

BERESHITH
"IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter
for Beginners,
by Beginners

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בראשית

MY MOTHER WAS RAISED BY COMMUNISTS

Enid Langbert

My mother was raised by Communists. My father by assimilated German Jews. There wasn't a lot of Jewish learning going on in my house. And there wasn't much in the synagogues that I irregularly attended in my youth that piqued my interest. How is it, then, that I now attend a very traditional synagogue? That is a useful question to ponder.

We are approaching Rosh Hashanah, our New Year. It is a time to reflect upon where we are and where we wish to be next year. It is a time to make Rosh Hashanah "resolutions."

How do Rosh Hashanah resolutions differ from the ones we make, and seldom keep, on that "other" new year in January? The answer, of course, lies in the difference between, on the one hand, a celebration of the day on which G-d created humankind and, on the other hand, an arbitrary secular system of counting. On the day of the latter New Year, it is wholly appropriate to evaluate our material progress and consider giving up smoking, losing 10 pounds, or saving more money. On the former, we must consider our soul and evaluate our individual progress in relation to the overall purpose for which G-d created the human species. *(cont. on p. 4)*



THE UNIFYING TERUAH

Rabbi Barry Gelman

On both days of Rosh Hashanah, we read excerpts from the book of Genesis. Many have wondered what special connection the rabbis saw between the book of Genesis (specifically the events of the life of Abraham and Sarah) and Rosh Hashanah that they chose these particular chapters.

Although many answers are given to this question, I would like to suggest an answer based on the introduction to the book of Genesis written by Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (known as the Netziv). The Netziv was the head of the famed Volozhin Yeshiva for almost 40 years -- until it was closed by the Russian government in 1892. He was a man who went to great lengths to maintain unity between the different factions of the Jewish community. He once wrote that the idea of separating the Jewish community into two communities, one observant and the other not, was the equivalent of *(cont. on p. 2)*

TRAVELING FORWARD

Harriet Edleson

After September 11th, I was in complete denial.

How could the greatest country in the world -- the one that had given me and millions of others the freedom that so many of us, at times, take for granted -- be attacked? It was unthinkable and, at least for me, unimaginable.

But life had to go on. In an era when a large percentage of Americans were reluctant to fly and the airline industry was collapsing -- I was writing about travel! I was terrified. Yet, I barely acknowledged this fact to myself or to anyone else. I refused to admit how tough things were and plowed forward.

In February 2002, I signed on with *The New York Times* to write for the travel section. And write I did -- for that newspaper and any other publication that would publish my work. The money, however, just trickled in, leaving me wondering how I was going to pay for my Upper East Side apartment, not to mention just living. *(cont. on p. 3)*

THE UNIFYING TERUAH (cont. from p. 1)...swords being thrust into his body.

The Netziv begins his introduction by teaching that Genesis, the first of the five books of Moses, is also called *Sefer Hayashar* -- The Book of the Upright, Straight or Honest. He says that: "Rabbi Yochanan explains the reason for this name is that it is the book of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who were called *Yesharim* (the plural of *yashar*)."
The Netziv proceeds to explain why our ancestors were called *Yesharim* (Upright Ones), rather than *Tzaddikim* (Righteous Ones) or *Hasidim* (Pious Ones): The destruction of the Second Temple took place in what the Torah refers to as a "perverse and crooked generation" (Deuteronomy 32:3), which the Netziv explained to mean that while there were both *Tzaddikim* and *Hasidim*, as well as Torah scholars, they were "not upright in the ways of the world."

The Netziv then elaborates and explains that these supposedly righteous and pious individuals had such a level of *sinat chinam* (baseless hatred) in their hearts toward each other that they suspected heresy of anyone who disagreed with them. Such hatred eventually led to violence and other evils, and eventually led to the destruction of the Temple. "This," the Netziv pointed out, "is the justification for the destruction: for G-d is *Yashar* and G-d does not tolerate this type of 'righteous person.' G-d prefers people who are *Yesharim*, not those who act crookedly, even for the sake of Heaven..."

The greatness of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was not that they were *Tzaddikim* or *Hasidim*, or even lovers of G-d to the highest degree possible. But, rather, according to the Netziv, that they remained *Yesharim* throughout their lives. "Thus they behaved respectfully even toward the most despicable idol-worshippers. They treated them with love, and cared about their well-being. This kind of behavior sustains the creation. We therefore see Abraham pray for Sodom even though he hated the Sodomites for their wickedness, as he explained to the King of Sodom. Nevertheless, he desired their well-being..."

Genesis is therefore known, according to what we have just seen from the Netziv, as the Book of *Yesharim*, "the Upright Ones," because of the central characters -- the matriarchs and the patriarchs.

What a powerful and daring action it is to call for supporting efforts for communal unity. The courage that the Netziv showed in writing this and, even more, by living in this manner, is a model for us all. The Netziv claims that Abraham was willing to go out on a limb and argue with G-d for the sake of people outside his faith

community. How much more so should we endeavor for unity within the Jewish community?

The importance of Jewish unity is reflected in our custom of how we sound the shofar on Rosh Hashanah.

It is quite clear in Jewish law, that on Rosh Hashanah we need to sound a *Tekiah* followed by a *Teruah*, followed by a *Tekiah*. This must be done three times. At the time of the compilation of the Talmud, the sages knew that a *Tekiah* was supposed to be sounded as one solid note. But, the question arose as to what, exactly, does a *Teruah* sound like. There are three opinions:

1. What we call a *Teruah* (three medium-length notes)
2. What we call a *Sh'varim* (nine quick notes)
3. What we call a *Sh'varim-Teruah* (three medium notes followed by nine quick notes)

One must ask an obvious question: How could we not know the sound of a *Teruah*? If G-d taught Moses all of the laws on Mount Sinai, including how to sound the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, and the shofar was sounded on every Rosh Hashanah from that moment on, it is hard to imagine that the details of the mitzvah would suddenly be forgotten.

Rav Hai Gaon (969 – 1038, Babylon) suggests a beautiful answer. It is not that a doubt first arose in Talmudic times, but rather that different communities had accepted and passed down the tradition of their *Teruah*, while at the same time recognizing that there were other traditions that were also valid.

The resolution of the Talmudic question was decreed by Rabbi Abahu (a third century Palestinian sage), who decreed that all three versions should be sounded. This is why we sound thirty shofar blasts at one time during the service. Rabbi Abahu saw the diverging opinions, and felt that it really did not look very good if each community did their own thing, so he established a rule that all communities should follow all the customs. This act of Rabbi Abahu, which was universally accepted, is one of the greatest examples of the creation of unity in all of Jewish history.

I once learned from a very wise man that if ideology becomes so blinding that we cannot see human beings in the followers of a different ideology, then we have gone too far. If that happens, we have moved from worshiping G-d within a certain ideology to worshiping the ideology itself.

Rabbi Abahu understood that all three ways of sounding the *Teruah* were correct, because all the communities involved were focused solely on fulfilling the commandment to sound the shofar, and on serving G-d to their fullest ability.



"SOUND THE SHOFAR OF UNITY"

And this was what made our fore-fathers and foremothers the great people that they were -- they were able to stay focused on the goal of doing G-d's will, even during the most trying circumstances.

In the spirit of the *Yesharim*, the Upright Ones, who find delight in unity and commonality of purpose, may this year be a year when we reach greatness as a community, united in service of G-d.

Rabbi Barry Gelman is the Rabbi of United Orthodox Synagogues of Houston, Texas.

TRAVELING FORWARD (cont. from p. 1)...

Six months later, my father suffered a severe stroke, and, within a month, he was gone. I was stunned, feeling as if I had been hit by a truck -- the kind that carries six cars. I wanted to recite *Kaddish* for him, but my grade school Hebrew had all but abandoned me. More than anything else, I was numb. Unmarried and living in Manhattan for just two years, I went through the motions of life. Luckily, my mother still lived in our family's home, a mere 37 minutes away by commuter train, and she needed me. I had another reason to live.

Winter roared in with temperatures hovering around freezing. After having attended Lincoln Square Synagogue's Beginners High Holy Day Services at the New York Historical Society earlier in the fall and, afterwards, Torah classes in the city, a friend invited me to spend Shabbat with a family he was close with in Brooklyn. Actually, he'd invited me several times before that, even before September 11th, but, new to Manhattan, I was not eager to take the train to Brooklyn -- for any reason.

That day, going for coffee with him on 85th Street, I had a change of heart, "Yes, I will come for Shabbos."

By this time, I was a regular at parasha classes throughout the city, eagerly absorbing as much as I could. I read everything I could find and attended Shabbat dinners in the city from time to time. I had also attended the NJOP Crash Course in Hebrew Reading at Kehilath Jeshurun to revive the near-dormant Hebrew I had studied for two years when I was 10 or 12. By the time I arrived in Brooklyn, I thought I knew a few things.

← DEPARTURES

ARRIVALS →



But it was as if I knew nothing -- minimal Hebrew, a few words of Yiddish. Fortunately, the *berachot* (blessings) for wine, challah and candle lighting were staples in my Jewish vocabulary.

I had been raised very Jewish as far as I was concerned. It became apparent, however, after I moved to Manhattan that I had just skated across the surface of Judaism. Despite my Jewish upbringing, what did I know? I didn't realize what I had been missing. My soul -- once exposed to information -- thirsted for more. I drank of the spiritual waters, satiating my soul.

But it wasn't easy. At the Shabbat dinner in Brooklyn, I was somewhat dazed, then beleaguered, as I wandered through the maze of *zemirot* (Shabbat songs) that penetrated my soul, *Divrei Torah* that nourished my intellect, and new Shabbat friends with whom to share it all.

Upon my arrival, my host's 15-year-old daughter bounded up the stairs to speak with me, about anything and everything, telling me definitively, "We're Chassidish!" I didn't stop to think much about what that might have meant. All I knew was that I liked these people: They were my people, and that was enough for me.

Spring came, and I returned for another Shabbat. By the fall, my host was calling me regularly on Thursdays to ask if I was coming for Shabbat. When Sukkot came, the phone rang again, asking if I was coming for *Yuntif* (the festive days). Indeed, I was. Sometime between Rosh Hashanah and Sukkot, a kind rabbi from Chabad agreed to come to my apartment to *kasher* my kitchen. I had called several times until I reached him, almost begging him to do the job. I just couldn't spend the rest of the holidays at home unless he did.

And so I read as many books as I could at my host's home in Brooklyn, learning about everything ranging from *Taharat Hamishpachah* -- the Jewish Laws of Family Purity -- to commentaries on the parasha of the week, from Rashi to the Ramban. I continued to attend classes in Manhattan through NJOP and the Hineni Heritage Center, as well as Aish Hatorah on the Upper East and Upper West Side and the Manhattan Jewish Experience.

And so it was a beginning: Keeping Shabbat and kosher as best I could. I waded in so as not to jump out, as the advice goes. The beginning has now become an advanced beginning, and, with G-d's help, I will continue to grow spiritually.

Three years after that first Shabbat in Brooklyn, I began to say the *Shemoneh Esrei*, the silent *Amidah* (at first mostly in English), witnessed two of my friends marry, signed my first book contract, and felt like I had come home to my Jewish roots.

My grandparents and my father would be as proud of me as my mother is.

A Manhattan-based writer, Harriet Edleson is author of the forthcoming book, The Little Black Book of Washington, DC, to be published by Peter Pauper Press, 2007. She can be reached at Harriet333@aol.com.

MY MOTHER (cont. from p. 1)... This sounds grandiose. But it is not, for the simple reason that there is no dichotomy between inner and outer life. For us on Earth, the spiritual manifests itself in the material. And that is why I ponder, at this time of year, the path that led me from secularism to traditionalism.

I believe that my parents and the synagogues that I attended when I was young were well-meaning. They tried to make my life easy and fun by eliminating *Halacha* (Jewish law and ritual). But, in the process, they lost spirituality. That was why I, and great numbers of my generation, who were not interested in a life that was simply "easy and fun," became disaffected with Judaism. Those of us who yearned for spirituality believed that we had to seek it elsewhere.

My first intimation that there was more to Judaism than was dreamt of in my philosophy, came in a Reconstructionist synagogue in Woodstock, New York, filled with Jewish mystics of all flavors and denominations: Buddhists, Yogis, Hindus, Sufis, Jews who had meditated, Jews who had left their bodies, Jews who had taken mind-altering drugs, Jews who had read Tarot cards, Jews who had sought gurus in India and Egypt, Jews who had studied astrology, etc., etc. I discovered, with a shock, that the spirituality that I had sought in all the other teachings was alive and well and living in Judaism. Moreover, the Jewish teaching had a warm familiarity that had been absent in all the others. Even if I did not, at the time, know any more Hebrew than I did Sanskrit, I knew that this was my teaching. This was my voice.

Then I met Rabbi Buchwald. From him I received the second, and even more surprising, gift of Judaism -- *Halacha*.

Nothing I had ever studied, in an Ivy League college and three different graduate school programs, or anything I had ever experienced, as a poet, Revolutionary, Hippie, Mystic, Lawyer and Judge, could prepare me for the shock of what Rabbi Buchwald taught me -- that my life could be enhanced, even saved, through the traditions of Jewish ritual.

Unfortunately, all of this happened after my children were adults. My children, like me, grew up in a home in which there wasn't a lot of Jewish learning going on. You can imagine the joy I felt a couple of years ago when my daughter-in-law told me that I had inspired her to send my three granddaughters to study in the Jewish Center in Tokyo, Japan, where they live. It is a wonderful place. Some of the children there, like my granddaughters, have two American Jewish parents. But there is also a rainbow of others -- children with one American parent and one Japanese parent, children with one Japanese parent and one Ethiopian parent, and children with two Japanese parents.

This summer, my whole family, three children, three spouses and five grandchildren spent a week together at a lovely resort in Maine. It was what my mother would have called a really "Goyishe" place. On Friday evening, I sat at a long table with my granddaughters. We recited the Shabbat blessing together and sang a rousing chorus of "*V'shamru Bnai Israel et ha'Shabbat*" (Exodus 31:16, the commandment to the People of Israel, instructing them to keep the Shabbat). It may have been the first time that the Sabbath was welcomed like a Queen at Linnekin Bay, Maine.

Enid Langbert is Principal Court Attorney in the NY Supreme Court and a proud grandmother.

Illustrations by Wendy Dunn



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