

# BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter  
for Beginners,  
by Beginners

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# בראשית

## CLIMBING MOUNT SINAI

*Emet Elisheva Simoneau*

I have a secret I would like to share with you. But first, please, let me start at the beginning, with a small introduction of who I am. I mean, if I am about to share a secret with you, you should know who I am, don't you think?

I am a Jewish girl who lives in Montreal. I speak Jewish, I look Jewish and I behave Jewish. Here is a little bit more about me. The reality is that I am also a convert. I converted to Judaism several years ago because I believed that Hashem gave the Jews the Torah on Mount Sinai. I knew that I didn't have to become Jewish, but I knew that the Torah held the truth. I wanted to be part of that truth, and, well, to tell you the truth, I am very proud to be a Jew. The day that I finalized my conversion, was one of the happiest days of my life.

I had to work hard to get there. I left my job, my friends, my home and everything I knew so I could achieve this dream. I moved across the country to be part of this new Jewish community, to a city where I didn't know anyone.

A lot of people say that I have sacrificed so much to be where I am today, but I don't think the word "sacrifice" is the right word. I have invested (or perhaps committed) myself. But sacrificed?--I wouldn't say so. It doesn't sound right. In my mind, sacrifice has a connotation of direness, sadness, suffering and of letting go of something you enjoy for something less enjoyable. I might be wrong, but this is how I perceive the word "sacrifice." *(cont. on p. 3)*



CLIMBING MT SINAI

## GHETTO GIRL TO RABBI'S WIFE

*Aliza Hausman*

I have always been a stranger in a strange land.

My childhood years in Washington Heights, an inner-city New York offshoot of the Dominican Republic, were Rapunzelesque. I watched the goings-on in the 'hood from our sixth-floor apartment, which towered over the hilly area. My sisters and I weren't allowed to play outside because of the drug dealers, the culture and the language, all of which my mother was sure were *veneno*--poison. According to Mom, Spanish was okay, English even better, but "talking Ghetto," the Spanglish slang of the streets, was no good.

I learned about religion by watching *The Ten Commandments* over Easter.

On Sundays, I attended catechism classes at the local Catholic school. At home my mother practiced a blend of Catholicism and Santeria (Afro-Caribbean "voodoo"), taking me to *brujas* (witches) to cure my allergies. I had no idea that only blocks away, in the midst of my Dominican ghetto, there was a significant Jewish neighborhood. *(cont. on p. 2)*

## SHAVUOT AND MOUNT TAKAO

*Rabbi Dr. Daniel P. Aldrich*

Gazing at the very Japanese "path" up the mountain - a river of cement with regular circular indentations that wound its way up out of sight among bamboo and foliage - I knew that we would never make it.

Having been in Japan for a few months, I had picked the wrong day for a casual climb - up a 45 degree slope. The day was sultry and oppressive and my three kids looked ready to rebel. My two oldest children - at that time 6 and 4, respectively - just stared, and my wife, as usual, rolled her eyes. Our youngest child, then two, was happily on her mother's back encouraging her erstwhile horse to "giddy-up" - so she wasn't overly concerned about her chances. Eventually, all of us did climb that mountain one hour east of downtown Tokyo, called Mount Takao, and the way that we did, has deepened my own understanding of the period leading up to and including the Jewish holiday of Shavuot.

From the second night of Passover, we Jews begin counting the 49 days of the Omer. Unlike most "counts," such as a count-down at Cape Canaveral or the radio countdown *(cont. on p. 3)*

*GHETTO GIRL (cont. from p. 1)...*

So how in the world did I find my way to Judaism?

It started with a car ride. My best friend in college was Igor, a Russian Jew. He had gone to Israel an atheist and had come back Orthodox. Driving around the neighborhood with me and my sisters, he thrilled us with tales of going kosher, living life as an observant Jew and scaring all his old friends. He wore a black *kippah*, which would soon be coordinated with white shirts and black pants that would become his signature wardrobe. I was wearing a halter top and short shorts. All I knew was that Judaism meant I wasn't allowed to hug him anymore.

"Wow! That's so interesting. Tell us more!" my sisters chorused from the backseat. And then to me: "You should be Jewish! You always wanted to be Jewish. Remember?"

When I was 13, a visit from a Holocaust survivor to my junior high school had piqued my interest in Judaism enough that I stole the Star of David my mother kept with her cross. I wore it every day. I went to the library's religion section, where I discovered that the Jewish "picture" of G-d matched the one I'd always had in my head and heart.

"Mom, I want to be Jewish," I declared one day, running to her in a frenzy of excitement, books in hand.

My mother's lips curled in horror before she reeled her arm back like a baseball pitcher and cracked a slap across my face. Later, various family encounters would teach me that anti-Semitism was alive and well in the world. I put Judaism on the back burner.

At 25, I tried going back to the church. I hoped Protestant Christianity might be less fire-and-brimstone than Catholicism. But the calculation that "no-Jesus-equals-eternal-damnation" didn't sit well with me. So when my best friend started talking, I was intrigued.

Two months later, I was knee-deep in Jewish books and had an appointment with an Orthodox rabbi. No Jesus. No Trinity. No more scary confessions to priests. No nuns looking perturbed when they asked all the students to draw G-d, and I held up a drawing of a giant yellow squiggle. "G-d is light." Even at 8, I wasn't drawing Jesus idols.

Over the next year I became a constant presence in the synagogue office. I took weekly classes. I assaulted the rabbi daily with questions via e-mail. I read late into the night and listened to educational MP3s on the way to work. I was a human iPod, downloading a lifetime of Jewish learning into my brain.

I saw Judaism as an extension of the personal relationship with G-d I had already honed over years of angry rants and silent wishes aimed at the heavens. I got "high" on how Judaism could teach me to make every action in my life holy and how to focus on bettering myself for my time on Earth--not as a ticket to Heaven! Judaism began to color all the areas of my life. I bought my last pair of pants from the Gap, and a week later I sold them to a fellow teacher at the high school where I worked. I charged knee-length H&M skirts by the dozen. I prayed all the time, and for everything. And when I discovered Shabbat, I sighed with relief. Shabbat was the first vacation this workaholic had taken in a long time.

I finally confessed my decision to convert to my father in an international call to the Dominican Republic. "Dad, I'm going to be Jewish. You're going to have Jewish grandchildren."

After a long pause, I heard a faint chuckle escalate into booming sputters of laughter. "You're crazy!" No, I assured him, I wasn't.

But still, I was a stranger. My olive skin was much darker than the Ashkenazi faces I saw at shul. People stared at my curly Afro. When I told my non-Jewish friends that people at shul complimented my "tan," they reacted in disbelief: "But you're so *white*!"

Six months into my conversion, I met my future husband, then a graduate student, at a housewarming party for some rabbinical students in Washington Heights. Here, at least, I felt like the consummate insider--Dominican and (almost) Jewish in a neighborhood that had long been home to both groups.

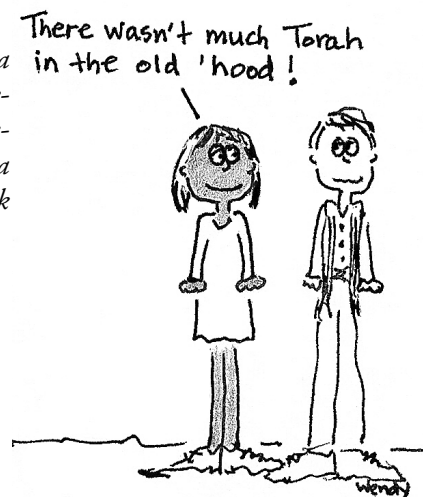
After nearly a year of studying, the rabbi thought I was ready to convert. But first I had to survive Israel.

My husband's supportive mother sent me to a *Haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) school. Orthodox Jewish boys dated for marriage, and we couldn't wed until I was "kosher." In Israel I realized that I was becoming part of a family. Like any family, there is bickering and infighting. Sometimes we can be dysfunctional in the way we tear each other down. But we can also be amazing in the support systems we create: cooking meals for new mothers, sitting shiva with friends, and partying at glorious weddings not to be missed.

Two months later, I returned to New York to dip in the *mikvah*. A *Beit Din* (rabbinical court) of three rabbis asked me questions before shepherding me into the little pool. Fresh from the *mikvah* and clasped in a bear hug by my friend Devora, I was sure that though I had been born to a non-Jewish mother, I had always had a Jewish soul.

Am I still a stranger in a strange land? As I pack my husband's lunch before he heads for rabbinical school, I wonder how many other Dominican Jewish rebbetzins are out there. But I've never felt less alone in my life. The story goes that converts, too, were present at Mount Sinai for the giving of the Torah, but we were lost along the way and have had to find our way home. And where is home? Ruth, the most famous convert of all, put it best: "Your people will be my people, and your G-d, my G-d." You said it, sister!

*Aliza Hausman is a Latina Orthodox Jewish convert, freelance writer, blogger and speaker. Currently working on a memoir, she lives in New York with her husband.*



**CLIMBING MOUNT SINAI** (cont. from p. 1)...In reality, I felt that I was not going down, but going up--from something I did enjoy, to something that I love and that inspires me! It is what gives me energy. Is it right to call that "sacrifice"? I would sooner call it "challenge," rather than "sacrifice."

For sure it wasn't easy, but without having to work to achieve something, it can never be fully appreciated. A young man gets a new car from his father. Will he take care of the car with as much devotion as if he himself had earned every single penny to buy the new car? To be a Jew is the same thing. It isn't easy, but knowing that you are doing the right thing, not only in your eyes but also in G-d's eyes, is an incredible feeling.

When people hear my story, they get inspired. They look at me with renewed energy and believe I stood on top of that mountain. They feel as though I was able to climb up Mount Sinai, that it was easy. But here, let me tell you my secret: I might have reached what seemed to be the top, but while I was there, I came to realize that I wasn't really at the top. There was still more mountain to climb, and then, well, I guess I got overwhelmed and lost my footing, and I fell down. I didn't climb down, I literally fell down.

I see life and Judaism very much like mountain climbing. Some people see mountain climbing as a sport, some people see it as a hobby. But one thing is for certain, everyone sees it as a challenge. I eventually found out that sometimes you must fall down when you make a mistake. And there are other times when you have to backtrack a little because you suddenly realize that although you thought that you were heading toward the top, the path didn't really lead to the top. Sometimes, also, you start on a path believing that it will lead you to the top and suddenly realize there is a large step ahead that you can't make, or that there is a gap that is simply too wide for you to cross.

Again, I see Jewish life in the same way. Sometimes, you must take a step backward in order to move forward. Sometimes, you resolve to do something and suddenly realize that it is too much. Then you must cut back, but just a little. Other times it may be quite a bit that you have to cut back. It really depends. Sometimes, you thought you were doing fine and all seems to be going well, and then you mis-step and fall down. It could be just

a few steps down, or many steps down.

When I decided to keep kosher, I didn't decide one day, this is it and threw everything away. I planned my climb and climbed my plan, little steps, one at the time. Some of these steps I achieved quite easily, and some of them I had to retake over and over. Then, one day I felt I had made it to the first level, my first climb, my first ascent to the top of the mountain. I had made it through Kashrut 101. I pitched my tent and took a well-deserved break. The second climb I planned was Shabbat, and the third was Yom Tov and so forth.

Lately, Hashem has been challenging me with different climbs, each of which is more difficult than the others. But I still use the same technique as I did eight years ago. What was valid then, is still entirely valid today. Small steps, one at a time. Some days, the climb will be easier than others, and some days it will be harder. One thing I know: I know the feeling of accomplishment I will have once I have made it to the top. So if, in the meantime, I get some scratches on my hands or knees, I know that once I stand above the clouds, the reward will be worth every single challenge I went through during that climb.

A mountain climber doesn't get much satisfaction from climbing a hill that is in his backyard. He gets that feeling of achievement when he pushes his limits beyond his own current abilities and still reaches it. Once he finally reaches this new mountaintop that he has never reached before, the feeling of exhilaration and accomplishment is worth every single struggle he went through during his latest climb.

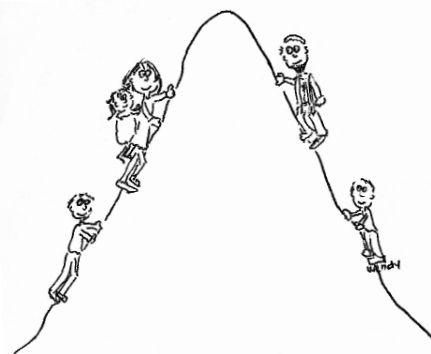
On this note, I hope you don't mind, but I need to grab my gear, Mount Sinai is waiting for me... I hear that the sunrises are amazing, I truly hope I'll see you there!

*Emet Elisheva Simoneau is a former member of the Canadian Navy who currently resides in Montreal, QC.*

**SHAVUOT AND MOUNT TAKAO** (cont. from p. 1)...of the Top 40 songs, Jews actually count up. This is because we're interested not just in the event at the end of the countdown - which is Shavuot, celebrating receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai long before there was a Top 40 - but also in the counting itself. NASA only really cares about the end of the countdown, when the space shuttle launches into orbit and delivers another payload to the exosphere. And most Top 40 listeners care only about which young "artist" has made it to the top of the charts.

We Jews, however, care about the process of counting as well. This is because the 49 days of the Omer are like 49 steps of a ladder - small, incremental steps toward a critical goal. This step-by-step motion moved our ancestors away from the "slave mentality" that had been forced into them from 200 years of slavery in Egypt. Our great-great-great-grandparents (you get the idea) had internalized the voices of their overseers and oppressors and, in many ways, forgotten what it was like to live lives full of choice and hope. They had become so much like their oppressors, the Egyptians, that Heavenly observers claimed they couldn't distinguish between them. The core attribute that defines us as people, according to Jewish thinkers like Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, is the capacity for choice.

The Creator had us spend 49 days in motion after our awe-inspiring departure, moving each day a little further away from the lives of drones to full-fledged, autonomous individuals who could make their own choices. Each count - day 1 of



BY TAKING SLOW, STEADY, SMALL STEPS, WE CLIMB THE MOUNTAIN AND EMBRACE TORAH

(cont. on p. 4)

**SHAVUOT AND MOUNT TAKAO** (cont. from p. 1)...the Omer, day 2 of the Omer, and so on - brought us closer to being truly free - not just physically (as we were the moment the Egyptian army was drowned beneath the waves), but spiritually and intellectually. When the Jewish people had counted out 7 weeks after their physical departure from the land of Egypt, known in Hebrew as *Mitzrayim* or "narrowness," they were able to divorce themselves from their old lifestyles and embrace their choice of the Torah. It took this period of almost two months for the ancient Israelites to regain their capacity and the will to openly receive the gift of G-d's wisdom.

Unlike Superman, neither we nor our ancestors can hurdle tall buildings in a single bound. Nor could we leave behind the lifestyle and consciousness of a hedonistic society like Egypt overnight. Real change takes time and determination. Unlike the infomercials running all through the night that promise instant results, meaningful alterations must come in small steps.

No marathon runner goes from being a couch potato to running 26 miles overnight (or, if they do, they may re-enact the original "Marathon" and drop dead upon arrival!). No violinist in Carnegie Hall picked up her instrument the week before the concert. I read in a popular book recently that some researchers believe the experts in our society - whether in computers or hockey, writing or music - spent some 10,000 hours rehearsing, practicing and getting it right. Unfortunately, most of us have instant access to our e-mail through Blackberries, instant access to

our bank accounts through ATMs, and instant gratification through microwaves and single-packaged junk food. We expect immediate results when we begin a diet, or attempt to stop speaking *Lashon Harah* (slander and gossip), or try to hold our tongues before we raise our voices. Real change, in contrast, has us moving up the ladder slowly, altering our behaviors in incremental ways. My teachers in yeshiva repeated over and over again that for us to change ourselves would be a slow and steady process.

So too, my family and I could not get up Mount Takao by running, leaping or an elevator (that would have been a welcome method, though). Had we run up the mountain in that heat, we all would have been on stretchers moaning for hydration. Instead, we all decided to take the journey up the mountain one small step at a time. Placing one foot in front of the other, in small steps, we moved forward as a family. It was hot and sweaty, but the view from the top was absolutely breathtaking - over valleys of green, lush trees, we could see all the way to downtown Tokyo.

May all of us reach the top at Shavuot through small, steady steps toward the Torah.

*Rabbi Dr. Daniel P. Aldrich is an assistant professor at Purdue University and the rabbi for PurJEW which seeks to help all Jews in the area reach their full potential. He lives with his wife and three home-schooled children in West Lafayette, Indiana and would be glad to host you for Shabbat should you be in town.*

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**Illustrations by Wendy Dunn**



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