

BERESHITH

"IN THE BEGINNING"

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for Beginners,
by Beginners

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בראשית

The Jewish New Year: One for the Marathon Runner, or One for Me?

Risa Goldstein

"LIFE'S MARATHON"



"THE CHOICES WE MAKE!"

I love eating pasta. Any kind of pasta will do. But, my all-time favorite is the famously artery-clogging *fettuccine alfredo*. Imagining all those calories sitting on my plate is a pretty disheartening proposition, so I usually allow myself to indulge only once or twice a year. When I look at a plate of this creamy delicious cuisine, I see a wicked temptation that I may regret when I have finished. On the other hand, a long-distance runner would see an overflowing platter of pasta as fuel for race day and could "carb up" with abandon, knowing that she would burn those calories as each mile of the race is run. Short of taking up running myself (not likely!), I would love to find a way to efficiently use up all that carb-generated energy in a healthy, productive way.

What does this have to do with the upcoming Jewish New Year? During the holy day of Yom Kippur, we read in the Torah about two goats, identical in every way, that were brought before the High Priest on Yom Kippur when the Temple still stood. After casting lots, one goat was designated to be brought as a sacrifice to G-d, while the other goat was designated "for Azazel." The first goat was then ritually slaughtered with all of the Children of Israel witnessing the act. Goat number two was then made the symbolic bearer of the sins of the Children of Israel and led to the wilderness, (cont. on p. 2)

RETURNING

Mikki Freedman

Growing up, I was always nervous around this time of year. Rosh Hashana was coming. I had to behave better. I had to do *teshuva* (repent). Yom Kippur was on the way, and I needed to show G-d that I was being good! I had better stop fighting with my brother, be more responsible and listen to my parents, among all the other things I needed to fix. G-d was going to judge me and see if I would merit a sweet new year!

I tried to improve. I tried to share with my brother. I tried to come right away when my parents would call me, and not pretend that I just didn't hear them. G-d would know the truth! G-d would know whether I was being bad. Would I be granted a good year? What would be written on my page in the Book of Remembrance?

But we all know how new year's resolutions turn out. So, as each year wound to a close and another Rosh Hashana approached, I found myself filled with dread. How was I ever going to change? How would I be able to really do *teshuva*?

What was *teshuva* anyway? Was G-d really going to forgive me for the things I had done wrong. And what if I did (cont. on p. 2)

GENESIS AND A SWIMMING POOL

Rabbi Fred Nebel

In *Pirkei Avot* we are told to "constantly review the Torah, because everything is in the Torah." On Simchat Torah, we begin reading anew from the beginning of Genesis. According to the sages, every passage in the Torah contains lessons for our lives. In fact, I recently experienced a lesson that made me think of the opening verse of the Torah:

"In the beginning G-d created the Heavens and the Earth." The Rabbis state that the Torah, which pre-existed creation, is the blueprint of the world. When G-d was ready to go forward with creation, He had a game plan for the universe--the Torah. This got me thinking: If the Torah is an outline to all creation, is there a parallel in the Torah to my own life?

When my wife and I bought our first home three years ago, one of the "attractions" was the 9-foot in-ground pool in my backyard. Growing up, I had always regarded a pool as a luxury item, possessed only by the elite. "Now it's my turn," I thought.

The problem was, "There was darkness upon the surface of the deep." That pretty much describes the view (cont. on p. 3)

MARATHON RUNNER (cont. from p. 1)...back to the mountains where goats are most comfortable.

At first blush, it seems as if the second goat gets the better deal. That 'lucky' goat avoided immediate death and could live a few more hours as a free and unencumbered beast. However, this freedom was just an illusion, as the goat was brought to the wilderness only to die without dignity, destined to be devoured by other wild animals, or, in later years, cast off a rough mountain.

So who or what was Azazel? What was the purpose of this whole exercise of drawing lots and assigning roles to these goats, when both were facing death anyway? Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, a nineteenth century German commentator, explains (Leviticus 16:10) that the term 'Azazel' can be translated as "an obstinate, headstrong character (*az*) who is gone, with no future (*azel*); he considers himself strong and, as a result, expires and disappears." Rabbi Hirsch goes on to explain that Azazel represents hedonism "as a matter of principle." The second goat represents a lowered state of existence that results when our choices are driven by our impulsive natural drives.

Rabbi Hirsch argues that by breathing His own breath into humankind, G-d endowed humans with the power to rule over untempered physicality. G-d created people with a body (*guf*) with strong physical impulses and a soul (*neshama*) that is powerful enough to subordinate and channel these impulses in order to pursue a higher purpose. Rabbi Hirsch explains that we are all faced with the decision of whether to be for G-d or for Azazel--and intimates that only those who are stubborn and futureless would opt to not pursue the sublime, that is the potential in each of us.

According to Rabbi Hirsch, the potential for the elevation of the mundane existed in both goats, just as it does in each of us. The two goats were alike in every possible manner--just like the pasta and the runner. That pasta could fuel a runner for 26 miles of accomplishment or simply provide a caloric padding for my hips. Rabbi Hirsch explains that many things appear to be the "good life"-- as does the goat's escaping the rites of sacrifice, or my enjoying the all-you-can-eat pasta bar. But, despite

that free feel-good sensation, it is "without a future."

Jewish law actually establishes a framework on Yom Kippur to remind us of our own eventual fate. We wear white (like a funeral shroud) and forgo food and drink to draw ourselves beyond this physical world and into the world of the spirit. Just like the goats, we will all leave the physical world one day, but what will we have accomplished? The different deaths of the two goats define our options: the first goat is taken in sacrifice to elevate the Jewish people and the holiness of the day. But, the second goat is cast off a mountain in the wilderness without the benefit of the sacrificial ceremony. The first goat is slaughtered in a kosher manner and, as an offering, those parts that are not used in the ceremony, are used for food. The "natural" death of the second goat renders it unfit for kosher consumption.

On Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, when we talk to G-d through formal prayer or in our own private requests, are we asking for things that only make our physical selves more fulfilled? Everyone would like to earn a good living and have good health, and these requests are certainly acceptable. Requests of the spirit do not all have to be esoteric--there are spiritual requests such as experiencing loving relationships or having joy from watching our children achieve their potential. The path to self-actualization lies in focusing on the spiritual purpose even as we meet our physical needs. Do I want good health solely to be able to take extreme vacations in 5773, or would I also use my good health to allow me to pursue more meaningful goals?

G-d wants to see that we can direct the gifts that we were given in this world to connect to our spiritual truth, to connect to G-d and the G-dliness He implanted in all of us. By doing so, we are saying that our lives exist and have meaning beyond the physical--beyond the selfish or hedonistic tendencies with which we may have been born--and that we have really learned to emulate the Creator of the universe during our sojourn here.

Risa Goldstein hails from Birmingham, Alabama and over the past decade has transitioned from life as a Georgia attorney to that of a real New Jersey housewife. She would like to dedicate this article in memory of Moshe Yitzchak ben Reb Avraham Aryeh z"l whose shloshim occurred during Elul.

RETURNING (cont. from p. 1)...really mean to change, but I just ended up making the wrong choices again? Was that *teshuva*? I wondered if I would be forgiven even if I ended up falling into the trap of sibling rivalry and childhood selfishness.

As I grew up, I asked about this a lot. (Apparently I had a good Jewish mother who had instilled a great amount of Jewish guilt in me). The sins I was committing were growing along with me, and in addition to the sibling rivalry, I had a few heavier sins weighing me down. I needed to find out more about how to do *teshuva* and how it even worked.

I was told that the word *teshuva* means "return." Return to what? Return to whom? "Return" seems to indicate that we are going back to somewhere we had already been. Well, where did we come from?

Our Parents. And where did they come from? Their parents! Follow this sequence all the way back, and we end up with Adam and Eve. Where did they come from? Who were their parents? G-d was their mother and father.

And He is ours as well.

Understanding the parent-child relationship, helped me understand how *teshuva* works.

Let's say a friend borrows something, breaks it and tells you he is sorry. As long as you aren't too upset about the loss, you will preserve the relationship and forgive him. But will you so easily lend him something the next time he comes asking? You might try to avoid sharing your things with this friend again. So, did you really forgive him?

What about if you lend something to your son--your car, let's say--and your son drives into another car and

(cont. on p. 4)

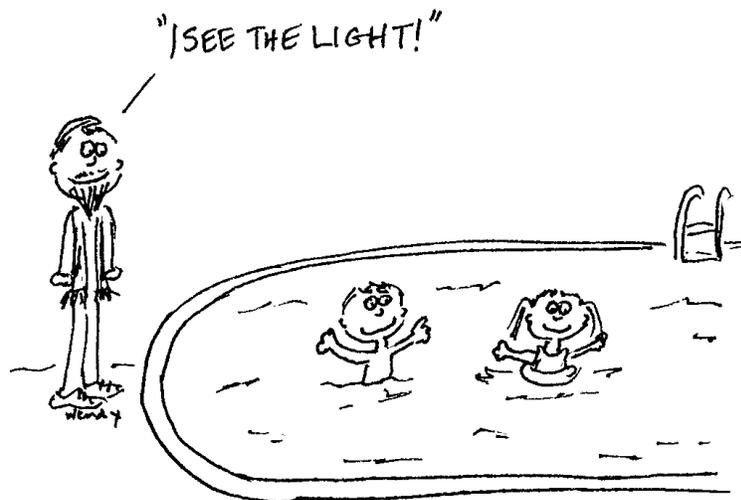
GENESIS AND A SWIMMING POOL (cont. from p. 1)... of the vast murkiness that the depths of the pool represented. Ten years of disuse and neglect had resulted in a black pond full of rain water, leaves and other detritus that the local wildlife love. I had no way of knowing whether or not the pool would be repairable within my "rabbinic budget." Furthermore, it was not high on our list of priorities for the house. We had so much more to do; therefore this would have to wait. As money flowed out of our pockets at a rate that would send even Congress into a tizzy, I could only imagine the possibilities the pool would hold. I contemplated purchasing a row boat, stocking the pool with fish and putting a message on the answering machine saying, "I can't come to the phone right now. I'm fishing on my boat." Then, after two summers of looking at this man-made swamp, I was determined to see what lay below the murky waters. The major problem was that I didn't know where to begin. Whom could I call? Whom could I trust? Calling pool companies only confused me more.

G-d said, "**Let there be light and there was light.**" My wife's idea was to start by draining the pool, a two-day affair that did shine a light on the subject and made me realize with stark clarity that my work was only beginning. "**In the beginning...**"

"**And the earth was unformed and void.**" The ducks were gone, frogs, as far as I could tell, had "jumped ship," and now I was facing 10 years' worth of decomposed leaves and dirt. Once again, my wife suggested that instead of killing my back, I should hire someone to get rid of the leaves, which I gladly did. The next problem that I faced was cleaning the pool walls and floor. Since fall was upon us, the pool stores were closed for the season. A neighbor lent me his power washer, which according to him was so powerful it could cut through wood. Well, that must mean that the algae that had grown on the pool walls and floor were made of steel, because it couldn't get rid them. And then the rains came, and I was out of commission until the following spring. Then as the winter fell upon us, the whipping wind seemed to do some of our work for us, peeling the paint off the wall. Leaves were filling the hole again. All I could do was watch. And I had yet to develop a game plan.

"**G-d separated the light from the darkness.**" As spring approached, I started to talk with people who had done rehab work in their homes. I also did some online research. Google was now my best friend: I found great sites that explained how to clean the pool; the only problem was that anybody and everybody can "publish on the net." Again, whom to believe? I tried one thing after another. As a lark, I poured bleach on the floor of the pool and, surprisingly, it did a great job. The problem was that bleach didn't clean the walls as well. Then I used another solvent, but again, it wasn't powerful enough. The dirt still showed through. Finally, in desperation, I called a pool company, described my problem, and they, without hesitation, told me what to use and how to make the mixture.

(Surprisingly, the net said to be very wary of this cleaning solution, but I figured "Why not trust the experts?") As I applied this solution, which was amongst the cheapest of all, the dirt,



algae, and stains started to melt away. My 9-foot hole began to look like a bona fide swimming pool. I knew that I was nearly through when my son said, "Abba, the pool is really clean. I can't see the bottom from my window anymore." "**G-d separated between the waters above and the waters below.**"

"**And the dark was separated from the light. G-d called the darkness "Night" and the light "Day."** Just a few more details needed to be attended to and it would be time to fill the pool. As I filled the pool, the most beautiful thing happened: the blue flooring made the water appear pool-water blue, even though the walls were mostly white due to the paint that had chipped off during the winter.

"**G-d saw it was good.**" I finally knew I had made it when my wife looked at the pool completely filled and operational, smiled and said, "You did a great job! I'll even use the pool." And, when I saw our kids enjoying the pool, well, I knew I had made it through the darkness, and emerged to the light on the other side.

It's amazing how the words of the Torah ring true, and how we can each draw meaning from the Torah into our own lives.

Rabbi Nebel is the Outreach Director at the Midwest Torah Center in South Bend, Indiana. Since receiving ordination from Yeshiva University in 1987, he has held positions in pulpit, education, and hashgacha.

National Jewish Outreach Program

wishes you and yours

a happy and healthy new year!

שנה טובה ומתוקה

RETURNING (cont. from p. 2)...smashes your car's bumper! You will likely be upset, but more than you want to preserve the car and protect your belongings from damage, you want to teach your child a lesson. You may make him pay for the damage, he may have to prove his driving skills, but you will probably give him the car again. You will do whatever you can to help him become a person who drives carefully. Not only did you forgive him, but you would lend to him again, all the while hoping to teach him along the way.

In the first scenario, we are more concerned for our property than with helping our friend. In the second, when it involves our child, we are focused on doing what's in the best interest of the child.

Our life source comes from our eternal soul which was breathed into us by G-d Himself. We started out incredibly close to our Heavenly Father. Not so different from a mother

and her child. Before I became a mother, I couldn't imagine how *teshuva* could work. But after watching my children grow, I recognize that the process of



becoming an independent person requires struggles, and even failures. In order to really grow we need to fall down sometimes.

When we do something that the Torah doesn't permit, we have damaged the soul that G-d has lent to us. We need to fix it. We need to do *teshuva*. We also need to strengthen ourselves so that we are less likely to sin in the future. We need to return to our Father, Who will not only forgive us, but will also help us to learn the lesson we need in order to improve and withstand future challenges. *Teshuva* is recognizing that we need that connection with G-d to make our new year's resolutions stick! When I return to where I came from, I can find the strength to hold on to the image of who I really can be, long enough to take steps toward becoming that person.

Our loving Father in heaven doesn't "hold it against us" when we make mistakes. He waits with open arms for our return. When we turn to G-d, with honest intentions to come closer to Him, we are supported in our quest for self-improvement.

G-d is always there, and all we have to do is turn to Him and say: "G-d, you are my Father, I am sorry, please forgive me for I am your child. I will try to do better, please help me."

We really can come back to where we once were. It's like going home.

Mikki Freedman lives with her husband Eli and her growing family in Montreal. While raising her children, Mikki has learned that the greatest life's work is raising oneself, something toward which she is continuously striving.

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