

BERESHITH
"IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter
for Beginners,
by Beginners

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בראשית

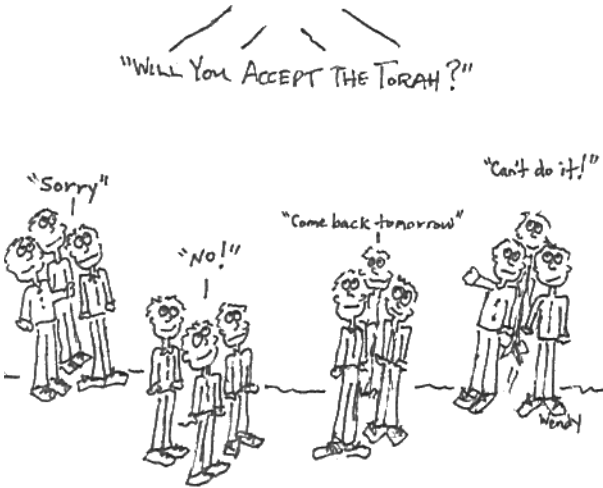
THE CONCEPT OF THE CHOSEN PEOPLE

Rabbi Ephraim Buchwald

Shavuot is virtually an anonymous holiday. It is the only one of the major festivals in the Torah that is not mentioned by name, and for which no date appears. Although it is celebrated on the sixth of Sivan, the fact that it does not have a formal date in the Torah text implies that the giving of the Torah cannot be limited to any particular day. This anomaly is meant to convey that the Torah is given and renewed every single day.

More than 3,300 (3,313) years ago, on Shavuot, the Jewish people received the Torah at Sinai and formally became *Am Yisrael*, the people of Israel. It was at that moment that the appellation, "the Chosen People," was applied for the first time. In a graphic description of the encounter with the Divine at Mt. Sinai, which is found in Exodus 19:5, Moses tells the Jewish people in G-d's name: Now, therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant: "*Veeb'yee'tem lee se'goo'lah mee'kol hab'ab'mim*," You shall be My own treasure from among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

This concept of the "Chosen People," a treasured (cont. on p. 2)



ACKNOWLEDGED AS A JEW—FINALLY

David Hewitt

Driving home from the Mikvah, I was profoundly struck by how much I felt like the same person that I had been before. For months leading up to my *gerut* (conversion), I had imagined that this day would be one of exceptional, almost tangible, change—that, after years of struggling to become a Jew, I would "definitively" feel like one. I did not! And so, as I rounded the streets of Montreal on the way back to my apartment, I considered what might be missing—a sense of completion, validation? I was deeply disappointed that I felt so unchanged.

That evening I went to the local Agudah synagogue for afternoon services. Friends there had known for weeks that this day was coming and were ready after services with *l'Chaims* (toasts). They even pulled me in for a little dance. Everyone around me was so happy and excited, so I did all I could do to put on a smile. Inside, I felt like a fraud. What if it didn't work, I thought to myself.

That night, I went back to my apartment and called my rabbi. "Rabbi, I have something I need (cont. on p. 3)

THE DAWN HAS BROKEN

Daniel Friedman

Israel is the best place to be for the holidays. In Israel, even the days leading up to a holiday feel like something special, and on the holiday itself...it just feels like the right place to be. The traffic lights shut down on Yom Kippur. Everyone dances in the streets on Simchat Torah. Even the gas stations are lit up with menorahs on Chanukah. It is no surprise then, that my most profound holiday experience took place while celebrating Shavuot in Israel.

There is a custom to stay up all night learning Torah on Shavuot. Taking advantage of being in Jerusalem, I spent Shavuot night "Torah-hopping." I attended various lectures and study groups all over the city, from Talpiot to the Old City. There was quite an array of subjects, Talmud, Bible, Prayer, etc., and since I was just starting to really explore my Judaism, almost every subject excited me.

Finally, at about 4 a.m., my travels brought me to the Old City. Actually, it seemed as if everyone's travels had brought them to the Old City at that same hour. I saw a parade of people walking together in (cont. on p. 2)

DAWN (cont. from p. 1) ... the same direction. Being a curious Jew, I decided to follow. In my garbled "Hebrish," I asked a few people where everyone was going. Their answer was either *neitz* or *vatinin*, two words that were, at the time, meaningless to me.

Eventually, I was informed that the traditional way to conclude this night of learning was by attending *Shacharit* (morning services) at the first possible sign of morning light. I also learned that, according to Jewish law, the ideal time to say the silent *Amidah* is at the very moment when the sun rises over the horizon. This particular early morning service is called "*neitz*" or "*vatinin*." Inspired by the night of learning and the people around me, I was certain that this was something I did not want to miss. So onward I went.

When the crowd finally converged at the Western Wall, it was quite an impressive sight! Jews from all over the world were gathered together at the last remnant of the Holy Temple. In ancient times, before the destruction of the Temple, Jews made thrice-yearly pilgrimages to Jerusalem. Shavuot morning at the Wall certainly felt like a taste of those ancient days. With great awe, however, I realized that, despite the vast number of people standing at the Wall, the gathered crowd wasn't



even close to all the Jews in the world.

As I thought more about where I was, I realized that almost every synagogue on the planet faces Israel, and that every synagogue in Israel faces Jerusalem, and that every sanctuary in Jerusalem faces the place where I was standing at that very second. I had been to the Wall before, as part of a ten day tour, but I was never that moved by the experience. The more I thought about the place where I was standing and the people who surrounded me in those early morning hours, the more I began to realize that I was beginning an incredible journey.

While still dark, the sky had changed into a rich navy blue. As I walked closer to the Western Wall, I had this image of one enormous *minyan* (prayer quorum), with everyone praying together. Soon after, however, I was hit by the reality of the Jewish people in all its diversity. The *minyanim* ranged from *Ashkenazic* to *Sephardic*, black hats, white *kippot*, ponchos, *streimels* and everything else in between. I found myself just wandering around observing, as

if in a museum, before finally settling myself with one group that had begun to recite the morning blessings.

Although the service was pretty standard, it was actually difficult to follow because of the many other groups praying simultaneously side-by-side, but with (cont. on p. 3)

CHOSEN PEOPLE (cont. from p. 1) ...people to G-d, has been a source of much grief for the Jewish people. The nations of the world find the concept hard to fathom, as do many Jews. Apparently, the rabbis also had difficulty with the "Chosen People" concept, and therefore offered a well-known *Midrash* in order to mitigate the difficulty with the term.

The *Midrash* describes G-d as having revealed himself not only to Israel, but to all the nations of the world. G-d first goes to the children of Esau and says to them, "Will you accept the Torah?" They answered, "What is written in it?" He said, "You shall not kill." Said they, "L-rd of the Universe, the very essence of our father Esau is that he is a murderer. As it says, (Genesis 27:22) 'And the hands were the hands of Esau,' and (Genesis 27:40) 'By the sword you shall live.' We cannot accept the Torah."

He then went to the children of Amon and Moav and said to them, "Do you accept the Torah?" They answered, "What is in it?" Said He, "You shall not commit adultery." Said they to Him, "L-rd of the Universe, our very essence is that we come from adultery, as it says (Genesis 19:36), 'And

the two daughters of Lot conceived from their father.' We cannot accept the Torah."

He then went to the children of Ishmael and said to them, "Do you accept the Torah?" Said they to Him, "What is written in the Torah?" He answered, "You shall not steal." They said to him, "L-rd of the Universe, our very essence is that we live from thievery and robbery. As it says (Genesis 16:12), 'His [Ishmael's] hand was in all things, and the hand of all was upon him.' We cannot accept the Torah."

There was not a nation among the nations of the world to whom G-d did not speak and on whose door G-d did not knock, asking them whether they wished to accept the Torah. Afterwards, G-d came to Israel, and they said to him, "*Na'aseh V'nish'mah*," We shall do and we shall hear!

Through this *Midrash*, the rabbis accomplish a subtle semantic transformation. Rather than the Jews being the "Chosen People," by the means of the *Midrash* they become the "Choosing People." The *Midrash* in effect asserts that all the nations of the world had an equal chance to choose Torah, but rejected it, and only the Jews (cont. on p. 3)

DAWN (cont. from p. 2) ... different pronunciations and tunes. As the light grew stronger little by little, so did the noise, as more and more Jews started or joined the holiday prayers. I was following along as best as I could, enjoying the experience, when, all at once, the mood changed. Suddenly everyone seemed to be getting ready for the silent *Amidah*. And then, group by group, the entire gathering grew quiet. From the depths of the silence, there emerged one final "*ga'al Yisrael*" (Redeemer of Israel), the final two words of the blessing pronounced before the *Amidah*.

A chill ran through me. Never in my life had I seen such a large group of Jews praying in complete silence. I prayed as well. As the light and heat grew brighter and stronger on my back and the brightness of the early summer unfolded, I became aware of how special this place was. All around me, Jews, each with their own varying customs and thoughts, were praying together at the same time. For just one moment, I could imagine what it might be like if all the Jews in the entire world really could come together to Jerusalem to share in the holidays as one nation.

It was only as I reached the end of my silent *Amidah*, however, that I was struck by the realization that I was part of this unity. It was, for me, a profound moment. The preceding year, during many of my other experiences learning about Judaism, I felt as if I were watching from the outside. At the Western Wall on that Shavuot morning, as the sun broke the horizon and the sky turned from dark to light, I was no longer just observing the day—I was now a significant part of the glorious tradition of our People.

Daniel Friedman lives in Washington Heights, NY, with his wife Hannah. A new member of the NJOP staff, Daniel works in Development.

CHOSEN PEOPLE (cont. from p. 2) ...chose Torah. We find a similar idea with Abraham. G-d did not designate Abraham to be the first Jew. Rather, it was Abraham who found G-d. A British writer and humorist, named William Norman Ewer (1885-1976), wrote what could be construed to be an anti-Semitic limerick, "How odd of G-d to choose the Jews." Someone correctly and cleverly responded: "It's not so odd, after all, they chose G-d."

On this wonderful festival of Shavuot, let us prove ourselves worthy of being the "Chosen People" by choosing G-d once again, embracing His Torah, His precepts and His commandments.

Go easy on the blintzes!

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald is the Founder and Director of the National Jewish Outreach Program. This D'var Torah originally appeared on www.njop.org in 2001.

ACKNOWLEDGED (cont. from p. 1) ... to talk about. I don't think my conversion worked today!" "Stephen...I mean David Shalom, I don't understand." "I don't know Rabbi, maybe I didn't dunk enough times, or the water was off, but I just don't feel any different." My rabbi assured me that everything was kosher, and that I was in fact Jewish. Feeling slightly reassured, I went to bed thinking that a good night's sleep would probably awaken the Jew in me.

Long before my conversion, Bracha, who, along with her husband, had acted as my main mentor and sponsoring family throughout my conversion, had warned me that if ever there was a morning that I was to get up on time to *daven Shacharit* (pray the morning services) and wrap my *tefillin* (phylacteries), it had better be the morning after going to the Mikvah. I was not so concerned about this, since I am a natural morning person and, as practice, had been getting up for services for months.

At 7 a.m., when my alarm went off, I couldn't believe it. I rolled over, wanting to smash the thing. "What kind of sick hour is this to have to get up?" I thought to myself, not recognizing the reason for my newly found resentment for mornings. "Oh man. Have I given up ever sleeping in again?" I moaned. I was in a horrible mood, and only the thought of having to tell people that I missed services the first day after my conversion forced me out of bed.

Getting to synagogue did nothing to improve my temper. Half asleep and feeling resentful, I began to put on my *tefillin* for the first time. At first, I put them on too loosely, only to have them slide off my arm. I then tightened them so much that I began to lose circulation and had no feeling in my fingers. I wanted to throw them out the window.

At the time, I was living in the Montreal's old Jewish neighborhood where the closest place to pray was a Belz Chassidic synagogue. The Belz community is really unusual, and I was welcomed despite sticking out like a sore thumb among all the beards, black coats and *streimels* (fur hats). Since I had never before worn *tefillin*, they must have figured out early on that I was not Jewish. They were, however, kind enough not to make me feel out of place.

There was one exception to this universal welcome. Each morning, during the repetition of the *Amidah*, an old chassid would go to the front of the synagogue to get a metal *pushka* (charity box). He would then make the rounds, stopping at each person, and, in a very unceremonious fashion, would shake the *pushka* at them, expecting a contribution. Eventually he would reach my row. The first guy would get a shake, and the guy next to me would get a shake, but I would only get a half-frown from the chassid, and his *pushka* would remain decidedly unshaken. This ritual never bothered me greatly, despite making me aware of not really belonging. I figured that this man had probably been praying there for the past 75 years, and (cont. on p. 4)

ACKNOWLEDGED (cont. from p. 3) must have wondered what this wacked-out kid who thought he was Jewish was doing in his synagogue.

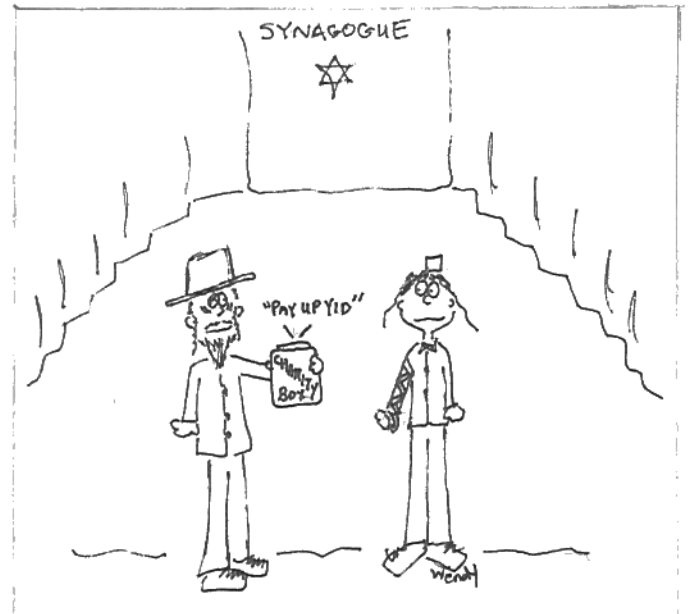
On the morning after my conversion, I was too caught up with being sour to even notice the *pushka* man until he was already at my row. When I spotted him, I knew he was only going to add to the misery of my whole conversion experience. As usual, the first guy in the row got his shake, then the fellow next to me. When he finally came to me, the chassid offered his usual frown and started to pass me by. However, before he moved on, the chassid paused and took another look at me. He paused again, and then, with exactly the same unceremonious rattle, he pushed the *pushka* in my face and shook it. "Pay up Yid!" declared the *pushka*. It was at that moment that I felt that I belonged!

I could have hugged him. I was smiling from ear to ear. Then I realized, however, that the chassid was more interested in feeding his *pushka* than in this new Jew's sloppy embrace. I then dropped in the first of many quarters and finished praying--but with a joy that I can barely describe.

Since that morning, I have discovered many other ways to increase my feeling of being Jewish--going to Israel,

observing the *Yomim Tovim* (Jewish holidays), learning in Yeshiva, doing *chesed* (good deeds), and getting married (to the editor of this newsletter!). But there is nothing more fundamental to my personal Jewish connection than realizing that, while there is certainly room in life to be profound and inspired, sometimes the most important way to feel one's Jewishness is to just drop a few quarters into a *pushka*.

David S. Hewitt began his journey to Judaism in Montreal. Currently working in commodities, he lives in Passaic, NJ, with his wife, NJOP Publications Coordinator Sarah Rochel Hewitt.



Illustrations by Wendy Dunn



Bereshith: "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 or visit www.njop.org.

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