

BERESHITH

"IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter
for Beginners,
by Beginners

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בראשית

STAND STILL!

Devorah Spilman

Stand still!

It seems I never stand still. I want to, but I never seem to have time. I want time to stand still, and I want to hear G-d's voice. I think of the Jews standing before the Red Sea with the Egyptians at their backs, fear in their hearts and regret in their minds. To those men, women and children, Moses says, "Fear not, stand still and see the salvation of the L-rd which He will show you today" (Exodus 14:13).

Stand still and listen to the sounds of the Shofar.

Stand still and say the silent *Amidah*, the standing prayer.

At the Sea they had to have NO FEAR. They stood still in order to *see* and then to be *saved*.

It is Rosh Hashanah, and my life seems perched on the edge of the Red Sea with the Egyptians coming after me. I'm in a panic of hopelessness and sure that I can't possibly change and really do better this year. I feel stuck. But I go to the synagogue, and I try to feel something.

I do feel something. I feel yearning, a deep yearning to be closer to G-d, to find the stillness I crave, to fulfill my goals. I also feel that I can't, that I won't, be any different than I was last year. (*cont. on p. 2*)



WHAT IS G-D TELLING ME?

Azriella Jaffe

I was in a car accident last week. Or perhaps the right words are, "I caused a car accident last week." The guy in front of me slammed on his brakes because the guy in front of him did, and I crashed into his car. I didn't respond fast enough when he suddenly stopped, and now I have a sore body and a car with significant damage. Since I live in NJ, I can look forward to G-d knows how much of a bill when you add up tickets, points, and deductibles.

I keep living the accident over and over again, this constant nightmare in my head. I can still hear the crash, feel it in my body, and that sinking "Oh no!" that comes from it. I had plans, an appointment I was on my way to, and so did the other driver. But this happened instead. Now it's insurance adjusters, and body shops, and chiropractors, and apologizing over and over again to my husband for messing up his car. There is (*cont. on p. 3*)

SUKKOT IN SCHENECTADY

Rabbi Saul Strosberg

Grandma lived with us while we were growing up. She moved in after Grandpa passed away. I will always cherish the times we shared together. Shabbat and Holidays were particularly enjoyable, as Grandma would help entertain company, by telling stories, singing, and making everyone feel comfortable in our home.

Grandma especially loved Sukkot. She loved eating in the Sukkah, which she called her "*sukee*," and would always try her hardest to stay at the table as long as possible at the holiday meals despite the cold nights and hot days.

Each year, as her health progressively deteriorated, it became more and more difficult for her to come out to the "*sukee*." But for Grandma, we would do anything. One year, we moved the "*sukee*" to our driveway, which made life easier. Another year, my parents had a ramp built, so that Grandma could be wheeled up and (*cont. on p. 4*)

STAND STILL (cont. from p. 1)...I stand up because it is time to blow the Shofar. We are all standing, standing still, silent, together. I close my eyes, and I stand still, really still and then there is sound all around me, inside me, ripping open barriers. There are tears sliding down my cheeks. I am standing at Mount Sinai when we received the Ten Commandments. The sound of the Shofar was there too. I am part of something much bigger than myself; something my soul seems to understand better than my head. I am transported, transformed, transfixed, and I am standing still, forever outside of time and space. I am at the Sea, and it is parting. I can walk through on dry land and dance on the other side with Miriam and the sounds of her tambourine.

The sound of the Shofar falls silent. I don't sit down. I don't open my eyes. I stand still, finally, deeply, truly still, and I know this year will be different. I know that I will be able to stop, stand still and remember this moment and go forward through any obstacles.

Now I stand before my young students. They are five years old. They also will experience Rosh Hashanah. How can they change? How can I?

Judaism teaches that every person can fix their mistakes through a process called *Teshuvah*, literally, return. Maimonides listed four steps to the *Teshuvah* process, but I needed to teach those ideas to five year olds. Thus developed: "Oops, Ow, Sorry, Do Better."

- Step 1 – **Oops** – Tell the truth about your mistake.
- Step 2 – **Ow** – Feel bad, regret your mistake.
- Step 3 – **Sorry** – Say sorry to the person or people involved and take an action to fix the mistake, if appropriate.
- Step 4 – **Do better** – In the same situation do the right thing next time.

These steps work wonderfully with children. Children learn that you can't fix a mistake until you tell the truth. Then if you do the steps you are not in trouble. You have fixed and erased your mistake. Now you are ready to do better. And really, the very first step requires that you stop and stand still...find the truth of what happened. You have to look and listen to begin Oops, Ow, Sorry, Do Better.

Standing still, I blow the Shofar for them. I teach them the three sounds of the Shofar and what the Shofar is telling us.

Tekiah – One long blast Dooooooooooooooooo
YOUR BEST

Shevarim – Three medium blasts DOO DOO DOO
YOUR BEST

Teruah – Nine short blasts DO DO DO DO DO DO DO
DO DO DO YOUR BEST

We practiced being a Shofar and calling out Dooooo your best. As simple as this is, I also stand and hear the Shofar calling me to do my best. What is holding me back from my best? Now is the time to blow it away and see, think, believe and envision my best self, my best life and really see it and know it to be true.

Sometimes a book of secular wisdom enters my life and supports me on my path through Judaism. Last week I found a book called *The Secret*, by Rhonda Byrne. It teaches the "law of attraction," that thoughts become things. I realized this was a great book for Rosh Hashanah. "Rosh" means head in Hebrew. Our "new year holiday" is the head of the year. It directs the rest of the year. We set our intentions for the year on Rosh Hashanah.

As I read this book, *The Secret*, I realized that I too can set my intentions for what I most want, and I can believe it will come to pass. During the Rosh Hashanah service we say that "By doing *Teshuvah*, *Tefillah* (prayer) and giving *Tzedakah* (charity), we can remove an evil decree." As I think about this I see myself returning to a clear place, praising and blessing my life and praying for what I most want in my life and in the world.

Then I take action. I give to others, and I give to myself, making my visions real. In this way, Rosh Hashanah becomes real, not just a long day in synagogue. I take time to close my eyes and not say every word in the book but to hear the words of my heart and see the visions of my mind. I stand still, silent, focused...I ask G-d to help me make those visions come true. Knowing that our thoughts and beliefs shape what happens makes me take our tradition more seriously and take that time in synagogue to do real and powerful inner work and to commit to continuing that work in my daily life.

May this Rosh Hashanah be a time of transformation and blessing for each of us individually and for the whole world. May we, with G-d's help, make our deepest and truest visions real. May we all be written and sealed in the Book of Life for good.

Devorah Spilman is a storyteller, teacher, puppeteer and clown who lives in Portland, OR. She performs at community events and teaches at the Florence Melton Adult Mini School and at Portland Jewish Academy.

*Wishing You a
Happy New
Year!*

WHAT IS G-D TELLING ME (cont. from p. 1)...also a renewed and deeper fear of leaving my house, of driving anywhere, of recognizing that every day I don't know if and when I'll return to the house -- or if my family will -- in the same shape they left, or even, at all. This awareness haunts me, terrifies me, makes me cry.

I share this incident with you because I am acutely aware of how being observant shaped the way I responded to the accident from the first minute. I'll share with you what I mean.

My first response after "Oh no!" was, "Thank you G-d that no one was injured." Even though the accident happened because the guy in front of me slammed on his brakes, I am considered at fault because I hit him. I wish it hadn't happened. But it did, so I thank G-d that it wasn't much worse.

The other guy was rushing to an appointment. The damage to his car was minor. He suggested not bothering with the police, and just trading car insurance info. I should have done that, it would have saved me a lot of money in points and insurance increases. But I knew the right thing to do was to call the police, and in that instant, I chose to do the right thing and call the police. (I admit to several moments since then of clunking myself on the head and saying, "You idiot, what were you thinking?!!!!")

At the end of the transaction, I approached the man and apologized to him for hitting his car. Although this in itself was an admission of guilt, and perhaps I should have been taking the stand of, "Hey, this is YOUR fault for putting on your brakes!" I chose in the moment to just say, "I'm sorry for hitting your car." He softened immediately, told me it was all right, and asked me what my first name is. I told him, "Azriela, a Hebrew name which means G-d is my helper." He smiled, and quoted me back a bible verse from his religion. For a moment, we were just two people recognizing that G-d is in charge, and we for-

gave one another. I wished him a good day and he wished me the same.

Ever since the accident, I keep asking myself over and over again — if this was from G-d, and I must believe it is, why? Am I being punished for something I've done wrong? Am I being warned to stop doing something I've been doing? Am I being given a wake up call? Why the expense right now that we really can't afford? Did I come by some money in the wrong way, and G-d is taking it back from me now? Was this not a punishment, but actually saving me from something? Now that my car will be in the shop for who knows how long, did G-d take it off the road because if that hadn't happened, something much worse could have happened while driving it? Does the accident take the place of something so much worse, and should I be grateful for it?

And then, there is the sinking feeling I try to avoid dwelling on, that now consumes me. Life is so fragile, gone in a second, one crash and it's all over as we know it. I kiss my children goodbye in the morning and pray they will return to me. I hug my husband before he heads off for work and pray for his safe return. Every morning, I reaffirm that what is so dear to me can slip through my hands. I can't hold on to it no matter how much I want to. It's really all in G-d's hands.

And that is, for me, a really scary thought.

This is the moment when I am supposed to take the high road, and increase my *bitachon* (faith in G-d), and feel a sense of serenity in this wake up call that reminds me that G-d is in control. This is the moment when I should just be concentrating on my gratitude that the accident only resulted in broken metal, not broken bones, and that the guy I hit wished me a good day by the end of it. And what does any of this have to do with being observant? Simply this.

I keep reviewing the whole accident with G-d in mind. G-d is always in mind. What does G-d want of me? Why is G-d doing this to me? What did I do wrong? What can I do better? Why today, and what does it all mean? Why was this G-d's plan for me today?

I don't have the answers, but I do know that it's important that I keep asking the questions.



This article originally appeared on BeyondBT.com. Azriela Jaffe, who lives in Highland Park, NJ, is the author of What Do You Mean, You Can't Eat in My Home, A Guide to How Newly Observant Jews and their Lesser Observant Relatives Can Still Get Along, which can be purchased at Barnes and Noble.

SUKKOT IN SCHENECTADY (cont. from p. 1)...down.



One of the last years, we installed a heater in the “sukee” that would go on at night, and a ceiling fan that would cool the “sukee” during the day. Astonishingly,

Grandma always seemed fine...it was the rest of us who felt the need to go inside after a few hours.

Very often, just before Sukkot began, the Rabbi would remind us of the *halacha*: If a person feels discomfort, he is exempt from eating in the sukkah. This rule was important to know, because often, in Schenectady, it would rain on Sukkot. Once we even had snow in our “sukee.” But no matter how cold or uncomfortable the rest of us were, Grandma wanted to stay!

The Kotzker Rebbe asked a question: Why should feeling irritated relieve a person from the obligation of fulfilling a mitzvah? In other words, a mitzvah is a mitzvah - why should it matter whether you feel comfortable or not?

In the *Ohel Torah*, the Kotzker Rebbe explains:

The sukkah is called the “Shelter of Faith.” It teaches you to leave behind your worldly concerns and dedicate yourself to G-d...If you achieve this level of faith, you feel no pain or discomfort... That is why a person who feels discomfort is exempt from the mitzvah of eating in the sukkah...for that person, any further stay there has no benefit. Therefore he is exempt. (Adapted from *The Essence of the Holidays*, A.Y. Finkel)

You see, my Grandma got it. By her definition, a “sukee” meant comfort. Our “sukee” was comfortable because she made it comfortable, with her humor, warmth, and wisdom. Grandma knew that wherever she went, G-d was there too, spreading His Divine shelter over all to enjoy. For Grandma, it was impossible to have an uncomfortable “sukee” because to her the concept of dedication to G-d and goodness was all encompassing.

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Illustrations by Wendy Dunn



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