

**BERESHITH**  
"IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter  
for Beginners,  
by Beginners

Vol. XIX No. 1  
Tishei 5771/September 2010



# בראשית

**NEW YEAR, NEW YOU**

*Jamie Geller with Charlotte Friedland*

**The same secret applies to creating a fab dinner or starting a new life: It's all in the prep!**

When I was growing up, a lot of my friends went to *shul* on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. First, of course, there was the fashion show --the opportunity to strut your trendy new stuff. But I think there was also a genuine sense that something major was going down, something about a Book of Life. You didn't want to miss out in case something holy happened.

While my family showed up in the sanctuary a bit more frequently than that, we were far from what you'd call religious. I didn't really experience an all out gut-wrenching, tear-jerking High Holiday until I turned to traditional observance in my mid-twenties. All of a sudden, these days of penitence and prayer turned into an opportunity to revamp my life.

Not that I knew how to do that. But somehow, with all of the seasonal emphasis on new beginnings and starting over, I instinctively knew that if I at least made a start, a Hand would reach down and help me up.

I admit that the idea of needing help was uncomfortable. I had been raised to be self-reliant, directed, and decisive. (cont. on p. 2)



**TRANSFORMATION: BECOMING A JEW**

*Sofia Gordon*

*"Vater unser im Himmel, geheiligt werde dein Name, dein Reich komme, dein Wille geschehe..." "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come...thy will be done on earth..." (Matthew: 6:8-10)*

I would like to tell you the story of a young, blond haired, blue-eyed, Aryan looking girl who repeated this prayer in German in her Protestant religious class everyday. By age 11, she already believed in a Supreme Power, but she was just starting to think about religious concepts as applications for moral living. She desperately wanted to fit in--her wish was to assimilate into German society as quickly as possible. She wanted to be Protestant. She didn't want anybody to know her secret and recognize her as a foreigner.

I know all this because the young, confused girl was me. I emigrated with my mother and younger brother from Russia to Germany. When we arrived, we stayed at a Jewish camp for politically persecuted refugees. While (cont. on p. 2)

**FROM HANNAH'S PRAYER**

*Rabbi Josh Broide*

One of the significant lessons of the holiday of Rosh Hashana can be found in the structure of the Musaf Amidah, the central prayer of the additional service, which contains nine individual blessings. There are the standard sets of three opening and three closing *brachot* (blessings) that are recited in every Amidah, and there are the middle three blessings that are specific for this time of the year. The Talmud in *Berachot* (29a) explains that each of these blessings represents one of the special aspects of the Rosh Hashana experience, *Malchiyot* (Kingship), *Zichronot* (Remembrances) and *Shofrot* (the blowing of the shofar). The Talmud goes on to explain that the nine blessings correspond to the nine times that the Almighty's name was mentioned in Hannah's Prayer (Samuel 2:1-10).

Hannah's story is the Haftorah (prophetic message) read on Rosh Hashana: A barren woman who wanted nothing more than to have children, she would go to (cont. on p. 3)

TRANSFORMATION (cont. from p. 1)...there, I overheard other people saying that we must be Jewish too, and that made me very scared. When I asked my mother, she told me that I must keep this a secret once we leave the camp. In the former Soviet Union our family suffered very much because of our Jewishness; my grandfather was interned in Viniza and Bershad ghettos; his family was buried alive in a mass grave; my father was persecuted by the KGB for his Zionist activities. It seemed that being Jewish always meant pain and persecution.

At first, being Jewish made me sad. After a time, however, I became increasingly curious about Judaism. My Protestant classes made me search for my family roots and ask about the meaning of these weird things, like a Shofar and a Channukiah, which we had at home. Unbeknownst to anyone, especially my mother, I began to attend the local synagogue. Fatefully, the Ronald S. Lauder Seminars were taking place in my hometown, Wurzburg.

I became so involved with the Lauder Foundation that I was invited to Munich to help organize Pesach Seders for the Russian Jewish community. In my Judaism class in Wurzburg I had already learned about Shabbat, Chanukah and Purim, but not yet about Pesach. You can imagine how I felt when I arrived in Munich and was told by the American volunteers that I needed to assist them in leading Seders for over 200 Russian adults! I cried with frustration; I had no idea what the holiday of Pesach was even about! I felt like the son--in my case, the daughter--who was sitting at the Pesach table and didn't know what to ask. The feelings of emptiness and shame at my lack of knowledge established in me a strong wish to go (*Lech Lecha*) and learn, to relight the little spark of Judaism that was obviously somewhere inside me.

Some months later, shortly before Rosh Hashana, I moved to Frankfurt where I attended the first *Midrasha* in Germany since the Holocaust, lead by a graduate student of Yeshiva University, Rabbi Bini Krauss. In fact, many of the people who guided me on my original exploration of Judaism were from Yeshiva University and Stern College. They were my role models of *Torah Umadda* (Torah and secular knowledge). From them I learned Torah--not only as G-d's plan and the genetic material for the functioning of this world, but also Torah as the root of creation.

Step by step I began, to keep the mitzvot, Shabbat and kashrut. My teachers and mentors established in me a strong



wish to understand "what binds the world's innermost core together..." (Goethe, Faust I).

Three years ago I moved to New York to pursue a degree at Yeshiva University and become part of their revolutionary path of Torah Umadda to make a mark in this world.

I graduated last spring and, shortly thereafter, joined the staff of the National Jewish Outreach Program as a Regional Program Coordinator to work on the Read Hebrew America campaign. This was an opportunity to follow my passion of empowering a new generation of Jews to connect to their Jewish identity.

This Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year, I will be standing in front of my Creator and will be judged for my past deeds. With all of the new steps I have taken in my life, I hope that this year I was able to understand and follow His will in a much more meaningful way. Through NJOP, I have learned that connecting to one's Jewish DNA can effect a whole cycle of life-changing events. Things that we do in life often have measurable results, but the extent of their impact is often difficult to quantify. I am very grateful to the NJOP team for the immeasurable impact it has had on me and on so many other Jews throughout America.

I would like to end by reciting another prayer which this blond-haired girl was able to recite in fluent Hebrew, with her eyes open and a smile on her face last Yom Kippur at the Shenk Synagogue on the YU campus.

*Avinu Malkeinu, cha'neinu va'ah'neinu, kee ain banu ma'aseem; asay eemanu tzedaka va'chesed v'ho'shee'aynu.*

"Our father, our King, be gracious with us and answer us, though we have no worthy deeds; treat us with charity and kindness and save us" (Talmud, *Taanit* 25b).

*Sofia Gordon lives in Silver Spring, Maryland.*

NEW YEAR (cont. from p. 1)...While I sensed that I might not fulfill my folk's uber-ambitions for me by becoming the first Jewish woman President of the United States, I did pursue a fast-track glamorous career as a TV producer. It wasn't until I realized that I was light-years from personal fulfillment that I traded most of that for a hubby, some kids and a kosher kitchen.

As you probably know, I was clueless when it came to cooking (kosher, yet!) and I mean clueless. But on the way to becoming observant, a wise person had taught me that preparation is the magic key to just about everything. As a busy executive discovering Judaism, I would show up at people's homes as their Shabbat guest just minutes before sunset. I'd switch off my cell, my Blackberry, and my pager, and *voilà* – instant Shabbat! The trouble was that the experience was becoming flat and tiresome, until my mentor suggested that I take the time to prepare myself for Shabbat and learn about the holidays in advance. Of course, I didn't believe her right away. Ms. Independent Thinker had to test the theory. So I gave it a try.

(cont. on p. 4)

FROM HANNAH'S PRAYER (cont. from p. 1)...the *Mishkan*, the Tabernacle, in Shilo, and pour out her heart in prayer in an effort to be blessed with the often-overlooked miracle of pregnancy. To make matters worse, her husband desperately wanted children and as a result took another wife. This co-wife wasn't easy on Hannah as she would continuously provoke Hannah, taunting her about the fact that she was barren. (This other wife, Pnina, had 10 sons. The sages say that Pnina's real goal was to help motivate Hannah to pray). It was an extremely challenging time for her until, one day she prayed with extra intensity and was blessed with a son (who would ultimately grow up to become a great Jewish leader, the prophet Samuel).

What is so significant about the life of Hannah that we recall her struggle in the Haftorah each Rosh Hashana, and also by modeling her private conversation with the Almighty in one of the most significant prayers of the Rosh Hashana experience?

We recognize that G-d grants us many gifts, some people more, and others less. There are those who accumulate a tremendous number of material possessions. But there are also those who struggle to get by each week and live from paycheck to paycheck. And most of the time it's not due to a lack of effort. Very often the effort that is expended by an individual is just as intense as another's effort, but the results are dramatically different. One thing is very clear--just because you were successful today is no guarantee that you will be successful tomorrow.

We have all recently witnessed this phenomenon on the front page of every major newspaper in the country. It's been the lead story of every major news network for the past several years. Some of the largest and strongest companies in American history have not only lost significant sums of money, but have gone bankrupt and been forced to close down. We all have friends and neighbors who have seen their bank accounts dwindle, or who own homes that are either facing foreclosure or are in the process of a loan modification or a short sale. These are words and phrases that hadn't been heard in decades, but which are now the topic of countless conversations.

On the other hand you also hear stories of people that have nothing and becomes millionaires overnight.

Hannah cautions and says (2:3) "*Al tarbu t'dabru gavoha gavoha...*" [You mighty ones — don't speak with haughtiness] "*...Keshet giborim chatim, v'nich'shalim ozru chayil*" [because you may fall and the weak will be girded with strength] (2:4).

This is the message that the story of Hannah teaches on Rosh Hashana. Life is fickle. If you feel confident because things are going your way today, be prepared that everything might change tomorrow. Hannah lived a life without children and was finally blessed with a large family. At the same time that Hannah raised her family, however, the sages inform us that Pnina lost hers. Rosh Hashana is the opportunity to pray for forgiveness and pour out our soul in anticipation of

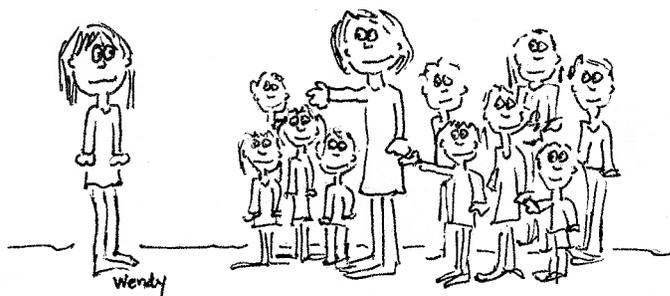
being blessed just as Hannah was blessed, with the understanding that nothing is guaranteed.

At the same time, we should acknowledge that there are a lot of changes that *are* well within our control. There are so many things in our lives that we know that we can improve. Like most things in life, change does not come easily. But this High Holiday season is the time of the year that we must at least consider what we need to work on. It's not about making the decision to change the world, but rather to make a conscious effort to make a few meaningful adjustments in our lives and take positive steps toward a meaningful year.

For those who wish to take the steps of change, the local community is the perfect place to look. For instance, the Boca Raton Synagogue's new Boca Raton Jewish Experience (BRJE) offers a place where an individual journey can be pursued at one's own pace and interest. The mitzvot are our opportunities for personal growth, to be tried, examined, and understood.

May this year serve as a year of blessing and for positive change for you, your family and your entire community.

*Rabbi Josh Broide is the founder of the Boca Raton Synagogue's Boca Raton Jewish Experience (BRJE) and Director of the Florida branch of the Jewish Student Union (JSU). He is the recipient of the prestigious Grinspoon/Steinhardt Award for Excellence in Jewish Education.*



"CAUTION: NOTHING IS GUARANTEED!"

National Jewish Outreach Program

wishes you and yours

a happy and healthy new year!

שנה טובה ומתוקה

NEW YEAR (cont. from p. 2)...

The results were awesome! The more I prepared, the more I got out of every experience. Like an athlete in spring training, I prepped and flexed my mind, discovering new and wonderful things every week.

Would this prep thing apply to the mundane act of putting together a meal? When it came to cooking, my life script called for me to have an executive chef on my staff, not to be one. But I figured that if you can enhance your spiritual growth by learning about a *mitzvah* in advance, success in cooking probably hinges on how well you prepare.

As my grandmother would say, "Mazal Tov. You discovered America." Okay, there was nothing new in saving time by pre-dicing and pre-slicing ingredients for multiple recipes. But in delving into Jewish thought, I found out that for centuries, Jewish women have been spicing their cooking with a special ingredient called *kavanah*.

You won't find it in the supermarket. *Kavanah* is Hebrew for intention or focus: our grandmothers knew that what's in your heart affects your food. A casual liturgy of *techinot*--informal prayers--were the routine accompaniment to cooking and baking. While preparing meals, they would conscientiously invoke heavenly blessings to make their dishes tasty and

nutritious so that their families would be in good health to study Torah and do *mitzvot*; so that the taste of Shabbat delicacies would bring fulfillment; so that festival treats would feed the soul. They prayed that the love they poured into the meals they were cooking would bring comfort and security to their families.

And it works. I'm not one to read loftiness into every move I make, but I have found that keeping a spiritual goal in mind as I cook brings out flavor better than MSG. When it comes to Rosh Hashanah food prep, particularly, the process itself can be an uplifting experience. That's because a good many of our traditional dishes have symbolic meanings. If you think about that when you prepare them as well as eat them, you double the perks. In other words, to launch a really new year, consider why Judaism prescribes particular foods for Rosh Hashanah.

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*Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Sarah Rochel Hewitt 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 contact us: 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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