

בראשית

Vol. XVI No. 3

BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

Nisan 5763/April 2003

A FAMILY'S REDEMPTION

Kim Kleppel

It never fails to amaze me how far and wide Rabbi Buchwald's efforts to spread the love of Judaism can reach. I could tell you his effect on my family, which began with my daughter attending his Beginner's Services at Lincoln Square Synagogue in the late 80's, but you wouldn't understand how extraordinary this story is unless I go back several decades more.

In the 60's, parents all over America were worrying about their children joining communes taking on new religions and new ways of life. In my case, however, it was different. I was a nice Jewish girl who stayed that way. My PARENTS were the ones who joined a commune, an Episcopalian commune, and who took on a new religion with evangelical zeal, separating me from my family for years and years, and leaving me the only "nonbeliever" in the family.

Actually, joining the commune was not as unusual a step as it might seem at first. I had always sensed that my parents had never felt comfortable with their Jewishness. They were old-time Five Towners. My grandmother had designed and built a beautiful house in Woodmere in 1914. This was the house I came home to when I was born in 1935, and the home I lived in as a child and teenager.

As far back as I can remember, my parents were vocal (cont. on p. 2)



MY EPIPHANY

Marc Berenson

There comes a point in time in the life of every *Ba'al Teshuva* when he/she must stand on his/her own legs and take responsibility for his/her Torah knowledge or lack of it. The Mishnah states, in Ethics of the Fathers, that learning Torah as a child is like writing on fresh, new parchment, while learning Torah as an adult is like writing on older, erased parchment. It's just not the same. As I am not getting any younger, learning will only get harder unless I commit now to continued growth.

After several years of floating around at outreach Shabbat services, and after a year of attending Beginners Services at Lincoln Square Synagogue with Rabbi Buchwald, I came to the realization that it was time for me to master the daily prayer services, especially the *Shemoneh Esrei - Amidah*. If you look around, you see the *Amidah* everywhere. It is the central prayer of the *Shacharit*, *Mincha* and *Maariv* services for weekdays, as well as for Shabbat. There it is, three times a day, and on Shabbat, four times, seven days a week, with blessings added or deleted depending upon when it is said. In trying to establish my identity as a Jewish adult and to move (cont. on p. 2)

THE PASSOVER PARADOX - G-D & FREEDOM

Shimon Apisdorf

Most people who are familiar with the cycle of Jewish holidays know that just seven weeks after being freed from bondage in Egypt the Jewish nation stood at the foot of Mount Sinai to receive the Torah. Petitioning Pharaoh in Egypt, Moses speaks in the name of G-d and says, "G-d has sent me to tell you, 'Let my people go, so that they may serve me in the wilderness.'" Sure enough, barely two months after leaving Egypt, the People of Israel were in the wilderness receiving not just ten, but six hundred and thirteen mitzvot. Two hundred and forty-eight positive, three hundred and sixty-five negative, and all of them with hundreds of details about how, when, and where to carry out each individual commandment. So much for freedom!

A young musical prodigy enters the hallowed halls of the Julliard School of Music. She is subjected to a grueling regimen of instruction and practice, followed by more instruction and more practice. Guided by the erudite vision and steady hand of the maestro, the student is carefully led through a progression of exercises conceived by masters. It is all part of a careful educational program to develop musical talent and proper technique. The (cont. on p. 3)

FAMILY REDEMPTION (cont. from p. 1)...in their distaste for things Jewish. I think I first began to realize this as I listened to their diatribes against the nouveau-riche Jews moving into "their" neighborhood after World War II. My parents hastened to tell my sisters and me that we were not like "them." Indeed, if they detected a sign of a "Brooklyn accent" in our speech, we were immediately corrected.

We certainly bucked the trend in the Five Towns. We had a Christmas tree every year. I went to school on the Jewish Holidays. I was a Hi-Y member in high school. I went to services -- at the Woodmere Methodist Church. When I finished high school, I went into what was then a very non-Jewish profession, nursing. And then I fell in love, with a Jewish man.

I couldn't understand why my parents were upset. "But you always said you exposed us to different religions so that we could marry ANYONE and be happy," I pleaded with my mother. "Yes," she responded, "Anyone, but NOT a Jew."

Love won out. The fights over having a kosher wedding were loud and furious. When I tried to explain that my future mother-in-law couldn't eat anything that wasn't kosher at the reception, my parents' response was that she could eat cottage cheese. I must admit that I did get a sense of contrary satisfaction out of the fact that my wedding announcements stated unequivocally that I was getting married at "The Society for the Advancement of Judaism." And yes, it WAS a kosher wedding.

As for my sisters, one sister married a Christian man and had three boys. The other sister married a Jewish man, had two daughters, divorced him, and then married another Jewish man -- but only AFTER he converted to Christianity as she had. She then had another daughter. All my nieces and nephews were brought up as fundamentalist Christians.

My family patiently explained to me that until I accepted Jesus as my savior, I was as BAD as all the others in the world who would not, i.e., Jews -- those others who were keeping the world in pestilence, sickness, war and other horror by not recognizing the inevitable "truth" of Christianity. Little by little, a wedge was driven between me and my family, one I could not and would not, close.

Tragedy struck. My first husband, at a relatively young age, succumbed to a stroke. When I told my father, I also told him that if he came to the funeral and told me that I would feel better if I accepted Jesus as my Lord, I would kill him, and then my children (then ages 10 and 14) would be orphans as I would have to go to jail. There was a pause. My father said slowly, "Kim, at this terrible time it is more important that I have a daughter. I do not need a Christian daughter." It was the beginning of healing, albeit a very slow healing.

Fast forward to the late '80's when my daughter began attending Rabbi Buchwald's Beginners Services. My son-in-law joined her--first for love of my daughter, eventually for love of G-d. In the '90's my daughter and son-in-law became observant and live with their three beautiful children (how else would you expect a grandmother to describe them) on the Upper West Side. (My son-in-law even became president of an Orthodox shul!) My youngest niece also lived on the Upper West Side. I'm not sure just how my daughter and niece first got together, but suddenly, my niece started spending Shabbat at my daughter's apartment. She started attending Beginners Services. She, too, became observant.

Fast forward to Thanksgiving, 2001. My sister invited her daughter home for the holiday. My niece explained to her mother that she would not be able to eat a *treif* (non-kosher) meal. My sister countered with the suggestion that she could buy a new disposable roasting pan and a new pot, and serve kosher turkey with vegetables boiled in the new pot, on paper plates. My niece conceded, and my sister called me and asked if I, who kept a kosher kitchen and therefore was the keeper of all the "arcane" secrets of kashruth, would go food shopping with her. We headed off to Supersol (yes, I still live in the Five Towns). We bought appropriate food for the Thanksgiving dinner as well as snacks for her daughter to eat during the four-day visit. I tried not to be too big-sisterish as I explained the basic essence of kashruth, milk vs meat, pareve, etc. I still remember my sister's puzzled expression as we finished our shopping and checked out. "Hey, Kim," she said to me. "This isn't hard at all."

I think it was a few months later, in January or February, that I got a phone call that I certainly never thought I would get. It was my sister. She told me that she was studying Kabbalah as well as Jewish thought and customs with a Chabad Rabbi. She said to me, "Kim, now I can understand why you were so angry with Mom and Dad when they wouldn't recognize your Jewishness. They were denying you your essence. I now realize they also kept that from me. But now I know what I am. And Kim, from here on in, I will live as a Jew -- until the day that I die."

And so it went. From my daughter, to my son-in-law, to my grandchildren, to my niece, to my sister. And in between, to increased levels of observance by myself (not as far as I could or maybe will go in my lifetime) -- but that's another story. Thank you Rabbi Buchwald.

Kim Kleppel is the mother of a former Beginner.

EPIPHANY (cont. from p. 1)... forward in my life, I knew that it was high time that I learned this essential prayer. After being a "Beginner" for so long, I longed to enter the realm of the "intermediate" world!

With help from my Yeshiva University *Chavruta* (study partner) provided by Aish HaTorah, I set goals for reading more of the morning service in Hebrew. The blessings selected took a while to learn and get accustomed to, but I was able to make significant inroads. The challenge lay in the *Shemoneh Esrei*, I just couldn't find the inner "momentum" to read more than a few of the blessings before "religious fatigue" set in and I would finish in English. And so, this routine continued. Each time, I pushed myself a little further, sensing the need to read a bit more Hebrew and less English. Determined, I kept at it for several weeks, alas with very little success. I was reading at such a painfully slow pace that it could take almost an hour, and I would still not finish all of the blessings in Hebrew.

One day while stumbling through the prayers, I courageously decided to take on one more blessing of the *Amidah*. For some reason I picked the final blessing, the blessing for "Peace" or "*Sim Shalom*" in Hebrew. The first three Hebrew words, seemed strangely familiar. As I read the next two words, I suddenly realized that I definitely knew these Hebrew words, in fact I was reading them (cont. on p. 4)

*PASSOVER PARADOX (cont. from p. 1)...*discipline is exacting, the demands are great, and the rules are to be strictly observed. The goal of all this is freedom, the nurtured freedom of spontaneous expressions of genius. When the musician plays, the untrained eye sees only effortless and silken spontaneity. It all looks so easy. Like Michael Jordan, so smooth that kids everywhere think that all they need is the right pair of sneakers and they too will be able to perform airborne ballet with a basketball.

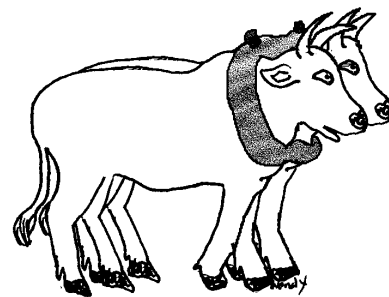
It's true, genius is a gift, but greatness is not. It is rather an achievement. All the G-d-given talents in the world will never advance from the realm of potential, if they aren't harnessed, molded, developed, and guided. This is exactly why masters, mentors, and basketball coaches, though appearing to tie their charges in one knot after another, are indispensable instruments of freedom. They unlock potential, liberate talents, and create the dynamics necessary for the expression of seemingly effortless spontaneity and creativity.

Spirituality and Spontaneity

In the eyes of the Torah, every Jew is, potentially, a spiritual prodigy. At the Shabbat meal on Friday night, Jewish parents bless their sons--that they may be like "Ephraim and Menashe," and their daughters--that they may be like "Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah." Greatness of character, spirit, and moral fiber, are the stuff of which every Jewish child is made. In blessing our daughters to be like Sarah, we are not praying that they should become another Sarah--for there can never be another Sarah. Instead we pray that just as Sarah's life was a remarkable expression of one woman's potential, such should be the destiny of all our children. It is the hope that they might invest their best efforts in an ennobled encounter with the special circumstances of their existence, and therein nourish the imaginable while making possible the unimaginable.

As Jews set out to confront life, it is with G-d as our "coach" and the mitzvot as our discipline of spiritual directives. This system of spiritual directives works to simultaneously harness and liberate the spontaneity of the human spirit in the dance of life. As detailed and far reaching as the mitzvot may be, when set against the situational matrix of life, they are recast as indispensable sign posts which hone our intuition as they indicate the direction in which we are to go--and grow.

The Torah (Deut 6:17-18) says, "Be careful to observe the mitzvot of Hashem your G-d, and His ordinances, and His statutes, as He has commanded you. And you should do what is straight and good in the eyes of G-d." There is a perplexing aspect to this exhortation to carefully fulfill the commandments in the Torah. How could it be that after being told to "Be careful to observe the mitzvot," that there is still room to say "Do what is straight and good"? Are the qualities of straightness and goodness not requisite to a life of mitzva-observance? Is a mitzva still identifiable as a mitzva if it is devious and corrupt? What the Torah is alluding to here is the fact that even after one is committed to observing all 613 mitzvot there is much in life that is left unaddressed. In all those instances, be they interpersonal, professional, religious, or otherwise, the Torah is saying that each individual must be the ultimate arbiter of what is straight and good. The responsibility of living a life shaped by straight



"WHILE THE YOKE IS HEAVY, IT ALLOWS
THE OX TO ACCOMPLISH MUCH!"

ness and goodness is laid clearly at *our* doorstep. At the same time, we are not left directionless.

George Bernard Shaw said, "Only on paper has humanity yet achieved glory, beauty, truth, knowledge, virtue and abiding love." The mitzvot are studies of character. Like a Chopin composition that works to blend refined technical skills with musical harmony, the mitzvot act as living mediums through which our latent capacities for growth are transferred from paper potential to the sturdy material of everyday life.

To think that it is easy to be a Jew because Jewish observance and practice dictate the course of one's every action is to be blind to the scope of each individual's potentialities; to the value, quality, and sanctity inherent in every nuance of living, and to the presence of meaning in all encounters with things external to the self. From the straightness and goodness which animate the 613 overt mitzvot we can infer countless other "mitzvaesque" approaches to the ever unfolding variables which an interactive life calls upon us to address.

The Paradox of Commanded Freedom

The acceptance of the Torah by the Jewish people at Mount Sinai was not a repudiation of the freedom achieved at the Exodus. These were not slaves, and the sons of slaves, who sought to exchange one hopeless yoke for another. These were, or better this is, a people who well understand that unharnessed potential is potential squandered. That an undirected life is a carelessly gambled life, and that the diminution of thoughtful rules and disciplines are open invitations, not to human freedom, but to savage anarchy.

Thus, the acceptance of the mitzvot is a system of spiritual mechanisms designed to educate and sensitize us to the qualities of straightness and goodness which are attainable in life. Still, even more than being a carefully crafted means to a beautiful end, each mitzva is also a deeply meaningful end in itself.

When a third-year resident assists in a major surgical procedure, that's not called practice. That's reality, and it's for keeps. Similarly, each mitzva stands independently as an experiential moment of growth, insight, and spiritual connectedness. And at the same time, it lays the groundwork for the future realization of enormous potential. As Johannes Brahms said, "Without craftsmanship, inspiration is a mere reed shaken in the wind."

Excerpt from Around The Year With The National Jewish Outreach Program, written by Shimon Apisdorf for the National Jewish Outreach Program. To order a copy of Around the Year, please call 1-800-44-HEBRE(W).

EPIPHANY (cont. from p. 2)...almost naturally. How could something so new feel like I knew it by rote? Then it hit me --my epiphany!

This blessing is the blessing sung every Shabbat by Rabbi Buchwald in the Beginners Service. In fact, I knew these words so well because the Rabbi would sing them in a way that was almost annoying. He would always sing in a manner so inspired, cheery and full of energy-- like the person of whom you are suspicious because they are always in such a good mood. In fact, I would roll my eyes every time he broke into this song. During *Sim Shalom*, Rabbi Buchwald is unusually aggressive, calling individuals by their first names and demanding that they join in the singing or else threatening (as so many know), "No Kiddush!" Every week for the year that I spent in the Beginners Service, I'd mumble along and pretend I knew the song, in order not to draw the rabbi's attention. I had no idea that I was slowly learning the prayer by memory. There was a melody and words, but it never dawned on me that the rabbi's gleeful singing would come back and rescue me in my time of need. I was overwhelmed by how something so seemingly obscure and what I considered almost foolish, became something so relevant in an instant.

Without hesitation, I started to sing. Each word I read rolled effortlessly off my tongue. Soon I was singing faster than I could read, but because I was familiar with each word I had the confidence to continue until the conclusion of the blessing. When I finished singing, I felt like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders -- I was truly getting closer to the goal I had set for myself. More than just a feeling of

accomplishment, I knew something special had occurred. This was definitely more than mere "coincidence" (my code word when I want to acknowledge Hashem, but am intimidated to do so).

If only more of life could be more like this quiet, powerful moment. The dots that make up life no longer seem random. It's as if Hashem is allowing us a glimpse of how the universe is all connected. But, before we can fully comprehend it, when the intellect tries to understand this glimpse, it is taken away and left as a mystery.

Continuing to grow and learn Torah, and to reach deeper levels in my own spirituality, may not be as easy as I would like it to be, but because of this experience as I worked on *Shemoneh Esrei*, I am much more confident that

I am headed in the right direction. More than anything, I want to maintain this

feeling of the interconnected universe. With Hashem's help, I now hope to start on my next goal of Hebrew comprehension, one root word at a time. Maybe Rabbi Buchwald has another song he can teach me.

Marc Berenson is an unofficial self-graduate (and occasional returnee) of LSS Beginners Service. When not studying Torah, he is a still life photographer.

"EUREKA! I KNOW THIS PRAYER ALREADY!"



Illustrations by Wendy Dunn



Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Sarah Rochel Reid, Rabbi Yitzchak Rosenbaum, and Beryl Levenson of the National Jewish Outreach Program, Inc. 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.

Readers: This is your newsletter, and we'd like to hear from you. Article contributions are always welcome.



989 SIXTH AVENUE, 10TH FLOOR
NEW YORK, NY 10018
1-800-HEBRE(W)

DATED MATTER