

BERESHITH
"IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter
for Beginners,
by Beginners

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בראשית

JUDGE YOUR PARENTS FAIRLY

Elizabeth Schultz-Zimmer, M.D.

A few months ago I came across a message by Rabbi Buchwald warning beginners not to be too harsh in judging how their parents raised them as Jews. I replied to Rabbi Buchwald that I agreed with him, stating the importance of understanding that each of us is in some way a product of our times as well as of our upbringing. But I also believe that even in the most non-observant homes, we likely owe more to our parents regarding our Jewish identity, in a positive way, than we realize. And so it came to pass that Rabbi Buchwald asked me to write an article for *Bereshith* on this topic.

Firstly, let me introduce myself. I am Elizabeth Zimmer, née Schultz, born in 1952. I, along with my older brother, Francis (Frank), was raised in a non-observant home. We did not belong to a synagogue, nor were we exposed to any type of formal (cont. on p. 2)

Why didn't we belong to a Synagogue?
Why weren't we given a Jewish education?
Why didn't we keep Kosher?



"JUDGING YOUR PARENTS"

SHAVUOT

Rabbi Yisroel Ciner

We will soon celebrate the holiday of Shavuot--the time when the word of G-d resonated and reverberated throughout the creation with *Matan Torah*--the giving of the Torah at Sinai. The prophet Isaiah (56:10-11), describes the power of G-d's word, Torah: "As the rain and snow descend from the heaven and will not return there, until they have watered the earth and caused it to give birth and sprout, producing seeds to be planted and food to be eaten, so too My words that emanate from My mouth, will not return to Me unfulfilled but will accomplish what I desire and bring success to where I have sent it."

It seems obvious that G-d's words, so to speak, emanate from His mouth! If so, the Chafetz Chaim asks, what is the verse emphasizing and teaching us by pointing this out?

The Chafetz Chaim explained it in the following manner. The Talmud (*Avodah Zarah* 8a) teaches that *Adam Harishon* (Adam, the first man) brought the very first ox created by G-d as an offering. In the words of Psalms 69:32, it was the ox whose 'horns preceded its hooves.' Since the entire world was created in a mature,

adult state, this full-grown ox rose from the earth, and, as such, came out with its horns before its hooves.

Why did Adam choose to bring that specific ox for the sacrifice?

That entire first creation, that which came solely and directly from the hand of G-d, was on a much higher level of power and spirituality than the later creations. Just as Adam was a spiritual giant compared to us, so too the entire world, as it was fashioned by the Hand of G-d, was on a much higher plane. Adam, therefore, wanted to offer G-d the greatest offering possible. He chose that ox for his sacrifice.

We live in a world that is far, far removed from the world that G-d created. The grains that compose the food we eat are thousands of generations removed from that first kernel of grain created by the Hand of G-d. Although they aren't created solely by the word of G-d, they nevertheless accomplish their purpose of feeding mankind. Their power has certainly waned as they have inexorably moved, step by step, away from those words of G-d which brought grain into existence. Yet, as the prophet stated, they fulfill their mission of feeding the world. (cont. on p. 4)

JUDGE YOUR PARENTS (cont. from p. 1)...Jewish education. We were kept home from school on Yom Kippur, although we did not necessarily fast or go to services. We had matzah in the house on Passover and family dinners with traditional foods (non-kosher) for the holidays.

My parents, my brother, my grandfathers, and myself were together in synagogue only once - and that "happened" to be in Jerusalem in the summer of 1963 for my brother's Bar Mitzvah. My brother had no knowledge of Hebrew or Torah. He was given a crash course for his Bar Mitzvah shortly before we left for Israel, along with educational tapes to study on board the SS Jerusalem, an Israeli ship belonging to the ZIM line that sailed back and forth from New York City to Haifa. I never learned Hebrew or Torah and did not have a Bat Mitzvah. On one occasion, when a college classmate of mine mentioned that he had to fly home for a "bris," I asked him, "What's a bris?"

Assimilation occurred quickly in my family. None of my four grandparents (born in the 1870s or 1880s) kept kosher or observed Shabbat, though my maternal great-grandfather was a kosher butcher. When asked how the family went from having a kosher butcher to complete non-observance in a single generation, my mother said that she couldn't really explain it, but that her grandfather encountered some dishonesty in the kosher business. My maternal great-grandmother was widowed at a young age and left with five daughters, the oldest of whom was eight. She reluctantly married a man recommended to her by a rabbi in the neighborhood. Her new husband, with children of his own, took what little money she had. She was then forced to put three of her daughters in an orphanage and never went near a rabbi again. Her eldest daughter, my grandmother Frances, never went near a rabbi either as far as I know, except for her marriage at the synagogue on Norfolk Street (1906), and for her son's Bar Mitzvah (1921).

My grandparents on my father's side were born in Russia and came from extremely poor families. My father told me that his father (my grandfather Isadore) watched his parents literally starve to death. He completely turned away from religion.

His wife, my grandmother Ida, had also lost faith and was a Communist sympathizer. My father told me she believed in "free love" and played records put out by the Communist Party.

AND I AM GOING TO TELL YOU THAT I OWE MY LOVE OF JUDAISM TO EVERY ONE OF THE ABOVE!

I was born six years after the end of the Holocaust and four years after the birth of the State of Israel. I grew up

during the Civil Rights movement and the Vietnam War. Some people are taught never to discuss religion or politics. At our dinner table, that is *ALL* we discussed. But to put it more accurately, we discussed anti-Semitism, which I now realize I understood as religion. (I didn't know anything about Torah. What little I knew about Passover I owe to Cecil B. DeMille). In my family, we didn't restrict our political and "religious" (anti-Semitism) discussions to the dinner table.

We talked about our views on these topics openly, outside the home. The one thing we were taught not to discuss, was money. So we talked about which political candidates were or were not good for the Jews and for Israel. We talked about the importance of the Civil Rights movement and how that was something every Jew should support. My parents would mention famous Jews: Disraeli, Frankfurter, Cardoza, Einstein, Freud, Ben Gurion, Moshe Dayan, Hank Greenberg and other famous Jewish athletes, and kept books about famous Jews.

My maternal great-grandfather, the kosher butcher, was badly attacked in his home in Allentown, PA, in the 1880s. (The incident was so bad that it was reported in a local newspaper with the title "Hebrew Assaulted." Since nothing was stolen the incident was considered an act of anti-Semitism.) The family then moved to the Lower East Side of Manhattan. I do not know this for sure, but based on what my mother remembers hearing, it is likely that the family moved immediately after beating up the man who beat up my great-grandfather. At any rate, what my mother does know for sure is that her father and his brothers were tough street-fighters and did not hesitate to rough up anyone who said anything disparaging about Jews. My paternal grandfather was similarly proud of his Judaism and also a fighter. During World War II, a man walked into his store and commented that the United States was fighting this war for the Jews who were contributing nothing to our country. My grandfather pulled out a newspaper article about his three sons who were all in service, and screamed and yelled at the man who quickly ran for the door. (During the war, when my father was stationed in Cairo, he took advantage of his close proximity to Israel and visited the *Kotel* while on leave).

I learned some very important Jewish values from my assimilated family. We were taught: A guest in the house is sacred--Mother went so far as to tell me that if a guest breaks a glass or a dish, I should break one also so my guest doesn't feel uncomfortable; Never bother a sales person or ask the price of any item unless you are seriously considering buying it; Donate quietly; Always give credit to people who have helped you (Thank you Rabbi Buchwald); One of the

best gifts you can give someone is an education (my grandparents sent each of their children to college, two to medical school and one to law school during the depression and at great sacrifice to themselves); Give to people begging on the street; Pay your employees on time; Open your refrigerator to everyone in your home; Accept gifts graciously; Never be afraid of the truth; Judge people by their behavior and never be impressed by how much money they have or don't have. I watched my parents take care of their parents. I was taught that the Shabbat candlesticks were our most valuable possession. (My mother, who had lovely jewelry and fur coats, told me in case of a fire, grab the candlesticks and run. My great-grandmother had brought them over from Europe on "the boat.")

My sense of justice comes from my parents. My eagerness to confront anti-Semitism comes from my family. My pride in being Jewish and my love for Israel comes from my non-observant parents and grandparents. Am I to say that I gleaned nothing positive from them regarding my Jewish identity?

My grandparents lived at a time when it was common to abandon Jewish ritual. I do not make this statement as an excuse, but simply as a fact of American Jewish history. My parents, of course, were raised by my grandparents. I do not believe for one moment that my family became non-observant solely because of some dishonesty encountered in the kosher butcher industry or because my great-grandmother made an ill-advised marriage. We are all to some degree products of our times.

And for that reason, we need to keep the observances and the rituals so that we are less influenced by hurtful trends.

Many of my generation were damaged physically and emotionally by drugs. Many women, including myself, put off having a family for the sake of a career only to end up childless. Fortunately, at the age of forty-seven, I married a wonderful man, my husband Jerald Zimmer. I know young adults who already regret having been tattooed.

I once asked my mother why didn't we belong to a synagogue, why weren't we given a Jewish education, why didn't we keep kosher? My mother's answer was that my family believed that our Jewish identity was so strong that we didn't need to. She now knows that she was wrong. She now knows that without the observances and the rituals, Judaism disappears. My mother, now just three weeks away from her eighty-ninth birthday, told me she regrets not having given my brother and myself a Yeshiva education. She now resides in a Jewish nursing home that is strictly kosher. This past year we made the blessing over the etrog and lulav together for the first time. We also read the Megillah together for the first time. (Thanks to Rabbi Simon Feld of the Jewish Home at Rockleigh.) And she is so proud that I am now learning Torah.

In so many of our prayers we mention the patriarchs and matriarchs. I cannot honestly say that I feel their presence with me when I pray. But I do feel the presence of my parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents (though I never met them). I feel they are happily and proudly going through Teshuvah with me and that we are all in this together.

Elizabeth was inspired to connect with the Traditional Jewish community when she first encountered the radiology residents at the Montefiore Medical Center who surprised her with a birthday cake under the hospital Succah. She feels blessed to be married to Dr. Jerald Zimmer who supports her journey and has come to look forward to Friday night dinners, "brachas and all."

THE BOOK OF RUTH: A SUMMARY

JewishTreats.org

Ruth was the Moabite wife of Machlon, one of the sons of Elimelech and Naomi, a wealthy couple who had fled Bethlehem during a bitter famine and settled in Moab, a neighboring country with which Israel had a history of conflict.

When Elimelech and his two sons died, Naomi chose to return to her homeland. Her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, decided to go with her. When they reached Israel, however, Naomi urged them to go back to their fathers' homes. Orpah did leave. Ruth refused, declaring: "Where you [Naomi] go, I shall go, your people will be my people, your land will be my land, and your God will be my God."

Upon their return to Bethlehem, Ruth and Naomi lived a lonely and impoverished life. People resented that Naomi's family had fled the famine, and they did not trust her Moabite daughter-in-law. To keep from starving, Ruth gathered excess barley that fell during the harvest in the field of Boaz, a relative of Elimelech. Boaz noticed Ruth's unique qualities of modesty, loyalty and humility and encouraged her to continue gleaning in his field until the end of the harvest.

In the meantime, the elders of Bethlehem debated whether Ruth was a true convert and whether she could marry a Jewish man. Naomi, however, knew that Ruth was devout and sincere. She directed Ruth to go to the ceremony at the close of the threshing and seek out Boaz, who had been so kind to them. She told Ruth to present herself to him as a potential mate and assured Ruth that Boaz would take care of her.

That night, Ruth demurely waited at Boaz's feet, signaling her intentions. Boaz, who was much older, an established landowner and a leader in the community, had not thought of himself as a possible suitor until that night.

Boaz and Ruth married and their son, Oved, was the grandfather of King David.

SHAVUOT (cont. from p. 1)...

How about us? Living in the year 2010? Can we access the pristine power and holiness of the Creation? Is that time too far gone or is it still available today?

In fact, there does remain one remnant from that time past. One remnant of the direct creative word of G-d is not just a faint echo reverberating through time, but rather is the word itself, preserved in its full power and holiness with perfect authenticity.

That, of course, is the Torah, the word of G-d that, as the prophet emphasized, emanated directly from His mouth.

With this, the full impact of Isaiah's original statement becomes apparent. The rain and snow accomplish their objective of supplying a growth environment for the seeds. Those seeds, in turn, so far removed from the original word of G-d, accomplish their objective of supplying food for the world. If so, the word of G-d that emanated directly from His mouth--the Torah *as we have it today*--will certainly have its powerful effect and accomplish its objective.

And what is that?

"This is my Torah!"



If one takes the hide of a kosher animal, processes it into parchment and writes upon it the words of the Torah, that parchment undergoes an incredible transformation. It attains a high level of holiness. Should one witness this parchment falling onto the floor, one must fast one day. The parchment has been transformed.

If this amazing transformation is the effect that the words of Torah have on the hide of a dead animal, imagine the piercing effect that it has when written in the heart and soul of a living person. It will not return without accomplishing its objective and will transform the person who's willing to allow G-d and His words to enter his heart and mind.

The original Shavuot was a time when we as a nation accepted the Torah. Subsequently, each Shavuot is the time for each individual to have an opportunity to personally accept the Torah. The words from G-d's mouth haven't changed. They are available to us in their full power and intensity. Our mission is to open our hearts and souls to allow them to transform us.

Wishing you a most meaningful Shavuot . . .

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Rabbi Buchwald's
Weekly
Torah
Message



Words of Torah for everyone!

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