

BERESHITH
"IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter
for Beginners,
by Beginners

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בראשית

THE SEPTEMBER BLUES

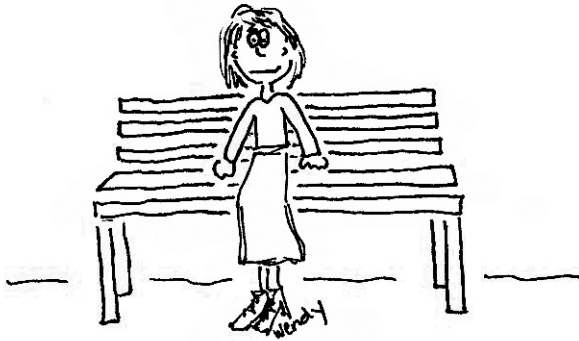
Amalia Reef

Ahh. It's here again, the fresh, brisk living pulse of September. We feel it in our bodies when we climb out of bed and, without effort or argument, prepare for the day ahead, ready to leave a full half hour before we need to. I feel it in the air when I take my kids to school in the morning, cool and quick and moving. And I feel it in the evening when I call my kids in earlier each day and they, again without effort or argument, prepare for bed and fall asleep sweetly and soundly well before midnight.

I have always had an awe and a love of September. It begins as invigoration, as I sense the new beginnings and fresh starts. I always loved the new school year with all of the fresh clean notebooks and sharpened pencils waiting for me to bring them to life. I loved the new school clothes my grandma always bought for me, the new shoes and, as I got older, the new accessories and haircut too. It felt like the beginning of a whole new world. It felt like anything was possible. And while I no longer have the pleasure of shopping with Grandma and heading off to school myself, the feeling persists.

September, however, always changed after I donned the last of the new wardrobe. By this time, something of a routine was established and I would begin to contemplate. Is this year really any different than those before? Will anything really change? Am I worthy of change? Am I capable (cont. on p. 2)

"STOP WITH THE
'SEPTEMBER BLUES'
ALREADY! IT'S
ROSH HASHANA!"



BOOK OF THE LIVING ZOMBIES

Rabbi Tuvia Hoffman

The angels asked G-d, "Master of the Universe, why don't the Jews sing joyous songs to You on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur like they do on the other holidays?"

G-d replied, "Should the Jews be singing joyous songs while the King is sitting on His throne of justice with the 'Sefer Chaim – Book of Life' and 'Sefer Maytim – Book of Death' open before Him?!" (Source: Babylonian Talmud - Rosh Hashana – 32b)

Many of you, including myself, remember the famous "Book of Life" and "Book of Death" being discussed as children on the High Holidays. It is interesting to note, however, that these words are imperfect translations.

A closer look at the words "Sefer Maytim" which is normally translated as "Book of Death" is more precisely translated as "Book of the Dead." If so, then the other book, commonly translated as "Book of Life" should be uniformly and precisely translated as "Book of the Living."

Although the difference between "death" and "dead" and "life" and "living" may seem trivial, when (cont. on p. 3)

HOLYLAND JITTERS

Janice N. Klein

I am going to spend this year in Israel, *Eretz Yisrael*. When I inform people of my decision, they usually ask me, "Aren't you excited?" This is a question that is quite often followed by, "Are you nervous?" When they do this, it always makes me think of the lyrics to one of the songs from the movie *Anastasia*. "People always say/life is full of choices/no one ever mentions fear."

They just don't.

I think I may have been asked a total of one time, "Are you scared?" Truthfully, I know rationally that I am excited about being able to spend the next year learning in "The Holy Land." Indeed, I will actually be in what is considered by many to be the holiest city, Jerusalem, *Yerushalayim*. And while I know that everything will ultimately be fine and that Hashem does, and will always, help me, what I am *feeling* is scared.

I know that Israel isn't really a scary place--I've been there twice before. The first time I went was on a Birthright Israel trip in the winter of 2005. It was one of the most amazing experiences I ever had. We toured practically the (cont. on p. 3)

SEPTEMBER BLUES (cont. from p. 1)...of change? It was the inevitable “September Blues” creeping up on me and engulfing me.

The year after I discovered Judaism, I finally put two and two together and realized that the power and the balance of my September had always come from G-d, that my soul had been living the pattern of a Jewish life, though my mind and body were completely oblivious to it!

My journey of learning and discovery would take me many years. I attended many events and services before I was actually part of the people. I remember wondering, with the final shofar blast of Yom Kippur still ringing in my ears, if this year would be the one that would lead me to the *mikveh* to join my people at last. In those days, and still in these, Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur were times of intense prayer and emotion, and times of hope. I feel G-d’s love so strongly even as I feel and dread His judgment. While I often feel unworthy of the precious gifts He bestows, I thank Him every day and *daven* (pray) that His kindness will prevail and temper His judgment, as I believe it will.

One of the beautiful opportunities that Hashem grants at this time of year is that of *teshuvah* (repentance). A couple of years ago, I heard a very powerful talk explaining that we should live the last Shabbat of the year as we would have liked to have lived every Shabbat of the year; the last Sunday of the year as we would have liked all the Sundays and so on. The idea is that G-d, in His infinite kindness, would take that last Shabbat, that last Sunday, and forget about any of the others during the year that were less than stellar. We take that one tiny step forward, saying, “This is how we want our Shabbatot to be, this is what we can do,” and G-d comes running toward us and accepts our *teshuvah*. This concept really made an impression on me. It put into words what my heart knew was true. G-d loves us and wants to bring us near. This is how we see G-d’s kindness tempering His judgment.

In the same talk, the lecturer gave practical advice on how to frame our *teshuvah*, and ourselves, for success. She suggested that we choose one very specific, very realistic, objective for the year to come. Something as specific as “I will pray every morning, except Sunday.” The idea is that our goal should be something we can do on a regular day, not just on Rosh Hashana. If we set a goal, and right away in the first week fail to keep it, we will lose track of our goal over time. It is too difficult to sustain. So, it is better to take tiny baby steps that we can realistically manage. This, I believe, is the secret of change.

I became aware of Judaism during my first year of university. I was 18 years old when I stumbled across Blu Greenberg’s *How To Run a Traditional Jewish Household* and knew that this was what I wanted for myself. I read the entire year. I told no one of my discovery. I sought out no Jews. The following year, I tried to make contact with a rabbi. It took 6 months to get an appointment. He gave me a book and proceeded to ignore my calls for another few months. Then he gave me another book. I read and read. I taught myself to read Hebrew. I asked questions whenever the rabbi agreed to meet me. I was too scared to go to synagogue, so I didn’t. When the rabbi finally

insisted that I come on Shabbat morning, I stood at the door for several weeks without entering. I spent another several weeks coming into the building and walking right out again. It was almost a year until I finally entered the prayer services and was caught by the rabbi, who found someone to sit beside me and show me how to follow the service. It took until I was 21 for me to finally start meeting Jewish people in the community and to go out for Shabbat meals. By the time I finally went to the *mikveh*, I was almost 23 and very, very sure of my path. I really was a different person. And how did I go from being who I was to who I became? With tiny baby steps, one after the other.

While I was constantly reassessing and evaluating who I was and where I was going, I still couldn’t tell you when the actual change occurred. It was so slow and so organic that I just slowly morphed into my new self. Now, 15 years and 4 children later, the changes are still happening, but they often sneak up on me unawares. Like today when my daughter, her first day back at school, answered the question “How are you special?” with “I am a Jew.” How is this child mine?

September, well really the Hebrew months of Elul and Tishrei, is a season of energy and invigoration when we think about what we can achieve. And in this season, G-d gives us the tools to achieve our goals, while at the same time making us strikingly aware of His awesomeness. It is this balance of love and fear that empowers us and strengthens our connection to G-d. It is the essence of what we are all about.

So, next time your eager energy of renewal, your fresh starts and turning over a new leaf, fizzles into the “September Blues,” thank G-d that you are a Jew.

Amalia Reef lives in Montreal, Quebec, with her husband and four children. She has an MA in Education.



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BOOK OF THE DEAD (cont. from p. 1)...the names of the books are translated with precision, we have a new understanding of what these books are. Every year, G-d writes the deeds of the "living" in the "Book of the Living." Similarly, He inscribes the deeds of the dead in the "Book of the Dead." But who are these dead, and why does He write down their deeds year after year? Does He write, "Jones, died in 1938 – still dead. Smith, died in 1978, haven't heard a word from him – still dead!"?

The answer is that "the dead" and "the living" both refer to people who are actually alive.

"The dead" refers to people who are disconnected from the essence of life. Instead, these people connect themselves to that which *appears* to be the essence of life -- base physical pleasures. There are, of course, the extremists, those who seek out the false euphoria of drugs and those who constantly seek the adrenaline rush of dangerous adventures. But the physical world, in general, is filled with these false sensations of being alive.

Everyone knows that a good ice cream cone, a nice car, a roller coaster – all these things make you feel good, they make your blood rush – they make you feel alive. However, when you finish the ice cream, you simply wipe your lips and it's done. These are pleasures, but they are not truly life experiences. They do not affect our souls, nor do they change us for the better.

"The living," on the other hand, is a description of people who strive to attach themselves to something with meaning, who wish to connect with the true source of life: G-d. These people create this connection by filling their lives with Jewish spirituality, the learning of Torah, observance of *mitzvot*, character perfection, giving *tzedaka*, and the like. This does not mean that these people do not enjoy the pleasures of life, such as the delight of an ice cream cone or the pride of a new car. But they recognize them for the fleeting moments that they are. Instead, these people live for the spiritual highs and the opportunity to make the world better.

The Talmud recounts that when Alexander the Great visited Israel, he asked the Sages several questions. Among them he asked, "What should a person do to stay alive?" They replied, "Kill himself." Alexander asked, "What should a person do to kill himself?" They replied, "Live a lot" (Source: Babylonian Talmud – *Tamid* 32a).

HOLYLAND JITTERS (cont. from p. 1)...whole country from the Golan Heights in the north to the Bedouin tents in the Negev desert in the south. Tel-Aviv was most impressive, with all of its modernity, and Tzfat, as well, with all of its spirituality (not to mention all the steps!). We trekked up the Roman ramp to Masada, went floating in the Dead Sea, hiked Mount Arbel (which had a fantastic view of the Kineret, the Sea of Galilee)... I am flooded with memories.

What I remember most, however, is our Shabbat in Israel. It was Chanukah as well as Rosh Chodesh and Shabbat. And motzei Shabbat, that Saturday night, was New Year's Eve! I vividly remember our Friday night walk back through the Old City to get to our hotel. All around the Kotel, a vast array of people came together to welcome Shabbat. There were huge chanukiah's (Chanukah menorahs) lit by the different institutions that overlook the Kotel. And, most amazing of all, were the little metal boxes that people had outside their homes. These boxes were filled with tea-lights to serve as chanukiah's. They were truly beautiful.

On that trip we learned about the land of our people and about our heritage. During my second trip to Israel, the learning that I did was much more in-depth. When I returned from the first trip, I knew I was in love with the place and wished that I could spend more time there. That summer, an opportunity came for me to study at a school called Neve Yerushalayim for three weeks, and it was an opportunity that I jumped at. No more traveling about and touring. On this trip I had a regimented schedule of classes and mealtimes. I had to study outside of class, because taking everything in at once was nearly impossible. Different as it was, it was still wonderful. I met some great people, teachers and students alike. And amazingly, I even met someone I had never thought I'd see again: an old camp counselor, who got married, moved to Israel and currently had two little boys.

(cont. on p. 4)

The meaning of these enigmatic words is that if a person really wants to kill himself, he should "live a lot," i.e. indulge in all of life's pleasures, since overindulgence brings a person away from spirituality into the base world of the physical. Such a person is considered dead, even though he is still alive. On the other hand, if a person wants to stay alive, he should "kill himself," meaning that he should kill himself over the words of Torah to understand them. (Obviously this is not meant to be taken literally, but rather "killing oneself" refers to exerting maximum effort into something, as we colloquially say).

A person who struggles to live a meaningful spiritual life and to do good deeds has a rich life, a life in which even the physical pleasures are transformed into spiritual acts. This person can truly be said to be "alive" and is fitting to be inscribed in the "Book of the Living." Conversely, a person who only indulges in the physical but lacks the spiritual is considered dead, even in the vigor of his life.

As the High Holidays approach and the "Book of the Living" and the "Book of the Dead" are opened, take pause and ask yourself into which book will you be inscribed this year. Do you live a life that can truly be considered "alive," or are you merely a walking talking zombie?

Commit to explore Judaism this year by taking classes in Torah and involving yourself with more *mitzvot*. Learn what it is to be considered alive in both the physical and spiritual worlds.

May you be inscribed in the Book of the Living for a long and good life.

Rabbi Tuvia Hoffman is the Director of the West Island Jewish Experience in Montreal, Canada.



HOLYLAND JITTERS (cont. from p. 3)...

On my last day in Israel, I took a walk near the school and on my way back, I met a fellow student who was in a different program at the school. When I told her that I was leaving, she told me that it would be all right, it would always be all right, even if I never made it back again, as long as there is always the desire to return to Israel. One of the rabbis at the school had an even more impactful confidence-building response to my ambivalent feelings about leaving. He wished me a safe flight, both back (to the States) and home (to Israel). And he was right. I am now going back to Neve Yerushalayim to study for an entire year!

Over the last year, I worked at the National Jewish Outreach Program (NJOP), and had the opportunity to work with some amazing people. The entire staff at NJOP was supportive and enthusiastic about my decision to return to Israel, especially considering how much of a surprise it was. I had been planning to start graduate school while continuing to work for NJOP part-time. When my plans changed, there was no half-heartedness in their happiness for me. Those who had been to Israel for study or vacation, or for any other reason, shared their experiences with me and gave me advice. In some ways, they even helped me prepare to go by allowing me to take an early lunch so I could spend a few hours at the Israeli consulate getting my student visa so that I wouldn't have to worry about it when I arrived in Israel. They threw me a going away party, and gave me going away presents. And most of all, they let me know how much they were going to miss me, and how much

confidence they had in me, especially in undertaking this endeavor.

I will be in Israel in time for Elul, the month in which we prepare for Rosh Hashana. In fact, I will be there for the holidays, all of the holidays! Perhaps I will hear a shofar blown at the Kotel or enjoy refreshments in a Sukkah near the walls of the Old City. In just a few months I will once again see those charming tea-light chanukiahs that dazzled me so on my first trip to Israel. Purim, Pesach and Shavuot...each holiday reflecting its own flavor. And I will be at the heart of it all, learning about it and experiencing it in Jerusalem.

So why, with all of these wonderful memories, and all of the inspiring stories that others have told me about their time in Israel, am I scared? Truthfully, I don't really know. Maybe it's just the idea of picking up and moving to another country for an entire year. I don't know. What I do know, is what I am going to do. I'm going to go to Israel, to trust in Hashem, and to keep on singing that song: "Heart don't fail me now/courage don't desert me."

Israel, I won't turn back now that I'm here!

Janice Klein graduated from Rutgers University with a Bachelors in Psychology and is now spending a year at Neve Yerushalayim before starting an MSW program.

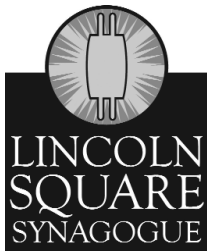


Illustrations by Wendy Dunn



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