, when he realized that he still wished to be Jewish, he sought out a rabbi to show him the way. (cont. on p. 3)

## LIFE IS A JIGSAW PUZZLE

Larry Greenman

Shavuot is the holiday that celebrates the Children of Israel's acceptance of the Torah and our formation into a nation. The giving of the Torah to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai was so momentous that even the world stood still to be a witness. According to tradition, every Jewish soul--for all generations to come--was present at that incredible moment, and every Jewish soul, for all eternity, accepted the Torah upon him/herself.

Because the Torah became the innate possession of every Jew, even those not yet born, the Talmud states that when a Jewish baby is still in the womb, he/she is accompanied by an angel who treats him/her to a grand tutorial wherein he/she is taught the entire Torah. Immediately before birth, the angel taps the baby on the lips and everything that was learned recedes into the baby's mind and is forgotten.

Sounds preposterous? When I was a young boy, I often thought that the topics I was learning in school were irrelevant to my life. Yet I also remember my late father (cont. on p. 3)



**DISTINCTIONS** (cont. from p. 1)...could never become a Jew. You already had a Jewish *neshama* (soul), but for some reason you were born into a non-Jewish body. You had the inextinguishable spark of holiness that is in every Jewish soul, it was just dormant. Tell me you were not longing to serve the Creator in the deepest recesses of your Jewish heart. The inclination toward Torah is in your essential nature.”

I was dumbfounded. After all, he made complete sense. According to the Talmud: “An angel teaches the entire Torah to a Jewish soul while it lives in its mother’s womb. When the child is about to be born, the angel flicks the fetus above its lip, causing the indentation above the top lip, causing the child to forget what it has learned” (Niddah 30b). In my case, instead of a flick, the angel must have smacked me! It must have smacked me so hard that I had forgotten everything so completely that I was born into a non-Jewish body!

When I was little, I longed to be a saint because they were good and they were close to G-d. (I grew up Catholic, and, in my teenage years, I dabbled in Eastern practices.) What made a person good? Since goodness wasn’t measurable, I passed on trying to figure it out and concentrated on losing myself by merging with the divine. I had been taught in my upbringing, and in my “dabblings,” that deprivation, celibacy and getting as far removed as possible from my senses was holy. Unfortunately, I wasn’t very good at negating my senses, so I was always wracked with guilt...Now I understand that my longing then was really a distorted longing for Torah and mitzvot; the voice from Sinai was calling me. Because the angel had done such a good job, I didn’t understand.

During my first Shabbat experience, in August of 2002, a particular verse from Psalms 115 struck me: “The heavens are the heavens of the L-rd, but the earth He has given to mortals”--while the heavens are already heavenly in character, G-d gave the earth to mortals so that we might make of it something heavenly!

Soon, whatever I had learned in my former life of spiritual practice was shattered.

Then I heard the *Shema* for the first time: “Hear, O’ Israel, the L-rd is your G-d, the L-rd is one!”

It was like waking up for the first time. “Of course!” I thought. Torah kicked in, all my preconceptions then faded, and I understood! Holiness means living the earthly, here-and-now life and sanctifying each moment, each breath. It has nothing to do with transcendence.

From that moment on, I spent every moment studying, thinking, breathing and dreaming Yiddishkeit. I was spellbound by the weekly Torah portions. They were better than soap operas. I lived from Shabbat to Shabbat for Shabbat. I thought that I must be Jewish because I “felt” Jewish. It wasn’t until a few months later, on Simchat Torah, when we began reading Genesis again, that I understood what the real difference was between feeling Jewish and being Jewish. There were distinctions. There was the holy and the mundane; light and darkness; the seventh day and the six days of labor. There was a distinction between Israel and the other nations. Being Jewish was determined by law (if one’s mother is Jewish, or if one goes through conversion and is determined to be ‘kosher’ by a Jewish

court.) As soon as it was clear to me that I was not a Jew, I became determined to become a Jew and have the whole world recognize me as a Jew no matter what. In September of 2003, I accomplished that dream.

Since then, many of my Jewish brothers and sisters have expressed surprise at my considerable Jewish knowledge. They think I must have studied long and hard. I’ve even been asked if I’m “frum from birth.” This is the way a friend’s sister put it one Shabbat in Lakewood: she asked me where I got all my “tidbits” of knowledge, saying that someone had to study a lot to know what I know. It brought to mind this quote from Hasidic lore as told by Martin Buber:

The secret: this is the secret of the unity of G-d. No matter where I take hold of a shred of it, I hold the whole of it. Since the teachings and all the commandments are radiations of G-d’s being, when we lovingly do one commandment utterly and to the core, in this one commandment we take hold of a shred of the unity of G-d, hold the whole of it in our hands, and have fulfilled all.

This is the way I see it. After the revelation, Moses remained on Mt. Sinai studying the whole Torah for 40 consecutive days and nights. The Midrash says that G-d gave the Torah to Moses as a gift, since it’s not humanly possible for a man, even one as great as Moses, to have mastered it in such short a time. The only explanation that I can come up with concerning myself and my relationship to Yiddishkeit is that ‘revelation’ does not deal with the mystery of G-d, but with a person’s life as it should be lived in the presence of that mystery. “This teaching is not beyond reach. It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who among us can go up to heaven and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may do it?’...No, the word is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to do it” (Deuteronomy 30:11-44).

Torah was also given to me as a gift from the right hand of G-d. G-d took me out of the land of Egypt (whose name in Hebrew also refers to a dark, narrow place) to be my G-d. And the word is very close to me, in my mouth and in my heart, to do it. G-d has gotten hold of me--or is it vice versa? All I know is that there will be no letting go on my part.

*Channah Ruth Valderamma lives in Manhattan and is an antique furniture refinisher.*

### Grandma Reba’s Cheesecake--by Tamra Ackerman

#### Ingredients

Crust: Graham Crackers,  
1 Stick Butter, Sugar

Layer 1: 4 Pkgs Softened  
Cream Cheese, 4 Eggs,  
4 Cups Sugar, 2 or 3  
Squeezes of Lemon  
Juice, Capful of Vanilla,  
½ Cup Milk

Layer 2: 1 Container of  
Sour Cream, Capful of  
Vanilla, 1/4 Cup Sugar

Crust: Crush graham crackers and sugar, as much as desired, together. Melt butter and pour into mixture. Press graham crust into spring-form pan.

Layer 1: Mix cream cheese, eggs and sugar until it is a thick, smooth, creamy liquid. Add lemon juice, vanilla and milk. Mix. Pour onto crust. Bake at 350° for 45 min to 1 hr. Remove. Cool until luke warm.

Layer 2: Sweeten sour cream as desired with vanilla and sugar. When Layer 1 is luke warm, spread sour cream mixture on top. Return to oven for 5 to 10 minutes. Refrigerate until serving. Serve with desired fruit topping.

**EVERY JEW'S BIRTHDAY** (cont. from p. 1)...

From my own perspective, it is astounding that we even went out in the first place. After all, on paper he did not come close to meeting my "qualifications." I had been observant for nearly 10 years and had had the privilege of spending time studying in Israel. Modesty aside, in my circle I was considered to be quite knowledgeable, and more than one prospective partner had failed to meet my high-standards for learning. In my mind, the man I married would have been observant at least as long as I had been, and he would have far surpassed me in the area of Judaic studies. What is it they say? Man plans and G-d laughs.

G-d, as you may have realized, works in mysterious ways. Through my husband, I have learned many lessons in humility, and continue to do so. D— did not need all those years of experience that I expected him to need. Since deciding to become a "member of the tribe," D— had undergone a grueling and intense educational regime.

For anyone who is unfamiliar with the process of converting to Judaism, it is a process not to be lightly undertaken. Indeed, when I was getting to know my husband, I spoke to a woman in his hometown community with whom he was close and asked if she thought, given the fact that he was so new, that he was truly dedicated. Having witnessed, at close range, his conversion process, she was shocked that the question could even be asked. Beyond completely turning over his life, giving up non-kosher restaurants, Friday nights at the pub and a host of other old personal pleasures, he was required to spend hours upon hours in Judaism classes. He was tested for knowledge and carefully observed to verify his sincerity. With every step he took closer to the Torah, his identity blurred, shifted and changed. And while D—'s commitment grew with every challenge that he faced, he also had to struggle to deal with the changes in the important relationships of his previous life that he wished to maintain in his new life. There were constant explanations necessary, as well as asking his many friends and family to accommodate his new lifestyle.

D—'s process, from decision to conversion, lasted close to 3 years. Much of what I had learned in my 29 years of existence, he had to learn in that short span of time. Holidays, life cycles, even vocabulary, things that had always been part of my



existence, were all part of his learning process--a process we now continue together.

My husband's "dip day," as we jokingly refer to the day on which he went to the mikvah and ritually immersed himself to complete his conversion, was the 3rd of Sivan. Our wedding anniversary is the 8th of Sivan. In between those two dates is the holiday of Shavuot, the anniversary of the day G-d gave the Jewish people the Torah on Mount Sinai.

It is no coincidence, I realize, that these two days, so important in our personal lives, occur around Shavuot. The holiday of Shavuot is all about preparation for changing oneself completely. When the Children of Israel left Egypt (as celebrated on Passover), they were a fleeing assortment of ex-slaves connected primarily by bloodline. When they stood at Mount Sinai, only seven weeks later, they expressed with one heart the desire to accept the Torah from G-d and to dedicate their lives, and the lives of their children after them, to living the Torah's ideal. Shavuot is often compared to a marriage, with G-d as the groom, the Torah as the wedding contract and the Children of Israel as the bride. It was the beginning of a beautiful, if sometimes turbulent, relationship.

Three thousand plus years later, just prior to Shavuot, D— joined the Jewish nation, accepting upon himself exactly what my own ancestors had accepted at Mount Sinai. And three years later, just after Shavuot, on our wedding day, we joined together and pledged to each other and to G-d that our lives and the lives of our children would be lived by these extraordinary ideals.

As Shavuot approaches, and I look forward to celebrating yet another "dip-day/birthday" with my husband, as well as our anniversary, I am once again awed by the gift that I have been given. Everyday, I have with me a source of inspiration. While I was born a Jew and have chosen to strive to live my life to the full extent of that birthright, my husband accepted the Torah upon himself freely and of his own accord. And while I may have had years of life experience and the gift of a Jewish day school background, my husband is constantly finding new and exciting insights that energize our home.

Thank you G-d, for all your mysterious ways and for opening me up to even consider saying hello to such a "little kid."

**JIGSAW** (cont. from p. 1)...assuring me that I would see, later in life, how everything falls into its proper place. I have come to think of this idea as the "jigsaw puzzle theory."

Perhaps you remember your first 5,000 piece puzzle. Nothing looks more insurmountable. Yet for some reason, many of us are attracted by the challenge. If you're one of them, or have observed someone else doing the puzzle, you can remember the feeling of initial euphoria when you were able to connect two or three pieces together. For a brief instant, the puzzle appeared "doable." The next few minutes were spent persevering until you found another three pieces that clicked together, even though they belonged somewhere else in the puz-

zle. You probably felt better, more confident, although clearly at a loss how the other 4,994 pieces would fit into place. Slowly, you ploughed on, piling up small victories by identifying islands in a sea of jigsaw pieces...And remember that ecstatic feeling when you found that piece you saw an hour earlier that actually bridged two disparate clumps of pieces! Pay dirt! The puzzle actually began to take shape. Your friends who had counted you out an hour ago were now impressed. They were no longer telling you to give up, and they may even have swallowed their pride and offered to help.

The jigsaw puzzle is really a metaphor for life itself, and it was the lesson that my father was trying to impart. (cont. on p. 4)

**JIGSAW** (cont. from p. 3)...What I learn in one place may seem irrelevant, but at some point in my life I will find the connecting piece. This is also a theory that, I believe, would help inspire many Jews who are not yet affiliated with Judaism to begin finding a connection to their history.

So many in our generation have said, either overtly or by their indifference, that the Torah of our ancestors is "in the heavens," meaning that it is far away from their lives. In truth, however, the Torah itself says just the opposite--that the Torah is close to us. It is in our mouths and in our hearts. How's that for encouragement! The Torah is not really a foreign subject, because we once knew it all! It's just not fresh in our minds.

We all know intuitively that things that are valuable to us generally require an investment of time and effort. A person who takes the first step to learn Aleph-Bet or opens the Torah to study knows that it's an uphill climb. Rather than throw up his/her hands, however, he/she is willing to see if he/she can master even a small bit. When he/she learns how to recite the first three letters of the Hebrew alphabet, it is as if those first three puzzle pieces fit together. A larger clump of pieces is discovered later when he/she reads a passage taken from the *siddur* (prayer-book). There's a clear sense of accomplishment.

Putting this puzzle together is about connecting to our grandparents and the previous generations who struggled mightily to preserve our heritage and pass it on to us. It's about connecting to that moment in utero when all of Torah was at our fingertips. Even more so, it is about connecting to a seminal event over 3,300 years ago

when, on Shavuot, the Torah--written in Hebrew, with those same letters--was presented to the Jewish people because we accepted its precepts and its teachings.

I fully realize that a 5,000 piece puzzle is daunting, and the temptation to start and subsequently stop, or even to walk away from it to begin with, is overwhelming. "*Lo alecha hamlacha ligmor*," our rabbis teach us in Ethics of Our Fathers, "It is not for us to complete the work." They also write, however, "*V'lo ata ben chorin l'hibatel memehmah*," "We are not able to simply walk away from the challenge." If we walk away, we would be leaving the opportunity to fully see the "big picture" that finally evolves from those jigsaw puzzle pieces. Begin we must, and for those who take the plunge, there's an infinite reward

that awaits. True, some of the topics one studies may appear as isolated pieces of the puzzle. Other topics, however, will open up whole sections of the design. One day, perhaps next week, maybe five years from now, the bridge between all the different pieces will become visible and will inspire us to finish connecting those pieces.

Shavuot is our opportunity to connect with our people, with our heritage, and with ourselves. The puzzle pieces are laid out before us on a magnificent table representing generations of Jewish teachings and thought. Shavuot is called *zman matan Toratenu*--the time of the giving of our Torah. Not theirs, ours. Let's start putting the pieces together.

*Larry Greenman coordinates follow-up and community development for NJOP.*

LIFE'S A JIGSAW PUZZLE



Illustrations by Wendy Dunn



*בראשית*: "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](mailto:info@njop.org) or visit [www.njop.org](http://www.njop.org).

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