

# BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter  
for Beginners,  
by Beginners

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# בראשית

## SHAVUOT: DIRECTIONS TO PERSONAL GREATNESS (AND CARNEGIE HALL)

Judy Tashbook-Safern

*Tourist: Excuse me, sir...I know you'll be able to answer this. How do you get to Carnegie Hall?*

*NYC cab driver: Practice, man. Practice.*

No matter who we are, no matter what synagogue we attend (or don't attend), no matter how or why or whether we cover our heads, we Jews are all practicing. Judaism is not a religion for the merely faithful; it requires action: eating kosher food, saying Kiddush on Shabbat and holidays, affixing mezuzahs to the doorposts of our homes, returning lost objects to their rightful owners, tithing, being kind to widows and orphans, leaving a corner of the field for the poor, etc. There's a lot to do every day.

Each holiday also brings its own mitzvot and customs for us to practice. The central act of Rosh Hashanah is for each individual to recognize God as our own Father and singular Sovereign. *(cont. on p. 2)*



## LIVE THE TORAH

Rabbi Tzvi Fischer

I used to love the holiday of Shavuot. Yes, I said "used to." I would look forward to the cheesecake. (Blueberry for me!) I would also look forward to the cheese blintzes (blueberry, again, or plain cheese). Exactly why counting 49 days/7 weeks from the day after the *Pesach seder* translated into cheesecake, was of little significance. It was a simple equation: I like cheesecake, therefore I like Shavuot.

All that changed when I fell for the massive media campaign to get young people (me) to visit a doctor and get a physical. They call it a "well" visit, but all wasn't well. The doctor threatened me with the gulag if I didn't go on a low fat/low cholesterol diet. Alas, no more cheesecake or cheese blintzes for me.

When I think about it, I don't understand why cheesecake is the food of Shavuot? Shouldn't it be whole-bran barley crackers? After all, the 49 day count of the Omer began with harvesting barley and making a barley offering (Leviticus 23:9-15). Or, perhaps, it should be whole wheat bread, in tribute to the end of the counting of the Omer when the wheat is harvested and two loaves of wheat bread were offered (Leviticus 23:16-17). Since the count begins *(cont. on p. 2)*

## INSPIRED BY HOLINESS

Candy Engel

Just before the Jewish people received the Torah at Mount Sinai, the Jewish people declared: "*Na'aseh v'nishma*," We will do and we will hear. Just like my ancestors had to actively make a choice to accept the Torah, I also had to find the strength within myself to declare, "I will do, and then I will listen."

In the journey to embrace the Torah, there are "a-ha" moments. Those are the moments that turn your world sideways and yet, in the end, affirm the choices that you are making. I fondly remember one such moment, perhaps because it occurred in the most unlikely of places and revealed to me an entirely new way of looking at the world.

I had been in Israel for 6 weeks, and it was the second Shabbat after I had decided to take on the responsibility of observing Shabbat. My friend asked me to join her for Friday night dinner in *Me'ah Shearim*, an "ultra-Orthodox" enclave in Jerusalem. I was so excited. I figured I would now see how Shabbat was really meant to be!

We arrived just after candle lighting. The tiny door opened, and my friend Debbie introduced our host, Michal. Although short in stature, her immense green *(cont. on p. 3)*

## DIRECTIONS TO PERSONAL GREATNESS

(cont. from p. 1)...

On Yom Kippur, we repent, forgive and accept that we have received forgiveness. On Sukkot, we don't just dwell in huts and gaze at the stars to appreciate that God has given us everything. Every day of Sukkot, we take a palm branch (*lulav*), myrtle branches, a bunch of willows and an etrog in hand to symbolize that we will each personally do our part to bring the Jewish people together. On Shemini Atzeret--the ultimate "after-party," we linger to rejoice. Quite simply, on Shemini Atzeret, our action is to *remain* with G-d. And the next day, Simchat Torah, we celebrate completing the entire Torah by beginning immediately to study it again. On Chanukah, we kindle lights. On Purim, we remember the evil that nearly befell us and we celebrate our survival by bringing gifts for the poor. On Passover, we remove chametz from our homes, open our homes to all who are hungry, recall the Exodus from Egypt and eat matzah, the bread of affliction.

Which brings us to Shavuot. This is the last holiday in the cycle of the *Shalosh Regalim*, the three pilgrimage festivals when Jews used to appear at the Holy Temple in Jerusalem with offerings of praise and thanks to God. Just as Pesach is the anniversary of God taking the Jews out of Egypt and Sukkot commemorates the miracles that we experienced during our wandering in the desert for forty years, Shavuot is the anniversary of the Jewish people receiving the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai. How do we commemorate that awesome day?

Since the destruction of the Temple and the dispersion of the Jewish people, Shavuot has traditionally been observed by staying up all night studying Torah. The next day, we typically eat cheesecake and read the Book of Ruth.

Considering that receiving the Ten Commandments was a monumental occasion--and that these are pretty easy traditions (quite pleasant, really) - why isn't Shavuot more popular? Why hasn't it "stuck" in the way that Chanukah or Purim or Passover have? These days, more people seem to know more about celebrating Tu B'Shevat (the New Year for trees, the "Jewish Earth Day") than Shavuot.

Perhaps it feels intimidating or overwhelming that this is the holiday on which we are supposed to recall receiving the Torah. So, possibly, over time, people backed off from "keeping" Shavuot. After all, most of us didn't sign up for being Jewish. Most of us did not ask for this mission and were not consulted as to our preference. In fact, the destiny of Judaism was assigned to us in the lottery of birth. We didn't choose this religion. Even the holy converts among us, those people like Ruth whose Jewish souls are hidden sparks in the dark world, were all chosen by God. He never asked us whether we wanted this destiny.

God only ever posed one question to His chosen people. Addressing the entire Jewish nation as one, He asked whether we wanted the Torah. And for the first and only time, the Children of Israel were in agreement. With one heart, we all essentially said, "Yes." We didn't know what the Torah was, but

we said, "We will do and we will listen."

While we cannot enact every mitzvah in the entire Torah during one holiday, on Shavuot, we take baby steps. We go to synagogue, eat a Yom Tov meal with other Jews, take a class, and/or say "Amen" to a blessing. We agree to practice, man. Practice.

We also agree to listen. If you can't hear the whole Torah right now, that's ok! Neither could the Jews at Mount Sinai! They asked Moses to hear it for them--and they had just experienced miracles. They had crossed the Red Sea and eaten Manna, but they were still not ready.

Let the mitzvot you begin to practice and the Torah that you hear speak to you. Let Shavuot inspire you to do more the rest of the year--to attend synagogue once a week or affix a mezuzah, to only eat kosher or to give *tzedaka*.

The message of Shavuot is that while all the Jewish people are destined for greatness, belief isn't enough; practicing is the only way to go.

(Carnegie Hall is at Seventh Avenue and 57th Street, by the way. And if you want detailed directions to personal greatness: there are 613 mitzvot to practice, all of which are outlined in the Torah and explained in the Talmud.)

*Judy Tashbook-Safren is the president of LeadingThinkers, a Dallas-based Marketing, Communications, Events and PR agency. She is an award-winning professional, a published author, a popular speaker, and the proud mother of two children. She can be reached at Judy@LeadingThinkers.com and you can follow her on Twitter @YesJeeves.*

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**LIVE THE TORAH (cont. from p. 1)...**on *Pesach*, the barley food would need to be crackers (like matzah). However, if we were to commemorate the end of the count, it would be wheat bread, which is *chametz*/leavened.

In any case, the holiday would be a lot easier for me if the choice of food was something other than cheesecake. Actually, Shavuot does not have a mitzvah food. In fact, it doesn't even have a special mitzvah. While the custom is to eat dairy foods and study all night, these are customs, not obligations. Some explain the lack of ceremonial observances for Shavuot by pointing out that one cannot make a ceremonial representation of the Torah. We can have a seder to represent our freedom, and we can blow a shofar to represent our awakening. We can fast to represent our purity, and we can live in a hut to represent the harvest and our preservation. But, we cannot ceremoniously represent the Torah. We must *live* the Torah.

Representations of memories keep them alive, but they are not living. You cannot represent life. Living is the real thing, and you only live once. It must be authentic. The Talmud tells of a Sage who had a vision of the World to Come. He described it as an upside down world where those who are "up" here are "down" there, and those who are "down" here are "up" there. The fact of the matter is that many (cont. on p. 4)

## INSPIRED BY HOLINESS (cont.

from p. 1)...eyes exuded a light and an innocence. A very large stomach preceded her. She was most definitely in her 9th month. To me, she was the embodiment of femininity. She was lovely, modest and bursting with life--both literally and figuratively.

"Here he comes!" Michal declared. We had been sitting on the stoop of her home, waiting for her husband, Shaya, to return from Friday night prayers.

I looked in the direction in which Michal was pointing and felt like an angel was walking towards us. I remember his skin being almost translucent against the black satin of his *bekishe* (long black coat worn by Chassidic men). His long perfectly curled *payot* (sidecurls) swayed in the early night breeze, under a brimming *shtrimmel* (fur hat worn by Chassidic men).

I could not take my eyes off him. I had never seen anyone look so holy before! Michal smiled radiantly, and told him that Debbie was here with her friend. While I wondered why she introduced us that way, he smiled warmly, nodded in the direction of his wife without glancing at us and said, "Good Shabbos." Only then did it occur to me that he must be blind!!

That did it for me. In my mind they were the perfect, most innocent and holy couple on earth! She was expecting, he was blind, and even though I had not yet stepped foot in their apartment, I knew it was very far removed from anything remotely luxurious! And still--they smiled. This poor young man was oblivious to his beauty, his wife's luminosity--us... the world. My heart began to ache at the thought that he could not even afford a cane!

The door of their apartment opened directly into the "kitchen," a simple counter with a fridge. Next to the fridge was a door. That was the bathroom. On the other side of the wall was a large room with a curtain strung across half of it. Behind the curtain, they proudly told me, was their bedroom. On the visible side was a plastic garden table, and 4 plastic chairs. And of course, a bookcase with holy books.

Tremendous guilt washed over me. I could not believe that they had invited TWO guests! How could I even begin to deprive them of food and make them spend more money than they could afford?

But the deeper question that I really felt was: How come they are so happy?

Debbie went to help Michal in the "kitchen" (the corner of the apartment with a counter, fridge and stove). Shaya began to sing *Shalom Aleichem*, a song which greets the Shabbos (or Shabbat) angels. At the time, however, I had no idea what he was singing, but I could not stop staring at him. How he sang....How much emotion went into his every word. I was



dumbfounded. I could not believe how elated he was, and how his blindness and poverty compounded his terrible situation.

My heart was breaking for them, but at the same time I could not believe how holy this little hole in the wall was. How this destitute young newlywed man was singing as if he had everything his heart desired. He did not want for a thing. Life to him was pure bliss, and his gratitude to God was remarkable.

He must have felt me staring at him. Ordinarily, I would

never stare, but I was certain he could not see me doing so. He finished singing, closed his eyes, and turned his head toward me.

"I don't mean to make you feel uncomfortable" he said. "I don't look at anyone, except my wife."

He could see! I had been incessantly staring at a man who could actually see! I wanted the ground to open up and swallow me.

Shaya then explained, "I never want to desire something that belongs to another. So I try my best not to look at anyone."

What a concept! What a people!

In that moment, I knew that I had made the right decision to realign my life with religious Judaism. To be a part of a people who, for generations, have held on to truly holy ideals and very lofty concepts. I did not have to feel sad for these people. At 20 years old, they knew more about life and had a deeper insight into the workings of the world than anyone I had ever met. They were to be celebrated!

In that moment, immense relief washed over me. He wasn't blind, and I had now chosen to side with people who had incredible moral fortitude.

From that moment on, I knew that my decision to leave my home, my parents, my country of birth--all that was familiar to me--and set sail on uncharted waters, was the correct one. Whatever the future would bring, I understood that I would be amidst a sea of people who would keep me afloat through their holy example.

*Candy Engel lives in Montreal with her husband and 4 daughters. She tries to make the delicate balance of being a mom, being creative and living a healthy lifestyle. Some days she actually succeeds in all three!*



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**DATED MATERIAL**

**LIVE THE TORAH (cont. from p. 2)**...people go through the motions and make representations of Torah in their life, but they don't *live* it.

In the evening blessing of the *Shema* it is written, "For the words of Torah are our life and the length of our days." Torah can and should be the breath of life in a person. If we make a representation of Torah in our lives but our heart isn't in it, we are like the people who are seen as pious (up) here, but actually miss the opportunities to really live it, and then, in the heaven envisioned by the Talmudic sage, we may not be seen as "up" at all. On Shavuot, the holiday that celebrates accepting the Torah, we do not make any representations of Torah.

Why then is the counting of the Omer begun with an offering of barley stalks and completed with an offering of two loaves of bread on Shavuot? If we cannot represent the Torah, what representations are these making? Barley was grown primarily as animal feed. It is a primal form of life. We begin our journey to Torah by celebrating primal life, which is life as the opportunity to grow. And we begin to grow, symbolically, by counting one day at a

time toward a life of meaning. Effectively, we are counting days to make them count and to reach a point where our life is no longer primal, but rather human and meaningful. And so, we celebrate the end of the count, Shavuot, with human food--wheat bread. We bring leavened bread on Shavuot. It is the only time we are permitted to represent an inflated offering in the Temple. We can represent our growth, if we live it every day.

Today, we can't bring the two loaves of bread to the Temple as an offering, but we still count the days of growth. Growing to life. Growing to health. Growing to Torah.

I still love Shavuot, but differently. I know that I will not be able to eat all that cheesecake and blintzes, but I am ok with that.

On Shavuot, I will once again have completed a count that reminds me of my need to live, and that living Torah allows me to live completely!

*Rabbi Tzvi Fischer is the Director of the Portland Kollel, an education and outreach program in Portland, Oregon. Rabbi Fischer studied at the Mir Yeshiva in Jerusalem for a decade prior to founding Portland Kollel.*



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