

BERESHITH

"IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter
for Beginners,
by Beginners

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בראשית

RECEIVING MY TORAH

Hila Gordon

Time never moved in the place where I grew up. The rolling hills and country air were unchanging, and the faces, the same for generations. Even as a child, however, I knew that I was different. I just didn't yet have the ability to pinpoint my needs and act accordingly. No matter how much effort I exerted, I never "fit the bill" for being one of the crowd in Newton, North Carolina.

I was in the top percentage of every class, friendly, but shy -- although I had always felt that I was praying to a different G-d than those around me. I was not raised as a Jew. My parents were Southern Baptists of varying degrees when convenient.

The first time I ever learned about Jews was in the 8th grade, when we learned about the Holocaust in English class. It was not something I had heard about before in our sleepy Southern life. My classmates nodded their heads, agreed it was a sad thing and completed the assignments that the teacher had given them automatically. I was in tears. I was living the accounts we were studying. The information reached inside of me and touched a chord so deep that it never stopped reverberating. I cried, "Never again." My project on the Holocaust was shared (without my knowledge) with many teachers in the school who remarked on the depth of emotion revealed.

(cont. on p. 2)



WE LEARNED ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST
IN 8TH GRADE ... I WAS IN TEARS.

ALLOWING TORAH TO PENETRATE OUR HEARTS

Rabbi Gidon Moskovitz

Shavuot comes at a wonderful time of year. The weather is great. The birds are chirping. It's definitely up there as one of my all time favorite Jewish holidays. Without any massive cleaning efforts (Passover) or trips to Home Depot (Sukkot), it is also one of the easier holidays. Shavuot is also a unique holiday in that it doesn't have any physical symbols, such as a shofar or a menorah. And yet, one could argue, because there are no physical symbols on Shavuot through which to connect to the day, it is, in a certain respect, the hardest Yom Tov. It is the hardest to make real.

On Shavuot, the Jewish people received the *Aseret Hadibrot* - the Ten Commandments - and, by extension, the entire Torah. The closest physical symbol for the holiday of Shavuot would therefore be the tablets.

Recently our synagogue received a donation of a beautiful, framed, antique set of Tablets of the Ten Commandments. While they are not the originals from Sinai, of course, they are nevertheless quite old. How did we know that they were not the originals? First of all, no one likes us that much. (cont. on p. 3)

SHAVUOT WALKS

Yonit de Metz

On two different occasions in my life, the holiday of Shavuot has been a time of walking for me. These treks took place at different ends of the earth, at different times of day, were of different lengths, and were for different reasons, yet they were both progress reports for me, showing how my life was changing.

The first time I "hiked" on Shavuot, it was purely out of necessity. My summer apartment was five minutes from my office and a mile from the nearest synagogue and observant community. Since it was the height of summer, it was a steamy, hot, and long, long mile. Thank G-d, there was hospitality at one end and my comfortable bed at the other, but the several trips in between were an unfortunate necessity.

As I passed by my office building, I saw that the world continued for others not lucky enough to be celebrating Shavuot, who hurried about to and from work and errands as if it were just any other day. Buses and cars passed me by, a lone anachronism trudging wearily through the modern hustle and bustle. I grumbled to myself about the heat, (cont. on p. 2)

RECEIVING MY TORAH (cont. from p. 1)...

After those weeks of study, my life slowly started to change. I began walking a separate path from my childhood friends and family without noticeable outer changes, until I reached the cusp of adulthood.

My childhood was dark and violent, full of journeys suitable for a best-selling novel. I desperately sought to move beyond the turbulence and fill the void in my soul with G-d. How? For me, the hardest part of the journey was not getting started but making sure that I was on the proper path.

I finished high school with high honors, including a full scholarship to a State University to study education. Beginning with enthusiasm, I took well over a full-course load and packed summer sessions. With that schedule I was aiming to complete my degree in three years. During the beginning of my third year, however, I became fascinated with the idea of Hollywood and acting. The day I heard the open call for extras to be in a television mini-series being filmed locally marked a major turning point in my life. I recall putting on my best clothes, and taking a shyly excited last glance at myself in the mirror before heading to the given address. This launched my fledgling acting career.

It seemed from the first moment that I was blessed with *chein* (charm) in the acting world. I retained an agent, went from audition to audition and landed bit parts in less than noteworthy productions -- standard fare for the majority of beginners. After a short period of small roles, I began meeting famous actors and studio heads, and began to get called back for much larger roles. I learned the intricacies of Hollywood protocol, expectations, and more about who I wanted to be. For all the fun I was having, that same spiritual void inside was still unanswered and tugging away.

I ended up moving to sunny Los Angeles and fell in love with the stunning scenery of southern California. The dreams of fame and excitement were hanging like ripe fruit on a tree. Little did I know that directly across the street from my new home was Ohr Elchanan Yeshiva, a major Lubavitch institution, or that I now lived in a neighborhood full of Torah-observant Jews of all sects. In between my pursuit of acting success and looking for true satisfaction, I tentatively began exploring Judaism. All around me

were *frum yidden* (religious Jews), walking around almost as if their feet didn't quite touch the ground. They were clearly living a purpose-filled lifestyle, and the almost mystical aura I sensed around them drew me closer with every encounter.

The more I learned, the more certain I was that this was the deeply dormant yearning in my soul that refused to be ignored. Nothing about a fully observant lifestyle phased me. Over the course of a year and a half, I visited various families and established a core group of several families upon whom I relied upon for everything. First came the questions, then slowly I donned the outer clothing, and then my *neshamah* (soul) started being shaped as well.

After living an observant lifestyle for 18 months, I decided to approach a *Beit Din* (Jewish court) for conversion. I was nervous, as I knew that Judaism discourages converts and that it would be an arduous journey. I had already approached one *Beit Din* about 6-8 months earlier and had been turned away to "go learn more." At the advice of my rabbi, and with a consensus among "my" families, I flew to New York and entered a return-to-Judaism seminary for girls in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. Machon Chana, the seminary, provided a beautiful base of other beginners and a safe enclave to grow. Immediately I went to the *Beit Din* recommended by the rabbi in charge of Machon Chana and proceeded to plow ahead with determination. Five months later, after several tests, many brush-offs (during which I was fully investigated for sincerity!), I finished my conversion, and on 11 Cheshvan, the *Yahrzeit* of Rochel Imeinu (anniversary of the death of Rachel our Matriarch), I went to the mikvah!

Though the official journey only took two years to complete, it was a lifetime in the making. I searched for a long time to find my place. I am very grateful to Hashem for leading me to the right location and people.

Some people struggle the entire time they are learning to embrace what they sense in their hearts is the right path. I was blessed that my previous life was starkly different. One small sliver of light, a tiny taste of Torah and I knew I had found the answers. Life was finally beginning for me!

The author, Hila Gordon, is happily married and living with her husband and children in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, New York. She is 29 years old, and is currently working part-time.

WALKS (cont. from p. 1)...the poor choice of footwear I'd made, the stoplights and traffic that interrupted my walk, and why couldn't I have found an apartment halfway between the synagogue and work for times such as these.

I knew that after each meal I had to repeat the walk back to my home. To make matters worse, as a "*chutznik*" (one who lives outside of the land of Israel), I had to keep two days of Yom Tov -- so I had to have a double dose of endurance. Complaints, sweat, and aching feet, not withstanding, did not daunt me from beginning the walk again each time.

My second Shavuot "hike" was as different as night and day from the first. Most importantly, it took place on much holier ground and with the holiest of destinations. Late Shavuot night, I joined hundreds of Jews on a walk through Jerusalem toward the *Kotel* (Western Wall). It was a much longer journey of approximately five miles, but the way was cool and fresh and there were few cars at 3 AM. Excitement lightened our steps and made the time race by. I spoke with my classmates about the all night Torah study we'd just completed and about our plans for the rest of Shavuot, where we would meet if separated, if we needed a nap to recharge after learning and walking all night, and all the cheesecake we would eat. Our numbers grew as we traveled along our route through the heart of Jerusalem. Soon the street was full. There were people to the horizons both ahead and behind. The night was silent save for the buzz of conversation from the smaller clusters making up the informal parade. As a group, we had a common

(cont. on p. 4)

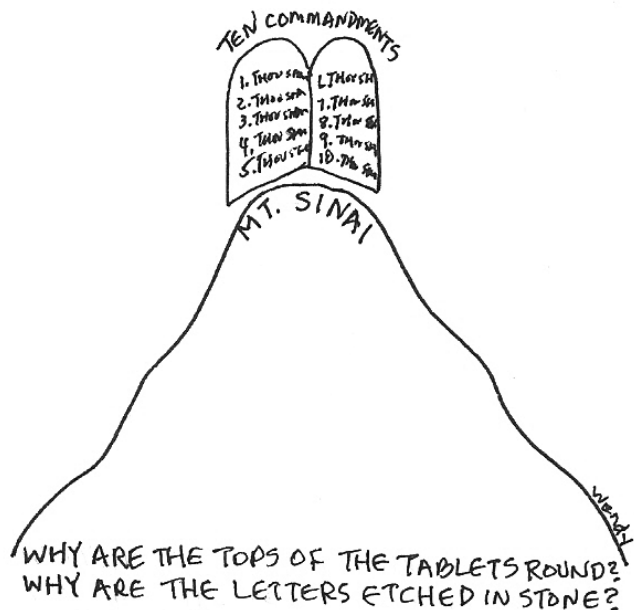


ALLOWING TORAH (cont. from p. 1)...But more importantly, these tablets are rounded on top, and our tradition teaches that the originals were rectangular, parallelograms, with angles and all. Why then, you may ask, are these antique tablets and thousands of other such depictions, rounded? (Just look at the ones Charlton Heston carried down!) What exactly is the rounded top meant to signify if it is historically inaccurate?

Additionally, the antique tablets given to our synagogue were wood, whereas the original were stone. Now you can't write on stone, so the Commandments were engraved on them. That is a lot of hard work! What's wrong with good old parchment and ink?

The Talmud (*Shabbat*, 104a) records something quite interesting about the tablets. "Rav Chisda said, the writing on the tablets was such that it could be read from either side." In other words, no matter which way you held the tablets, you could read the Ten Commandments without having to tilt your head upside down or sideways. They just read straight. A miracle, without question. Now we understand that Hashem is not interested in impressing us with tricks. ("Wow, you can read it from both sides! How did He do that?") There is clearly a message in this miraculous engraving. What is the message?

The answer to all of these questions is linked to what Shavuot is all about, and, ultimately, the answer lies at the heart of the holiday.



What is the difference between writing and engraving? When writing, you bring some ink and superimpose it on a background. The message is imposed on the medium. But through engraving, the medium and the message become one! You can't have the message without the medium, because the medium, in its very essence, is part of the message. You can't erase engravings without destroying the medium as well.

The underlying, deeper question is: What is the medium that we are talking about? Ourselves! Our own hearts! In Proverbs 3:3, we are enjoined to write the words of Torah on the tablet of our hearts. That is why they are imagined as rounded -- to represent our hearts. The engraving of the message is meant to be on our hearts to the extent that our hearts are meant to reflect the message through the very essence of our being.

The Jewish people are meant to reflect that message from every angle. It is meant to penetrate us to such a degree and in every respect that no matter which side of us you are looking at you see the message of G-d, and you see it clearly. Front or back -- it all becomes the same when the message reflects the medium and the medium reflects the message.

The message of the engraved tablets is that we can reach that purity, and that clear sense of purpose, here in this world. We can allow the message of Torah to penetrate our very hearts. That is what we mean by *Kabalat HaTorah*, Receiving the Torah. It isn't simply walking away with a brand new book authored by G-d. Shavuot isn't simply the date next to the copyright info at the beginning of the Torah -- "All rights reserved by *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* -- 6th of Sivan 2448.

Copyright holder reserves the right to strike you down with a lightning bolt if you infringe on the copyright." Rather, *Kabalat HaTorah* means walking away with the Torah in our very minds and hearts!

We all walk around with "protective armor." But for true *Kabalat HaTorah*, we need to let down our armor and let the Torah in. We will often hear a beautiful Torah idea and walk away saying: "That is beautiful, but the message is not meant for me." That is the armor going up. On Shavuot, we let down the armor and let the Torah penetrate us through and through. We write those everlasting words on the tablet of our hearts so that we don't just carry the Torah around with us -- but actually become the Torah and allow its message to be reflected in every aspect of our being.

Rabbi Gidon Moskovitz is the rabbi of the Meyerland Minyan in Houston, Texas.

Shavuot: The "Green" Holiday

There is a custom to decorate the synagogue with plants, flowers and other greenery. More than just a recognition that Shavuot takes place at the blossoming time of spring, the custom of decorating synagogues is related to the Talmudic description of Mount Sinai when the Torah was given. Although located in the wilderness, Mount Sinai blossomed with flowers

Additionally, when the Holy Temple in Jerusalem was standing, Shavuot was the time when Jewish farmers brought their first fruit offerings. To enhance the beauty of the mitzvah, the baskets containing the fruit were usually decorated with flowers and greenery. Thus, one of the names for the holiday of Shavuot is *Chag Ha'Bikurim*, the holiday of the first fruits.

WALKS (cont. from p. 3)...goal: racing the dawn, hoping to see the first rays of the sun light up the *Kotel* Plaza.

When my friends and I arrived, there was no space to move at the *Kotel* as others had already staked out spots to begin *davening* (praying). Hashem guided us through the crowd outside, through a stifling women's section inside one of the many Old City yeshivas, and onto a rooftop. From there we could both hear the *davening* and the Torah reading from an adjacent rooftop and have a breathtaking view of the *Kotel*, the sunrise, and thousands of Jews in prayer. I ate my Shavuot meals nearby, and this time, since I was now a resident of Israel (and therefore keeping only one day of Yom Tov), I was able to take a bus home after sunset.

My parents were amazed when they heard of these hikes. My father was actually speechless both times I related to him my Shavuot plans. To them it wasn't the destination, the distance, or even the hardship that was remarkable. It was the change that each of these treks represented in me.

In high school, I had often refused to walk to or from extra-curricular activities. Either my parents drove me, or I skipped the event. I had no car of my own, but, more importantly, no motivation to exert myself. Me, walk and get sweaty? No way! Much better to get a ride in an air-conditioned car or even miss out and catch up on my reading in my air-conditioned bedroom. It wasn't that I was spoiled or particularly lazy. To the contrary, I took extra classes in school, was a straight A student, worked in a pizza shop and belonged to many clubs. In the

name of charity, I had walked a mile carrying my little brother for 'Walk for a Cure' and had jumped rope for hours for 'Jump Rope for Heart.' I would just carefully ration my time and energy to causes I deemed worthy.

This is what surprised my parents. After all, I wasn't required to go to synagogue, and I could have easily stayed at home to pray and eat. There was no requirement to trek across Jerusalem in the middle of the night, I could have stayed in my warm bed and had a sleep marathon instead. My parents saw that these spiritual destinations meant more to me than dance classes, shopping, or any of the other places I wouldn't walk to. There was a measurement by which to gauge my commitment, the mile.

It wasn't as if I woke up one morning with new priorities and found myself suddenly more mature. That too was a journey, albeit a more subtle, longer one. I still seemed the same me, but something was definitely different. Even today, I still probably wouldn't walk to a silly after-school activity, but new activities in my life mean new priorities. When weighted against something spiritually uplifting, what's a little sweat and a little more wear and tear on my shoes? Some trips need to be hard on the "sole" to strengthen the "soul."

Yonit de Metz is a Texas cowgirl living in Beitar, Israel, and is part of the Aish HaTorah family. She has traded software debugging for the more rewarding jobs of vegetable debugging and motherhood.

Illustrations by Wendy Dunn



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DATED MATERIAL

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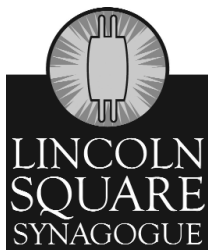
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