

Happy Purim!



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Hell's Kitchen

by Matt Brandstein

By my mid-20s, I had effectively become another one of those unaffiliated Jews working deeply within the *sitra achra* (dark side) of Hollywood, vigilantly dumbing down civilization with entertainment goods so tasteless that their mass popularity was even more alarming than their utter lack of content. A lifelong diet of secular fanaticism in addition to the intellectual contamination from my thankless job had eventually caused such a debilitating case of spiritual attrition that, out of sheer desperation, my *neshamah* (soul) began a grassroots style protest campaign to take down my decadent lifestyle.

The mantra of a beloved Chabad rabbi with whom I had crossed paths months earlier in Times Square took hold of my thoughts as I bit into a crunchy BLT sandwich.

"You are what you eat!" shrieked his phantom voice as hot bacon grease scalded my hungry fingers. The snack was meant to be a quick fix comfort food for my clichéd feelings of generation x apathy, but the words I heard were an enduring revelation that prompted me to reflect deeply on my poor menu choice.

"I am a Jew... not a pig," I told myself through guilty sobs as I spit my last delicious bite of treifness into the garbage, which I then proceeded to throw into the bigger garbage outside on the street in the middle of the night just to hammer home the point. Diet had to be the single most practical area to achieve miraculous transformation, at least according to the hype. The media messages of life altering results and vibrant health promoted by the mega billion dollar weight loss industries finally made sense to a skinny guy like me.

While climbing up the five flights back home as a newly non-bacon eating Jew, I prayed that something as fundamentally important as kosher might provide me with the kind of practical salvation from the quicksand that had been drowning my integrity.

My sights turned to my shabby tenement kitchen, laden with the contraband ingredients and illegal concoctions, all set amidst a thick layer of residual grime that seemed to cruelly emphasize my culinary transgressions. Radical research was required to learn the legal ins and outs of preparing not just me but my home for proper Jewish

use. Going kosher was certainly not the most common task in Hell's Kitchen (the actual name of my midtown Manhattan neighborhood), but I wasn't going to let a Satan get in the way of claiming my Jewish birthright...

Going kosher in Hell's Kitchen (the actual name of my neighborhood)? I wasn't going to let a Satan get in the way of claiming my Jewish birthright...

A few days later, I gathered every dish, pot, pan and utensil in my kitchen, as well as all of the contents of my cupboards, fridge and freezer, and smashed it all to irrevocable bits. Normally, I would have been a bit more philanthropic with their removal from my home, but as a novice to Jewish life, I needed a visceral rite of passage to embrace the significance of this change, not to mention the brief catharsis destruction provides. A small part of me also wanted to eliminate the risk of another unaffiliated Jew inheriting this full kitchen set of spiritual troubles.

It would have been practical to send out a general press release announcing my new dietary restrictions to alert all of my relations, both professional and personal, with whom dining was an integral activity, but instead I just avoided everyone and spent most of the first two months of going kosher by myself in a corner booth on the second floor of the now defunct Kosher Delight on Sixth Avenue and 46th Street in midtown Manhattan. I tend to be a bit of a neurotic loner anyway, so disappearing into a world apart from my mainstream one didn't set off any alarm bells with those who know me well.

"I can eat sushi every meal

and never get sick of it" is one of those innocuous phrases that upwardly mobile people with enough petty cash to regularly eat the stuff seem to repeatedly declare as they dig into their sixth or seventh piece. I bet they would eat those very words after, say, their twenty-second piece on the third day of the nothing-but-sushi diet. If one were actually crazy enough to voluntarily consume the same meal for the rest of their life, my own personal field research has led me to believe that there is nothing more fitting for the task than the Kosher Delight snack box. This manna from heaven, consisting of crispy fried chicken and french fries, is flavor loaded with enough sodium enhancers to leave the taste buds relentlessly craving for more.

On the occasional treif restaurant outing with family and friends during my kosher-keeping debut, I always seemed to be at midtown hotspots within the ironic proximity of my beloved Kosher Delight. Not ready yet to declare my forward shift into Jewish observance, I simply feigned a lack of interest in eating to the curious amusement of my fellow diners. My rapidly expanding waistline from several weeks' worth of tens of thousands of snack box calories made even the over-protective secular Jews in my life back off from forcing me to order from the menu. However, I did manage to raise a few eyebrows, when, in some of the fancier restaurants, I insisted upon drinking my sodas from the can.

"I have a terrible germ fear. Who knows if they are really properly washing those dishes," I questioned aloud, thinking it better at that stage to sell my mental instability than my religious stability to a group that didn't seem too keen on Jewish observance.

While riding the D train back home from the Broadway Kosher Delight on an early Friday afternoon, I had my first moment of validation that I was actually going in the right direction with this dietary switch. It wasn't one of those Hollywood style Divine Providence testimonial-making moments that I heard about happening to others, but it was enough of an impetus for me to continue taking further steps towards a more Jewish life.

I pulled out a little booklet that had been handed me earlier that day while at my restaurant's counter ordering my ten-thousandth snack box to go. I glanced at the book's title, which was neatly printed under a gloriously illus-

•Continued on page 12



The Final Word

by Yerachmiel Tilles

It was with heavy hearts that a group of senior chassidim assembled in the home of their rebbe, Rabbi Zvi-Elimelech of Dinov, the "Bnei Yissaschar". Their rebbe had fallen ill, and it was understood that his moments were numbered. They joined his children and grandchildren to be with him in his closing hours of physical life, and perhaps hear some final instruction from their mentor and guide.

The rebbe's eyes were closed, and a medley of awe and ecstasy played upon his holy face. "Our master is spending his last minutes in communion with his Maker," they all thought; "how selfish of us to assume that he would have something to say to us at this time!"

Suddenly, the rebbe's eyes opened and began to search the small crowd. Finally his glance rested on a man who was standing to one side. The chassidim made way for this man, and gently propelled him toward the rebbe's bedside.

"Reb Shmuel," the chassidim heard the rebbe inquire, "what is it that you wanted to ask?"

"Rebbe," said the man, whom no one recalled ever having seen before, "the wool that I purchased... what shall I do?"

"Don't worry, Reb Shmuel," said Rabbi Tzvi Elimelech. "Wait until next winter. The price will rise, and you will make a handsome profit."

The rebbe's eyes closed. Soon after, his soul departed to its heavenly abode.

In the days that followed, the chassidim hotly debated the significance of their rebbe's final words. The mysterious "wool merchant" had disappeared as suddenly as he had appeared; certainly, he must be one of the thirty-six "hidden tzadikim," or perhaps Elijah the Prophet? Various theories were offered on the Kabbalistic meanings of "wool," "winter" and "handsome profit."

Word of these deliberations reached the ears of Rabbi Tzvi Elimelech's son, Rabbi Dovid. "You are mistaken," he said. "There is no mystery here, no hidden meaning, only a profound expression of my saintly father's love for every Jew.

"Reb Shmuel is a simple merchant, who would often come to seek Father's counsel and blessings regarding his business affairs. Recently he had bought a large quantity of wool, after which its price had dropped sharply; the poor man faced the loss of all his assets, as well as huge debts for the sums he had borrowed to make the purchase. He rushed here to seek my father's advice.

"Upon his arrival, he followed the crowd into Father's room, unaware of why we had assembled. Father, although in his final moments, sensed the presence of a Jew in need and considered it his highest priority to assure him that all would be well."



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The Lubavitcher Rebbe

by Yanki Tauber



MASQUERADE

On Purim, nothing is as it seems.

That ferocious monster is really sweet shy Sarah from second grade. That beautiful Queen Esther with the jewel-studded crown is really your brother Moishe. Is that a gigantic three-cornered poppy-seed-filled cookie walking down the street? And how did little Michael grow that luxuriant white beard?



Why do we disguise ourselves on Purim? Because on Purim nothing is as it seems. Was the banishment of Vashti simply one of those things that happen when a debauched Persian emperor gets drunk? Was it just coincidence that Mordechai happened to overhear a plot to kill the king? Did Achashverosh choose Esther to be his queen because she happened to be the most beautiful woman in the empire? Was it plain bad luck for bad Haman that he happened to come visit Achashverosh just when the king was having Mordechai's heroic deed read to him? Was it Esther's charm and Achashverosh's flippancy that made the king suddenly hang his favorite minister?

Purim was instituted because the Jewish people at the time understood that it was G-d Himself who did all of the above, to save His people. He was just disguising Himself as a Persian palace soap opera.

When G-d took the Jews out of Egypt on Passover, the entire neighborhood, from Giza to Gaza and from Memphis to Mesopotamia, resonated with the miracles wrought by the G-d of the Hebrews. When a small jug of oil burned for eight days on Chanukah, the most skeptical Hellenist saw that it was an act of G-d. Purim ("lots") is unique in that the most miraculous of salvations was shrouded in the garments of nature, luck and coincidence. G-d was hidden and remained hidden - His name does not

once appear in the entire Megillah (Scroll of Esther)!

Purim is a masquerade. Esther (which literally means "I shall hide") is scrolled up. Even the poppy-seed filling is barely peeking out of the folds of dough of the hamantash (or is it prune?), not to mention the wholly concealed meat (chicken?) filling in the *kreplach*.

Not paradoxically, Purim is also the most joyous festival on the Jewish calendar. It's great to celebrate miracles, but how often does a miracle come your way? Far more exhilarating is the realization that nothing is as it seems, that G-d is always pulling the strings, even when things seem to be "just happening."



A THROW OF DICE

Numerous factors contributed to the salvation of the Jewish people from Haman's decree, not least amongst them Mordechai's rousing of the Jews to repentance and Esther's efforts on their behalf. Yet the name of the festival - the one word chosen to express its essence - refers to a seemingly minor detail: the fact that Haman selected the date of his proposed annihilation of the Jews by casting lots (*pur* is Persian for "lot"). Obviously, the significance of Haman's lots lies at the very heart of what Purim is all about.

Why did Haman cast lots? Because he was attempting to break what, to his mind, was a "vicious cycle" that had been plaguing him and his ilk since the appearance of the Jewish nation a thousand years earlier. Many great and powerful men, from Pharaoh to Nebuchadnezzar - not to mention Haman's own ancestors, the Amalekites - had tried to destroy this people. Granted, the Jews have a great and powerful G-d, but they also have this inane habit of angering Him with their transgressions. All one needs to do, it would seem, is wait for such an opportune moment. But always, at the very last minute, the Jews repent, and time and again their G-d is reconciled with them and saves them.

Haman knew that the Jews had sinned yet again by worshipping Nebuchadnezzar's idol and partaking of Achashverosh's feast; but who knows



how long their estrangement from G-d will last this time?

As long as our plans hinge upon the virtue or iniquity of Israel, reasoned Haman, we'll just have a repeat of the same old scenario. A more basic approach is called for. Can it be that G-d really cares about one people more than another? Can it be that He is truly pleased by "good" deeds and angered by "bad" ones? Surely G-d is beyond all that. There might be a level of reality on which goodness is rewarded and evil is punished, but on a higher plane, these things are obviously meaningless. On that level, a truly infinite G-d has no concern with what goes on in the material world, and the prime minister of the mightiest empire on earth can do what he chooses to a small, dispersed minority.

So Haman cast lots, hoping to "connect" to that level of reality that transcends the laws of good and evil - to that

level of reality on which, he believed, everything is up for grabs, as free of any moral rules as a throw of dice.

What Haman failed to realize was that the people of Israel are G-d's chosen people - that even on the level of divine "choice," which transcends all logical criteria, G-d desires them and protects them. It is true that G-d, in essence, is beyond it all; but this very G-d chose - for no other reason than that such was His desire - to take the people of Israel as His own.

The Jew always knows this in the deepest part of his soul, even if his external behavior may, at times, run awry of this realization. This, ultimately, is the reason why we always return to G-d, and why G-d always forgives us in the end.

This, ultimately, is the very essence of the miracle of Purim - and the very essence of the miracle called "the people of Israel."

COMMITMENT

Most of us have experienced in the course of our lifetime what we like to call "moments of truth." These are times when something very deep inside us is challenged, and we respond in ways that those who know us - and even we ourselves - would never have thought possible. We find ourselves capable of feats of sacrifice, courage and ingenuity greatly exceeding our "normal" facility.

As impressive as these feats are, they are almost always as transient as they are magnificent. It seems that their very nature dictates that they be moments of truth - flashes, but only flashes, of something beyond our actual selves.

(If we think about it more deeply, the idea of a "moment of truth" is almost an oxymoron. Is not the most basic definition of truth that "this is the way it is"? If something is

true, shouldn't it always be that way? And if it's usually not that way, doesn't this imply that it's not true, or at least lacking in truth?)

Therein lies one of the most amazing aspects of the story of Purim. As related in the Book of Esther, even after Haman had fallen out of favor with the king and was hanged, the decree he initiated remained in effect: the only thing that Esther was able to achieve was that the king should issue a second decree, in which the Jews were given the right to resist those who came to kill them. The first decree, calling upon all citizens of the realm to annihilate the Jewish minority in their midst on the 13th of Adar, remained in force until that date, when the Jews were victorious in their war against their enemies, killing 75,000 of their attackers.


In other words, for nearly a full year (Haman's decree was

issued on 12th of Nissan, a full eleven months before the victory of Purim), a decree of annihilation hung over every single Jew alive on the face of the earth, as their enemies had royal sanction to take their lives. Yet throughout this period, not a single Jew "broke ranks" to save himself by renouncing his/her Jewishness. In fact, the Megillah relates that so impressive was the Jewish stance that many non-Jews converted to Judaism in this period. Such a display of sustained commitment is unparalleled in the history of man.

On that first Purim, every Jewish man, woman and child was a hero. More significantly, their's was not a "moment of truth" heroism, but the awakening of a bond to their G-d that no external threat or internal erosion could loosen. It is from this font of commitment and self-sacrifice that we have been drawing ever since.

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What Sigmund Freud Knew (But Did Not Understand) About Jews

by Yosef Landa

Sigmund Freud, the "father of psychology," was thoroughly secular in his professed beliefs and practices. Throughout his writings he expresses a marked disdain, if not outright hostility, towards all religions, including Judaism. "Religion is a universal obsessional neurosis," he once wrote, and described himself as a "godless Jew" and "one of the most dangerous enemies of religion."

You get the picture.

In 1930, Freud penned a preface for the publication of a Hebrew translation of one of his works, "Totem and Taboo." In it he characteristically declares himself as adopting "no Jewish standpoint and making no exceptions in favor of Jewry" and describes himself as having abandoned "all common characteristics" of his fellow Jewish people.

In light of that, what he writes further can only be described as remarkable.

Who feels that he is in his essential nature a Jew and who has no desire to alter that... If the question were to be put to him: 'Since you have abandoned all these common characteristics of your countrymen, what is there left to you that is Jewish?' he would reply: 'A very great deal, and probably its very essence.' He could not now express that essence clearly in words; but some day, no doubt, it will become accessible to the scientific mind."

The "author" of whom he speaks is, of course, himself.

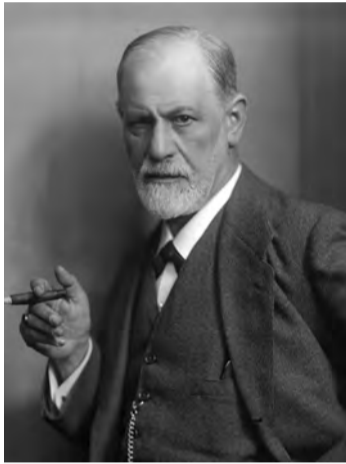
Truly remarkable! Freud is telling the world that regardless of his seemingly complete and utter disaffection from the ideas and practices of Judaism, he remains Jewish in his essence - and admits that this is something his scientific mind cannot fully explain.

When unpacked, I believe that this remarkable statement reflects a critical idea

that holds the key to understanding one of the Jewish People's most puzzling characteristics.

A Pattern of Discord

There's the well-worn quip about two Jews having three opinions, which actually holds a great deal of truth. We Jews are not in the habit of agreeing with each other about much of anything. Euphemistically we refer to it as Jewish diversity, but it really seems more like we're just hard-wired with a penchant for discord. What's more, it has been this way for



"No reader will find it easy to put himself in the emotional position of an author who is completely estranged from the religion of his fathers but who has yet never repudiated his people."

Sigmund Freud

the longest time, going back to the hair-splitting Talmudic debates between the Schools of Shammai and Hillel, and even earlier. The Talmud seems to suggest that this is the way it was meant to be: "Just as their faces are not alike, so their opinions are not alike."

That's just the way it is.

Jews can argue about almost everything under the sun, and we do. We not only debate how to observe Shabbat, what kind of food we should eat, or what our



synagogues ought to look like. We also argue about how to achieve peace for Israel, immigration policy, and what to do about gun violence, growing assimilation and anti-semitism. And we have nearly as many prayer liturgies as there are Jews...

Is Jewish Unity a Realistic Objective?

What is so utterly baffling about this phenomenon is that at the same time that we relentlessly squabble with each other, most of us sincerely crave Jewish unity. We long for it, we moralize to each other about it, and we wring our hands in despair when it eludes us. (Then we turn around and blame each other for that...) Conversely, we exult over any fleeting manifestations of Jewish togetherness. We get goosebumps every time we witness a momentary coming together of Jews from differing persuasions, ancestral traditions or modes of practice.

So, what gives? How can a people so divided into philosophical groups and sub-groups, schools of thought, affiliations and what-have-you even talk about being an *Am Echad* - a unified, singular people, a nation of one? How can we be expected to "love our fellow as we love ourselves", when we can hardly identify any commonalities between us?

Am I expected to love that fellow who makes me cringe every time he opens his mouth? The one whose understanding of Judaism I think is completely off the rails? The one whose behavior I consider to be way out of line?

With such intense discord, how can we realistically aspire to Jewish unity?

The Soul Factor

Enter the concept of the

Jewish *neshamah*, the soul, which the founder of Chabad, Rabbi Schneur Zalman (1745-1812), teaches is the enduring spiritual core of every Jew. The place of our unvarying and indivisible Jewishness, he writes, is a spark of Divinity identical within each and every Jew. This is the essence of our Jewishness, and it supersedes and transcends the many differences that separate us.

It is true that we differ about matters of vital importance. We may be oceans apart when it comes to the fundamentals of Judaism: G-d, Torah, mitzvot. But remarkably, those differences don't define the core of our inner Jewishness. What defines our Jewish selves is the *neshama*, by which we are all essentially and equally Jewish. Repeat: essentially and equally Jewish.

Despite our profound disagreements about what being Jewish is supposed to look like, and how our Jewishness ought to be manifested, our underlying Jewishness is absolute and uniform.

The same concept applies on the individual level. We all experience ups and downs in our day-to-day Jewish performance. Some days we just do better Jewishly than others... But despite those variations in our "doing Jewish," the nature of our "being Jewish" remains unchanged. Even more: it is unchangeable. It is a constant. It is who we are. Each and every one of us. All the time.

Freud, the self-described

"godless Jew," understood this about his Jewishness. And while he acknowledges his inability to explain it, he readily accepts the existence of his Jewish essence and fully embraces it. Rabbi Schneur Zalman and the Rebbes of Chabad would hardly be surprised. I can imagine them smiling knowingly...

The Key to Unity

Now, returning to the puzzle of Jewish unity. How can there possibly be Jewish unity in the face of all the discord and disunity that exists within our people? It is by realizing that as Jews our kinship is not the product of similar ideas or shared values, or even our commitment to Torah and mitzvot. Realistically, those vary from time to time and from individual to individual. Rather, our unity is a reality far deeper, far more enduring and far more consistent than any of our ideas or behaviors. Our unity is the oneness of our essence.

If we would take the time to reflect on the lofty inner nature of every Jewish soul, we would discover that the imperative to "love our fellow as we love ourselves" is not an idealistic exaggeration or a poetic platitude, but a reality that sits within each of us, which we are urged to uncover and to embrace. To be sure, the path to reaching that destination is not an easy one to navigate, but it is very much within our ability to achieve.

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Is There Flawless Proof That Torah Is True?

by Tzvi Freeman

Question:

Years ago I attended a seminar where we were presented with logical proofs that the Torah was delivered to us by Moses at Sinai. I was convinced and began a path towards complete Jewish observance. After many years and much thought, I (and many of my friends who were similarly convinced) realize that every one of these proofs is flawed, including the classic proof of Rabbi Yehudah Halevi in the Kuzari. I continue to practice as an orthodox Jew, but I do not have faith in the ideology.

My question has to do with being called to the Torah and making a blessing that says "He has chosen us from all the nations and given us His Torah," when I do not really believe that this Torah in front of me is the one given to Moses. Am I permitted to make this blessing if I do not believe what I am saying?

Response:

I have to agree with you that there is no scientifically flawless proof that the Torah we have today is exactly what Moses wrote. It's obviously so, since there is no real science of history, of proving anything in the past.

At one time history was thought of as the retelling of traditions. It is within that context that the proof of the Kuzari that you cite was formulated, basically saying that the tradition with the most witnesses wins. With the rise of the natural sciences in the 18th century, physics-envy drove many scholars to attempt to mold history into a

science as well. In the 19th century it was a widely held belief that a scientific approach to history would eventually uncover, in the words of Leopold von Ranke, "how it actually was."

But science is about reproducible experimentation and observation, and history is about things that can never be reproduced or observed. So in the 20th century the idea of history as a science came under serious skepticism. By 1964, Alan Richardson was able to write, "No one believes that historical judgments can be 'proved' after the fashion of verification in the natural sciences." Today the only historians who still cling to the belief that they are really scientists are those antiquarians who engage in "biblical criticism" (supplemented with related studies of archeological artifacts) in their attempts to "prove" or "disprove" the Biblical account.

Many of the "facts of history" that are commonly accepted today are really quite questionable. Just take a look at how newspapers today report events around the world as they are happening. How can anyone then have faith in the history we reconstruct from fragments of copies of copies of documents, traditions and artifacts from thousands of years ago? Rather, history is more an art than a science, a form of interpretation of traditions, relic documents and scattered artifacts.

True, there can be overwhelming evidence for a particular event. Specifically, when there is a strong tradition that is accepted by a

large population, and that tradition is not directly in contradiction to any evidence to the contrary. Such as is the case with our traditional belief that Moses wrote the Torah. It makes sense that Moses wrote the Torah, since that is the simplest and best explanation, and it is a strong tradition that lay uncontested for millennia. We have plenty of evidence that a phonetic alphabet was already in use at the time. We see that the style of the text matches the style of documents from that time period. We see that it provides an accurate account of matters for which we have external evidence. (For one example: In Genesis 37:28, Joseph is sold "for twenty pieces of silver." Kenneth Kitchen, in a fascinating article in Biblical Archeological Review presents evidence from other Near Eastern texts that this was the going rate for a slave in the Old Babylonian period - just around the time of the event, but not before and not after. In fact, slave prices in later biblical texts are higher, in keeping with the trend recorded elsewhere.)

The Torah also provides accounts in a style that is hard to imagine someone writing at a later date - such as the detailed accounts of the building of the Tabernacle and the census of the people. These accounts read precisely as we would expect a compilation of accounting scrolls to read, certainly not as a fictional narrative.

We see that the Torah narrates events that a later chronologist would be very uncomfortable describing - such as the failures of the heroes of the stories and the people as a whole. Then there are accounts of marital relations that were later forbidden. Why would an author later than Moses want to write that Jacob married two sisters, when this was already

17th are full of anachronisms, but the Torah preserves the idiosyncrasies of each era.

In general, the Five Books of Moses have the style of someone obsessed with detail and accuracy - even when those details are overtly embarrassing and inconvenient. (For a thorough treatment of this topic, see Provan, Iain W., V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III, A Biblical History of Israel (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003).)

The line of tradition is also fundamentally reliable, since there is plenty of evidence (not proof, but strong evidence), archeological and otherwise, that the Jews were always a literate society obsessed with preservation of traditions. Since the Torah was in the public domain of a literate populace, it would be difficult for significant changes to fall into the text. As well, there was always a central authority with a Torah scroll from which to check any variance.

Nevertheless, anyone resting their faith on historical evidence of facts alone - even in this case - is building a home on the swampy banks of the Mississippi. Faith cannot be based on evidence of an event of the past, no matter how strong the evidence may be. Faith arises out of your personal life experience. You don't have faith in your wife because your research

•Continued on page 6

Nevertheless, anyone resting their faith on historical evidence of facts alone is building a home on the swampy banks of the Mississippi. Faith cannot be based on evidence of an event of the past, no matter how strong the evidence may be. Faith arises out of your personal life experience.

forbidden by the law of Moses? Or that Abraham claimed to have married his half-sister - likewise forbidden? Or that Judah and Simeon married Canaanite women, and Joseph married an Egyptian? Books written in the 19th century about the



"Just as my forefathers planted those for me, so do I plant these for my children." —The Talmud

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Bonaparte & The Chassid

by Yanki Tauber

Hear O Israel, the Lord is our G-d, the L-rd is one. And you shall love the L-rd your G-d...

The Maggid of Mezeritch expounded on the verse "And you shall love the L-rd your G-d": How can there be a commandment to love? Love is a feeling of the heart: one who has the feeling - loves. What can a person do if, G-d forbid, love is not imbedded in his heart? How can the Torah instruct "you shall love" as if it were a matter of choice?

But the commandment actually lies in the previous verse, "Hear O Israel." The Hebrew word *Shema* ('hear') also means 'understand'. So the Torah is commanding a person to study, comprehend, and reflect upon the oneness of G-d. Because of the nature of the human mind and heart, and the relationship between them, this will inevitably lead to a love of the Almighty since, in essence, the mind rules the heart. If one contemplates deeply and yet is still not excited with a love of G-d, this is only because he has not sufficiently refined and purified himself of the things which stifle his capacity to sense and relate to the Divine. Aside from this, such contemplation by the mind will always result in a feeling of love...

Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok of Lubavitch

Note: In his Tanya, the

seminal work of Chabad Chassidism, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi states: "By its very nature, the mind rules the heart." This axiom, known as the '*Alef* of Chassidus', forms the cornerstone of the Chabad-Chassidic approach to life.

The renowned chassid Rabbi Moshe Meisel of Vilna, youngest of Rabbi Schneur Zalman's disciples, once told Rabbi Eisel of Homel: "The *Alef* of Chassidus saved me from a certain death."

Rabbi Moshe Meisel, an extremely learned man, was fluent in German, Russian, Polish and French. During Napoleon's invasion of Russia he served as a translator for the French High Command. Rabbi Schneur Zalman had charged him to associate with the French military officials, to attain a position in their service, and to convey all that he learned to the commanders of the Russian army. Within a short while Rabbi Moshe had succeeded in gaining the favor of the chief commanders of Napoleon's army and was privy to their most secret plans.

It was he, Rabbi Moshe, who saved the Russian arms arsenal in Vilna from the fate which befell the arsenal in Schwintzian. He alerted the Russian commander in charge, and those who tried to blow up the arsenal were caught in the act.

"The High Command of the

French army was meeting" related Reb Moshe "and hotly debating the maneuvers and the arrangement of the flanks for the upcoming battle. The maps were spread on the floor, and the generals were examining the roads and trails, unable to reach a decision. Time is short. Tomorrow, or, at the very latest, the day after, the battle on the environs of Vilna must begin.

"They were still debating when the door flew open with a crash. The guard stationed inside the door was greatly alarmed and drew his revolver. So great was the commotion, that everyone thought that the enemy had burst in in an attempt to capture General Shtaub...

"But it was Napoleon himself who appeared in the doorway. The Emperor's face was dark with fury. He stormed into the room and raged: 'Has the battle been planned? Have the orders to form the flanks been issued?'

"And who is this stranger?!" he continued, pointing to me. In a flash he was at my side. 'You are a spy for Russia!' he thundered, and placed his hand upon my chest to feel the pounding heart of a man exposed. At that moment, the *Alef* of Chassidus stood me by. My mind commanded my heart to beat not an increment faster. In an unwavering voice I said: 'The commanders of His Highness the Emperor have taken me as their interpreter, as I am knowledgeable in the languages crucial to the carrying out of their duties.'

"Napoleon abruptly turned to continue his conversation with his officers..."

FLAWLESS PROOF
Continued from page 5

into her past demonstrates that she deserves it; you trust her because you know her, personally and intimately. You build a marriage based on trust, not the other way around.

Precisely the same applies to our faith in the Torah. Despite everything they tell you in those seminars, we don't believe that G-d gave us the Torah at Sinai because we have proof. Rather, we begin with our personal belief that G-d is good, that He is purposeful and that there is only one of Him - and we believe all that despite everything we see out there. Then we build from there.

Why do we believe? Because we are Jews and that's just the way we are. We inherited from our ancestors this integral conviction that He is one and He is good, and therefore life is essentially good and meaningful, and no matter what, we just can't shuck that off. We can try to run from it, or to transmute it into radical politics, guru-chasing, trendsetting or even extreme corporate climbing. But at the bottom of everything that a Jew does lies an inherent, simple faith that there's got to be meaning behind all this somewhere.

Once we recognize that foundation and give it some room to breathe, we look at our history and see it in that light. We ask, "If G-d is good, why doesn't He communicate with us?" Well, here's an answer: He does, through His Torah and through its sages.

Since we are created as semi-rational beings, we need some sort of support for this faith from our power of reason. We look, and we see that it is not unreasonable at all. In fact - if you have no problem with G d speaking to man and open miracles - it has more support than any other document from the distant past.

That's why, really, your approach of "orthopraxy" is more viable. Your Judaism does not rest on an event of the past, but on your present reality. But I would go further

than that. Jewishness should not be reduced to actions alone. There has to be a Jewish experience involved as well. That's where faith can really rest - on the inner human experience. A Jew needs to find and nurture that faith within that "G-d is good and there is only one of Him." He/she needs to feel an affinity, a closeness and an intimate relationship with that G-d, with His Torah and with the Jewish People.

So this is where I see your faith right now - tell me if I have it straight: You believe in the Jewish people; you believe in a benevolent, all-encompassing G-d who created you with a purpose; and you feel that "orthopraxy" is good. What you are missing is a meaningful experience of that orthopraxy, in terms of its inner soul and spirit. This is what Chabad attempts to present in terms of intellectual Chassidus and a chassidic lifestyle: not just practice, but an inner, spiritual experience of that practice.

In this, as well, lies the answer to your predicament concerning a blessing on the Torah. Ask yourself: In what do I have faith? In a book? Rather, the Jewish faith is in that abovementioned relationship between G-d and the Jewish people. Torah is the communication of that relationship, and it is really an ongoing dialogue through the Talmudic approach that continues to be generated along the generations. So if this is the Torah that the Jewish people are saying a blessing on today, this must be the Torah that G-d communicates to them - along with all the innovations of Halacha that have been accepted by the Jewish community at large over the millennia.

I am confident that if you take this approach, eventually you will be able to make peace with the statement of Maimonides that a person who claims that a single word of the Torah was not told by G-d to Moses, that person is a heretic. For the Torah that the Jewish people as a whole treasure and make a blessing upon is G d's communication through Moses to His people.

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Discovering a Personal G-d on My Trip to the Ohel

by Rifka Chilungu

I don't remember exactly when the idea came into my head; about a year ago or so is a good guess. It was at first just a little flash, nothing serious, and something easily dismissed and forgotten about until the next little flash.

But at some point between then and the moment I found myself standing in the rain, watching the pages of my Psalms fill with droplets and begin to wrinkle from the moisture, I had decided to visit the Ohel, the Rebbe's gravesite in Queens, N.Y., a place I hadn't been in more than 16 years and a place I actually thought I wouldn't ever be again. Not because I had necessarily changed my outlook on religion or observance or because I had taken some dramatic new course in life, but because when I left Brooklyn so many years ago, I didn't believe there was anything missing by never visiting again. In fact, I didn't think anything was missing at all.

I would be proven wrong. Tied to this decision to make the trek back to a place that had played a large part in my life - and in ways that go deeper than an easy explanation - is my decision to once again begin to cover my hair with a wig. Who would have guessed? Certainly not me. At least, not a few months ago. Yet now, it seemed to make sense. It seemed clear and obvious, though I don't exactly expect this return to make much sense to an outside observer.

What I was doing was answering a question posed to me near the beginning of my odyssey: Is it enough? So there I stood in the rain in a place so familiar from what felt like a lifetime ago. An unexpected messenger, I had with me letters and lists of names written by friends in my pocket, standing only with my daughter and one or two strangers, my newly acquired hair hanging wet on my shoulders and my thoughts suddenly running too quickly to grab a hold of after having practiced what I would say for days.

I am not a person who makes decisions impetuously. I tend to pause; chewing on angles and outcomes, ramifications and justifications. I don't follow impulse. I des-

perately try to find the rational route, even in the face of irrationality, and never trust a decision I suspect was made as reactionary or based on emotion.

I am a Jew. I follow the mitzvot that are commanded and I have knowledge of my place in the universe. Shouldn't that be enough? I swore it was. In my arrogance and hubris, I believed that I could stand apart from G-d and have faith without warmth. This was despite very wise and patient people telling me to the contrary. It took 16 years for me to come to the conclusion that they were right.

This outlook can be a tremendous strength, but it can also become a devastating weakness. I easily become suspicious of anything outside of reason and thought, and eventually, that suspicion included faith and ultimately a personal relationship with G-d, which seems like a very bizarre thing for an observant Jew, I suppose.

It was rational thought and observation that brought me to admit G-d's existence to myself and convert to Judaism nearly 20 years ago. I could no longer see the world and not see Him, and I could no longer see the Jewish people and not see His hand.

That's not to say that I came to this conclusion entirely happily or suddenly had this miraculous feeling of warmth and belonging. Conversion, both the halachic process and the personal process, is difficult, and there was a moment of deep frustration where I stood at the Western Wall in Jerusalem and begged (or maybe demanded) that G-d make me a Jew or remove any desire to

join His people. Remove it all and let me go back to whatever it was I had been before or let me move forward. Eleven months later, I stood in the sun of a warm November day, my hair still a bit wet from the mikvah, a complete failure as an atheist.

I lived in Brooklyn for three years, two of them before getting married. At some point, unable to deny a lack of something, I began to visit the Ohel weekly when I could. While I never professed to be a Chassid, I felt a calmness and centering from these visits.

I sometimes wrote pages and sometimes said very little. But I wasn't quite able to allow myself to feel much more than the quiet connection, the low grade hum that is in the background of our lives as Jews. That feeling of living in two worlds, the spiritual and the mundane. The knowledge of the monumental mission of making a home for what was for me a distant G-d in this world and the daily, sometimes drab mission of simply living.

I strengthened that pull to the eternal and essential with study, and adding these visits was another way to hone my sensitivity to it. I still believed, however, that there was little need for joy or an actual relationship with G-d in this mission, and that knowledge of purpose in itself was enough to pull a person through life.

I am a Jew. I follow the mitzvot that are commanded and I have knowledge of my place in the universe. Shouldn't that be enough? I swore it was. In my arrogance and hubris, I believed that I could stand apart from G-d and have faith without warmth. This was despite very wise and patient people telling me to the contrary. It took 16 years for me to come to the conclusion that they were right.

That time saw me go through the childbearing years of marriage with four children. It took me through a few moves as my husband finished his medical training. Two states. The death of a parent. The gut punch that is having children diagnosed with conditions and, thankfully, the great successes that followed struggles. Babies who became teenagers, and



all the stress and laughter that goes with it.

Sixteen years also brought, admittedly, a period of laziness on my part, where I suddenly found myself not shoring up my connection to G-d and purpose through learning as I once had. It is easy to justify. I'm busy. I have a lot on my plate with challenging kids. I can make up for it later. I'm still doing what I need to do.

The laziness hit me hard

because I had nothing to fall back on, no relationship with my Creator. To me, He was distant, unknowable and maybe even uncaring on the individual level. I did what I needed to do not out of love, but out of loyalty and the simple fact that I am a Jew and that is what a Jew is supposed to do.

Sixteen years brought a lot of things my way, however, and in the end, it brought the

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Purim Holiday Guide - Thursday



Once Upon A Time...

It all began in the city of Shushan of Ancient Persia in the 4th century BCE. The reigning King Achashverosh hosted a series of lavish royal feasts in his palace that went on for 180 days - six months! Every citizen living in Shushan was invited. The Jews, too, participated in the great party.

Intoxicated with the excitement of the festivities and days of endless drinking, King Achashverosh commanded his queen, Vashti, to appear before his guests wearing only her crown. Vashti refused. Enraged, the king consulted with his ministers and had Vashti executed.

The Beauty Contest

The king now needed a new queen. Achashverosh had all the beautiful women of the country brought to the palace so that he might choose a wife. The king chose Esther (Hadasah), the cousin of Mordechai, who was one of the leaders of the Jewish people. Heeding Mordechai's advice, Esther did not reveal her identity as a Jewess, and observed Jewish law secretly in the palace.

Mordechai To The Rescue

Mordechai would spend time at the palace gates every day, waiting for word from Esther. One day Mordechai overheard two of the king's chamberlains discussing a plot to assassinate the king. He told Esther of the plot and she informed the king. The plot was foiled, and Mordechai was credited with saving the king's life.

The Anti-Semite

Meanwhile, Haman, a descendant of Amalek - the implacable enemy of the Jewish people - became Prime Minister of the king's court. The king had issued an order commanding everyone in the palace to bow down in deference to Haman, but Mordechai refused because Haman wore an idol around his neck. This so enraged Haman that he devised a scheme to annihilate all the Jews in the kingdom on the 13th day of the Hebrew month of Adar.

Mordechai's Request

Hearing of the evil plan, Mordechai donned sackcloth and ashes and told Esther that she must go to the king and intercede on behalf of her people. To appear before the king without being summoned meant risking her life. Esther requested that all the Jews undertake a three-day fast of prayer and repentance. Mordechai gathered the Jews of Shushan - especially the children, 22,000 of them - and they fasted, repented and prayed to G-d.

The First Feast

At the end of the three days of prayer, Esther stood uninvited before Achashverosh. Upon seeing her, the king immediately extended his scepter. "What is it?" Achashverosh asked. "What is your request?" "I would like to invite the king and Haman to a private party," Esther responded.

During the feast, the king again asked Esther whether she had any request. "Yes," Esther responded. "I would appreciate if tomorrow, again, the king and Haman would join me for a feast."

Haman left the party a happy and proud man. Oh, the honor he was being accorded! But standing at the king's gate was Mordechai - who still refused to bow to Haman - and Haman was enraged. When he arrived home, his wife and wise advisors counseled him to erect a gallows, and then to go to the king and request permission to hang Mordechai. Haman excitedly went ahead and put up the gallows.

The Beginning Of The End

Sleep eluded the king that night, so he asked his servants to read for him from the Royal Chronicles. When they reached the episode where Mordechai saved his life, he realized that Mordechai had never been rewarded. Just at that moment, Haman appeared in the courtyard, planning to suggest to the king to hang Mordechai.

When he entered Achashverosh's chambers, the king asked Haman, "What shall be done to a person whom the king wishes to honor?" Haman, who was certain that the king wished to honor him, responded: "Bring royal garment and a royal horse. And let one of the king's nobles dress the man and lead him on the horse through the city streets, proclaiming before him, 'So is done for the man whom the king wishes to honor!'"

"Great idea," Achashverosh responded. "Now go get the garments and the horse and do so for Mordechai the Jew!" Haman had no choice but to comply. On the next day he went and honored Mordechai as the king had ordered, and then immediately rushed to join the king and Esther for...

"What is your request?" a curious King Achashverosh asked Esther at the feast. "If I have found favor in your eyes, O' King," Esther replied. "Spare my life and the lives of my people." Surprised, Achashverosh asked Esther who had threatened her. She replied that it was none other than the wicked Haman. Haman was immediately hanged on the gallows he had intended for Mordechai.

The Second Feast

Although Haman was dead, his cruel decree remained unchanged. According to Persian law, once a king had issued a decree it could not be rescinded. A new decree was issued, granting the Jews permission and the means to defend themselves against their enemies. The Jews experienced a stunning victory.

The Tables Are Turned

Although Haman was dead, his cruel decree remained unchanged. According to Persian law, once a king had issued a decree it could not



be rescinded. A new decree was issued, granting the Jews permission and the means to defend themselves against their enemies. The Jews experienced a stunning victory.

In Commemoration

At that time, the 14th day of Adar was consecrated as the festival of Purim, to celebrate and commemorate the great miracle of our people's salvation and the downfall of the wicked Haman. This holiday, called "Purim", is the most joyous holiday on the Jewish calendar.

Then & Now

The Talmud tells us that "whoever reads the Megillah backwards does not fulfill his obligation." Our Sages explain that "backwards" does not only mean in reverse order; it also means that whoever reads the Megillah merely as ancient history has missed the point. The Purim story is directly relevant to our contemporary world. As the Megillah itself tells us, when we celebrate Purim each year, the miraculous events of Purim - G-d's protection and the victory over our enemies - are "remembered and reenacted" in our lives.



Smile! It's Purim!



David's father meets the school principal and asks, "So, how is my David behaving in school?" The principal replies, "Your David, wow! If only there were 3 boys in this school like your David, this school would be the best in the entire town, perhaps even the country!"

The father is beaming inside until the principal concludes, "The problem is we have 150 boys like him!"



Charlie Boswell was a great athlete who became blind during World War II while rescuing his friend from a tank that was under fire. When he returned to the U.S. after the War, he decided to take up a new sport, golf. Years of practice and determination led him to win the honor of National Blind Golf Champion 13 times! One of his heroes was the great golfer Ben Hogan, so it truly was an honor for Charlie to win the Ben Hogan Award in 1958.

Upon meeting Hogan, Charlie was

awestruck and told the legendary golfer that his greatest wish was to have one round of golf with the great Ben Hogan.

Hogan was duly honored, after all, he knew Charlie as the great blind player that he was, and truly admired his skills.

But suddenly Boswell blurted out an unexpected challenge. "Would you like to play for money, Mr. Hogan?" "Charlie, you know I can't play you for money, it wouldn't be fair!" said Mr. Hogan. Boswell did not flinch. Instead he upped the ante. "Aw, come on, \$1,000 per hole!" "I can't. What would people think of me, taking advantage of you and your circumstance," replied the golfer who indeed was able to see. "Chicken, Mr. Hogan?"

"Okay," blurted a frustrated Hogan, "I'll play. But I warn you, I am going to play my best!"

"I wouldn't expect anything else," said the confident Boswell. "You're on Charlie. I'll tell you what. You name the time and the place!" A very self-assured Boswell responded:

"Fine. 10 o'clock... tonight!"



On a beautiful Sunday afternoon, in the midst of the French Revolution, the revolting citizens lead a clergyman, a drunkard and an engineer to the guillotine.

They ask the clergyman if he wants to face up or down when he meets his fate. The clergyman says he would like to face up so he will be looking towards heaven when he dies. They raise the blade of the guillotine and release it. It comes speeding down and suddenly stops just inches from his neck. The authorities take this as divine intervention and release the priest.

The drunkard comes to the guillotine next. He also decides to die face up, hoping that he will be as fortunate as the clergyman. They raise the blade of the guillotine and release it. It comes speeding down and suddenly stops just inches from his neck. Again, the authorities take this as a sign of divine intervention, and they release the drunkard as

well.

Next is the engineer. He, too, decides to die facing up. As they slowly raise the blade of the guillotine, the engineer suddenly says, "Hey, I see what your problem is..."



One morning, the teacher asks her class, "All those who want to take a tour of the sewer system, please put up your hand."

No one raises their hand except Benjamin, so the teacher asks, "Why do you want to tour the sewer system, Benjamin?"

"Because," he replies, "I heard my father tell my mother, 'Business has gone down the drain' and I want to go where the business went."



One morning, the teacher asks her class, "All those who want to take a tour of the sewer system, please put up your hand." No one raises their hand except Benjamin, so the teacher asks, "Why do you want to tour the sewer system, Benjamin?"

day & Friday, March 25 & 26



long journey until the coming of Moshiach - speedily in our days.

Mishloach Manot Gifts Of Food

On Purim we treat our friends to... treats. Send a gift of at least two kinds of ready-to-eat foods (for example, pastry, fruit, beverage), ideally by messenger, to at least one friend - men to women, women to women, kids to kids. The ideal messenger? A child, of course - they love it.

Being nice is always right. But, Mishloach Manot is more than nice, it's a Mitzvah that we're obligated to perform. It gives expression to our desire for Jewish unity and friendship. It enables us to bypass our "body" - our differences, and give expression to our Neshama (soul). In fact, it's a great opportunity to reconnect with someone from the past. Allowing our soul to overflow with joy and generosity can be contagious. Sharing food that can be enjoyed immediately does wonders to shore up friendships, heal old wounds, and make us each a part of one another.



Matanot Le'evyonim Gifts To The Needy

Tzedakah (charity) is synonymous with being Jewish. And we don't need a special occasion to give charity. Nevertheless, Purim day is a special time when we must give material help to at least two people in need. The Mitzvah is best fulfilled by giving directly to the needy. If, however, you cannot find poor people, place at least several coins into pushkas (charity boxes).



Tzedakah on Purim is special, because it goes beyond mere generosity toward a needy individual. On Purim, Tzedakah becomes Jewish unity in action. It motivates us to transcend our complacency by bonding with a fellow Jew who is totally outside our social and economic orbit. We give to (at least) two needy people in order to reinforce our kinship with different types of people, even people for whom we lack an instinctive empathy. On Purim we share what we

have, because we've achieved that pure sense of oneness that is so elusive at other times.

Seudat Purim The Festive Purim Feast

Of course, we eat on Purim. Can you imagine a day of Jewish rejoicing that doesn't include a festive meal? The Purim Feast is an occasion for every member of the family - immediate, extended, and friends - to celebrate with food and wine.



Other Purim Observances Taanit Esther The Fast Of Esther

Purim is a day of unbridled joy. Yet the day that precedes it is one of fasting. Why? Because the Jews of Persia - aware that there can be no victory without Divine help - fasted and prayed on this very day.

Fasting is very effective in moving us from our material routine into a more refined, introspective state. It enables us to reach an inner dimension and achieve a higher consciousness.

Machatzit Hashekel

When the Holy Temple stood in Jerusalem, every Jew was obligated to contribute a half shekel at this time of the year. We commemorate this by giving three half-dollar coins to charity - usually in the synagogue - either on the day of the Fast of Esther or just prior to the Megillah reading.



By contributing a half shekel we declare that as individuals we are incomplete, merely one half of an entity. The other half is G-d, with whom we bond. As we are all merely halves - incomplete beings - we achieve wholeness only by bonding with other Jews, and together we bond with the A-mighty. The Machatzit Hashekel reminds us that we are not alone and, indeed, cannot be alone.

Special Prayers

Al Hanissim is recited during the Amidah (Silent Devotion) of the evening, morning, and afternoon prayers, as well as during the Birkat Hamazon (Grace After Meals.) During the morning service, there is also a special reading from the Torah.



Parshat Zachor

On the Shabbat before Purim the Torah portion, "Zachor" (Remember) is read in the synagogue, and we are all enjoined to be present at that moment. The Torah commands us to remember the deeds of the nation of

Amalek, Haman's ancestors, who sought to destroy the Jews at their very birth upon the exodus from Egypt.



Amalek is not just a nation, it is a mindset of implacable hatred for the Jewish People. Even as we first tasted the sweetness of freedom immediately following our Exodus from Egypt, the Amalekites declared war. They made another attempt as we entered the Land of Israel forty years later, and on numerous occasions throughout our history.

There is a spiritual aspect to Amalek as well; an insidious toxin within us that invades our Jewish soul, a moral virus that attempts to derail us by pouring "cold water" to dampen our enthusiasm as we try to emancipate ourselves from our inner constraints and move onwards in our Jewishness. We counter this Amalek by reaching into our soul for that eternal bond with G-d, to that deepest space where doubt does not exist, where faith bonds us with the A-mighty.

Hamantashen Recipe

Hamantashen, a traditional Purim delight, is a three-cornered pastry filled with "mohn" (poppy seed) or other sweet filling.

- 1 cup sugar
- 1/3 cup oil
- 1/2 cup margarine
- 3 eggs
- 4 cups flour
- 1/2 cup orange juice
- 3 tsps. baking powder
- 1 tsp. salt
- 1 egg, beaten
- 2 lbs. "mohn" filling



Cream sugar, oil and margarine. Add eggs and juice and mix well. Blend with dry ingredients and roll into a ball. Divide into four parts. Roll out each piece very thin (approximately 1/8 inch) on a floured board. With the rim of a cup or glass (depending on desired size) cut into the dough to make circles. Place 1/2 to 2/3 teaspoon of filling in the middle of each circle.

To shape into triangle, lift up right and left sides, leaving the bottom side down, and bring both sides to meet at center, above the filling. Lift bottom side up to center to meet other two sides.

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Brush dough with beaten egg before baking. Place on greased cookie sheet. Bake at 350 degrees for approximately 20 minutes.

Yields 4 dozen Hamantashen.



Celebrating Purim Body & Soul

The observance of the different Mitzvot and customs of Purim, each representing a perspective of the festival, as well as the spirit of the holiday, are to help us capture and experience what Purim stands for.

Listen To The Megillah

Ancient history? Not for us. The Purim saga is something we must experience for ourselves. How? By listening to the reading of the Megillah (The Scroll of Esther) on the night Purim begins and again during the daytime. When Haman's name is mentioned, we twirl graggers and stamp our feet to "drown out" his evil name. Tell the children Purim is the only time when it's a Mitzvah to make noise!



The Megillah is unique among the books of the Bible. G-d's name does not appear, even once. All the same, G-d is constantly present, His name hidden amidst the words. Yes, it is easy to delude ourselves into believing that the Purim saga and the ultimate deliverance of the Jews was a natural occurrence. It is only by looking deeper, that we see the hand of G-d, like a master puppeteer, weaving disparate elements, disconnected plots, and subplots together toward an inexorable finale. In fact, this is one of the reasons for disguising ourselves on Purim - for G-d "disguised Himself within nature.

The Megillah is a sensational story. It's such a powerful reminder that G-d is always looking out for His People; sustaining us, giving us the courage and the energy to forge ahead against all odds. This has been true from the very birth of the Jewish people and throughout our

"Because," he replies, "I heard my father tell my mother, 'Business has gone down the drain' and I want to go where the business went."



One afternoon, Maurice, was driving his Rolls Royce when he passed two poor looking men by the side of the road eating grass. Maurice quickly stopped his car, backed up to the men, wound down his window and asked, "What on earth are you two doing?"

"I'm starving, I have nowhere to live and I don't have any money to buy

food," said one of them.

"You can come with me to my house, then," said Maurice.

"But I've got a wife and three kids just up the road."

"So we'll bring them along, too," replied Maurice.

"And what about my friend?" Maurice turned to the other man and said, "You can come with us, too."

"But, sir," said the friend, "I've got a wife and six children just up the road."

"OK. So we'll bring them as well," said Maurice. "Now get in my car,

both of you."

Soon, everyone had been picked up. They had been travelling for only a few minutes when one of the men said to Maurice, "You're very kind. Thank you for taking all of us with you."

Maurice replied, "I'm happy to be able to do it. And you'll love my place - the grass is almost a foot tall."



One day an auto mechanic was working under a car and some brake fluid accidentally dripped into his

mouth. "Wow," he thought, "This stuff tastes good!"

The next day he told a friend about his amazing discovery: "I think I'll have a little more today." His friend was concerned but didn't say anything. The next day the mechanic drank a whole bottle of brake fluid. A few days later he was up to several bottles a day, now his friend was really worried.

"Don't you know brake fluid is toxic?" said the friend. "You'd better stop drinking it."

"Hey, no problem," the mechanic said. "I can stop any time."



What's So Joyous About Being Jewish?

A meditation to blow through every barrier of life
by Tzvi Freeman

Happiness is an explosive. It blows holes through every sort of barrier.

Happiness is the juice that powers life.

Bees buzz from flower to flower in total ecstasy until the night. They're happy.

Birds fly from branch to branch, from forest to field, from one side of the world to the other twice a year. On happiness.

Human babies stand up and walk and fall down and get up and fall down and walk. Because they're happy. Because life is happiness and happiness is life.

Because happiness means breaking out of your boundaries. And that's what life is: A moment ago you were one being, the next you are another. Being alive means to be perpetually transcending yourself.

The boundary of all boundaries is the barrier between Creator and created. Go transcend that. Then you are truly alive.

Think of someone you greatly love, respect and admire. Some great genius or hero before whom you feel hopelessly insignificant, or even asininely redundant.

Now imagine you're down and out, all alone, stuck up in a derelict, one-room apartment on skid row.

There's a knock on the door, you crack it open, and who trots in but this very special person, a sparkling smile on his face and a bottle of champagne in his hand, he gives you a big hug and exclaims, "Let's celebrate that we are together!"

Take that, and now bump it up one: Imagine that this is not a person, but the Author of Heaven and Earth.

You've watched in fascination and awe all those Discovery Channel documentaries, goggle-eyed over His magnificent works, and attempted to fathom His unfathomable ingenuity in all

those science courses you've taken. In your creative works, in music, art, prose and computerized simulations, you've feebly attempted to emulate some tiny iota of His ultimate masterfulness - and have always come out feeling oh so inadequate.

And now, yes, He's standing there in front of you, smiling - and He grabs you, all of you, in a mega-bear-hug.

The Mitzvah Hug

Why would you want to imagine such a thing? Because this is the closest we can get to imagining what a mitzvah accomplishes - any mitzvah.



A mitzvah is the piercing of the wall of creation.

A mitzvah is the liberation of life from its confines.

A mitzvah is a request from beyond the final wall.

What are His requests?

He requests, from His very essence and being, that you engage every limb of your body in a dance of beautiful deeds together with Him. Each mitzvah is a full body embrace.

He asks that you speak to Him each of your innermost desires, in joy and in tears, in celebration and in sorrow. Every word is another kiss to your lips.

He asks that you engage your mind and soul in the joy and delight of the teachings He will share with you. You study His Torah, sing its song, swim in its ocean and wrestle with the flow of its rivers.

You are in intimate communion of spirit with He who spoke and the universe came to be.

A mitzvah is nothing less than a celebration of Creator-meets-created-and-the-two-become-one. Each mitzvah is another love affair. An elopement from the clutches of mundanity into the arms of pure and infinite love.

Yes, but ...

Okay, so half the time you're messing up. You keep slipping back into the dream, forgetting the whole love affair in the concerns and temptations of everyday life.

So there are rocks along Paradise Road. Get your priorities straight: Focus on the road and the paradise, not the rocks. Make up, say you're sorry, and get on with the celebration of life. Even for a moment. And then another moment. And there will be another moment.

Besides, those bumps along the road provide even greater reason to celebrate. Celebrate that your relationship with the Master of the Universe runs at such a core level that it cannot be broken; that even when you walk away from Him, He anxiously awaits your return.

No love could be deeper, no joy could be greater.

A Jew Must Be Happy

Perhaps the greatest challenge for Jews of our time is to re-associate being Jewish with being joyous.

We need to declare to ourselves, to our children and to the world that, no, being Jewish is not just about persecution, or anti-semitism, or the Holocaust. Neither is it just about the craving hunger and solemnity of a Yom Kippur service or bribing your kid to take his/her bar/bat mitzvah lessons.

That's why we have celebrations like Purim, and an entire month called Adar in which we are told that it's a mitzvah to increase our joy each day of the month. Joy over what? Over being a Jew.

Being Jewish is about celebrating who you are, celebrating what you are a part of, and celebrating every mitzvah you can pack in during a lifetime.

That's why we celebrate year after year our liberation from bondage in Egypt - because that is what being a Jew is all about: Exodus; breaking chains, shattering the bounds of a limited being.

Being a Jew means to connect with the infinite that is beyond all things. Being a Jew means having the chutzpah to pummel through all barriers, even the ultimate wall at the edge of all existence.

With joy and celebration, we will demolish the final barriers that 'separate' Creation from its Creator.

Did Mordechai Act Foolishly?

by Aron Moss

Question:

In the Purim story, Mordechai the Jew refuses to bow down to the wicked Haman. As a result, Haman enacts a decree to annihilate the entire Jewish nation. Did Mordechai do the right thing? Even if Haman thought he was a god, shouldn't Mordechai have bowed down to him rather than risk the lives of the entire Jewish people?

Answer:

In my youth, I attended a non-Jewish school. Jews made up about 10 percent of the student body, and we felt quite comfortable there. But sometimes we stood out.

It wasn't a particularly religious school, but on occasion they did hold prayer services in a big hall with a huge cross at the front. At a certain point during the service, everyone was told to kneel and bow before the cross. So everyone did.

But I didn't. I don't know why, but as everyone else went down on their knees, I just sat there. I was a little nervous that I would be caught not kneeling. But then I realized that anyone who saw me not kneeling was himself not kneeling, so I was safe.

Here's the funny thing. Looking around, I saw I was not alone. Scattered around the hall were others who did not bow. In fact, about 10 percent of the students were sitting upright. None of the Jewish kids would bow down.

It was quite a sight - a sea of bowed heads, with a few Jewish heads sticking out like protruding icebergs. Or maybe Goldbergs.

On reflection, this is astonishing. Where did we get this defiance from? We were all from irreligious homes and were for the most part completely uneducated in Judaism. No one ever told us not to bow down. In fact, for some of those students, this non-bowing may have been the only public statement of being Jewish they ever made. So what inspired us to be different?

I believe we got it from Mordechai, the Jew who refused to bow down. Somehow, his story of defiance has permeated the Jewish psyche, to the point that even 2500 years later, we know in the depth of our souls that we don't bow down to anyone but G-d.

When Mordechai stood up to Haman, he wasn't putting the Jewish people at risk. On the contrary, he was saving countless Jews in all future generations who would be inspired by his singular act of bravery, refusing to bow to the forces that would try to compromise their identity.

Our enemies will hate us for not bowing to them, and they will hate us even more if we do bow to them. But when we stand tall and proud, unabashedly stating our Jewishness, then, like Mordechai, we will see the downfall of evil and the triumph of good.



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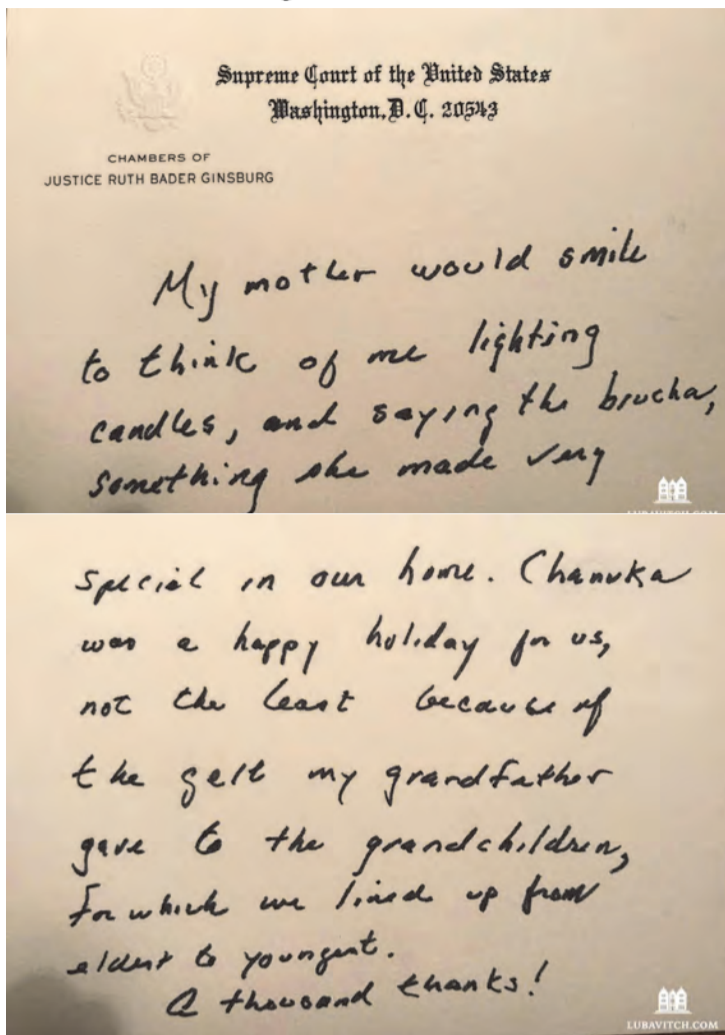
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Ruth Bader Ginsburg, a Chabad Rabbi and the Mysterious Nature of Jewish Identity

by Sarah Ogince



Writing by hand, on stationery bearing the seal of the Supreme Court of the United States, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg recalled her childhood as a young Jewish girl in Flatbush, Brooklyn:

Chanuka was a happy holiday for us, not the least because of the gelt my grandfather gave to the grandchildren, for which we lined up from eldest to youngest.

A thousand thanks!

The thanks were for a silver menorah and candles, delivered to the justice's chambers by the note's recipient, Rabbi Nosson Gurary, the Chabad representative to Buffalo, and regional director of Chabad Houses in Upstate New York. The menorah was one of dozens of Jewish mementos the rabbi sent Ginsburg during the two decades of their friendship - ornate dreidels on Chanukah, baskets of sweets and beautiful games for Purim, silver Kiddush cups, and, the justice's favorite, handmade shmurah matzah for Passover. In return, he received thanks, effusive, lyrical, and at times, nostalgic.

Ginsburg, who passed away on September 18 at the age of 87, was memorialized as a brilliant jurist, a tireless advocate for women's rights, and a liberal icon with rock-star status - the Notorious RBG. Her Jewish identity, however, proved harder to pin down.

After The Guardian's obituary stated that she had "abandoned her religion" at the age of seventeen, there was an immediate backlash from American Jews. They pointed to the obvious manifestations of the justice's Jewish pride: there was a mezuzah on the door of her Supreme Court chambers; she

had personally lobbied for the court to close on the High Holidays; and there was the poster on her wall with the verse from Deuteronomy, "Tzedek, tzedek, tirdof." Justice, justice, shall you pursue. (One of Ginsburg's famous jabots, the lace collars she wore with her judicial robes, was embroidered with the words as well.)

The Guardian subsequently issued a correction: Though the justice had moved away from observance, "she nevertheless remained deeply committed to her Jewish identity." The critics were satisfied, but the exchange glossed over a more subtle truth: Ginsburg's relationship with her heritage, like that of most Jews, was dynamic and changing.

Jewish identity flows in many channels - religion, culture, ethnicity, collective memory - and yet it is defined by none of them. Spiritual and mysterious in its essence, its expressions may mature, evolve, and even contradict themselves, from moment to moment and over a lifetime.

Unlikely Friendships

Rabbi Gurary became a witness to Ginsburg's Jewish life in 2003, when they were introduced by Justice Antonin Scalia.

Unlikely as they were, these friendships were an outgrowth of the rabbi's work in Buffalo. As an adjunct professor since 1971, he taught classes that were part of the SUNY Buffalo catalogue: Jewish mysticism and ethics, Chassidic philosophy, and Jewish law on the undergraduate level, and later in the law school.

It was his work in the law school, and his personal

interest in the intersections between Jewish and American law, that led the rabbi to think about the nation's highest court. In 2001, through a contact at the law school, he met Scalia ("He was very fond of Jewish law"), and in 2005, Rabbi Gurary created the National Institute for Judaic Law, an academic organization that would consider current cases before the high court in the light of *Halachah*, Jewish law.

The project was launched with a dinner at the Supreme Court attended by Scalia, Stephen Breyer, and Ginsburg. Rabbi Gurary remained in contact with the justices afterwards - they learned to expect a package from him before the Jewish holidays.

Mother and Daughter

Ginsburg responded warmly to the rabbi's overtures. "The beautifully crafted Kiddush cup revived memories of Hanukkahs past chez my grandparents," she wrote in December 2004. Childhood had provided the most intense Jewish experiences of the justice's life.

Like many of their contemporaries in 1930s Flatbush, the Bader family's primary focus was integration into American society. Ruth's mother, Celia Bader, had grown up speaking Yiddish in her home on Manhattan's Lower East Side and dropped out of school at fifteen to help pay for her brother's college tuition. She had something different in mind for her daughter. Intelligent and strong-willed, Celia steered Ruth toward a life of academic achievement in the name of independence.

But Judaism was important to Celia, too. The family belonged to a Conservative synagogue in Flatbush, and Ruth attended Hebrew school and Jewish summer camp for her entire childhood, first as a camper and then as a counselor. According to Ginsburg biographer Jane Sherron De Hart, Celia lit candles for Shabbat every Friday and brought up a separate set of dishes from the basement for Passover.

As a child and young adult, Ruth fulfilled her mother's demands in both spheres, excelling in public school and earning the nickname "rabbi" at summer camp, where she delivered sermons and prayers. But that would change after her mother's death in 1950, when seventeen-year-old Ruth drifted away from Jewish ritual observance.

Yet, in her own way, Ginsburg sought to synthesize the values her mother had instilled. As a lawyer, law professor, and judge, she championed the rights of women and minorities, a course that she acknowledged was inspired by her experience with antisemitism dur-

ing the Second World War, and by the idea of social justice that she had absorbed in her youth. In 1993, when she was nominated to the Supreme Court, Ginsburg paid tribute to her mother, whom she described as "the bravest and strongest person I have ever known."

Deepening Engagement

On the Supreme Court, Ginsburg took pains to define herself as a Jew in a way that she had never done before. "I am a judge born, raised, and proud of being a Jew," she wrote in an essay for the American Jewish Committee in 1996. "The demand for justice runs through the entirety of Jewish tradition. I hope... I will have the courage to remain constant in the service of that demand."

In addition to closing the court on the High Holidays, the new justice also lobbied to have a Christian reference removed from a certificate presented to members of the Supreme Court bar. When a colleague objected that the previous arrangements had been good enough for Brandeis, Cardozo, Frankfurter, and "even Goldberg," the justice replied tartly, "They're not good enough for Ginsburg."

Rabbi Gurary recalls his first meeting with the justice in her chambers, when, he says, she proudly pointed out that she had a mezuzah on her door. "It was a prominent, silver mezuzah."

As the years passed, it seemed to some that Ginsburg's engagement with Judaism was deepening. In 2008, she gave a talk at the Sixth and I Historic Synagogue in Washington, during which, a Washington Post reporter noted, she seemed reluctant to talk about her move away from observance as a teenager. "Ginsburg said she might feel differently if she were young now," wrote

Robert Barnes, because women today have more opportunities to participate in observance.

After her husband's death in 2010, Ginsburg began speaking to Jewish audiences more frequently, in the United States and in Israel. In 2015, she co-authored an essay about the role of women in the Passover story, intended to be used as an insert in the Haggadah.

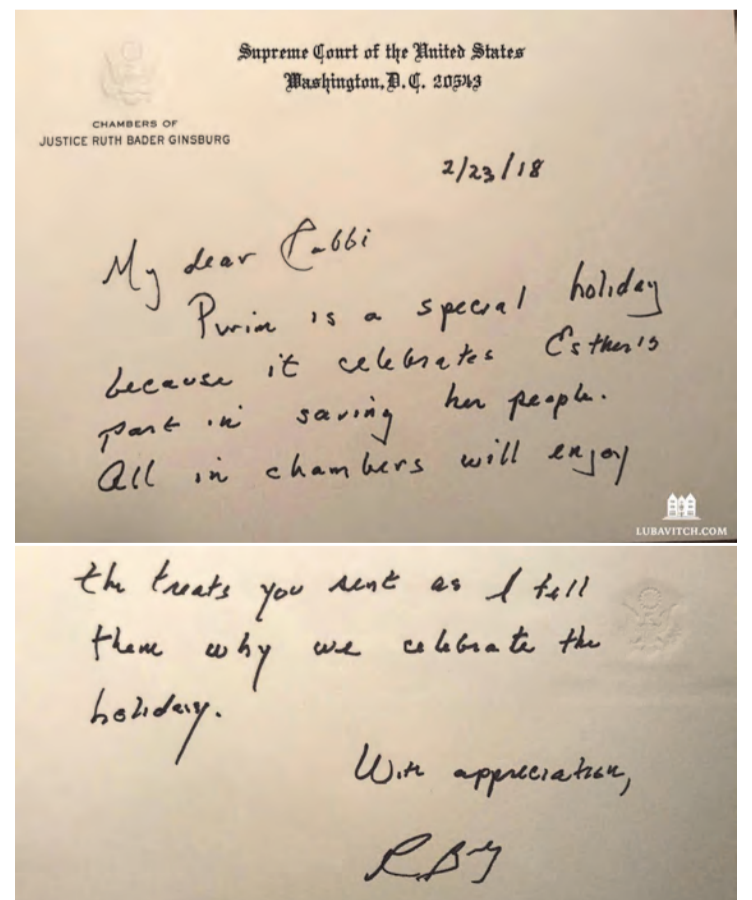
And then there were her notes to Rabbi Gurary, which reveal a more intimate side of the justice's Jewish self. "My dear Rabbi," she wrote on March 31, 2014:

World's best matzahs arrived in good time for Passover. I will bring one box to the family seder... It is a time that revives memories of seders at my grandparents' home and of the dishes my mother brought up every year. They were my favorites.

"She wrote to me openly, personally, in her own handwriting," Rabbi Gurary says. "She wanted me to know how she identifies with the Jewish tradition, that she feels fond of it. The gifts brought back memories of home."

The changes in Ginsburg's Jewish life were subtle, almost imperceptible. Only she knew if, and how, her feelings about her heritage had evolved over the years. Yet her notes to Rabbi Gurary point to personal expressions of her identity in a channel that may have surprised her. As the rabbi says, "She didn't have to write all that."

Certainly the rabbi's gifts provided an opportunity for Ginsburg to practice a core tenet of Jewish tradition - one that her mother had pursued with passion. On receiving a Purim gift in 2004, she wrote, it was "the ideal way to make the holiday understood and appreciated." She was, she told the rabbi, passing it on to her grandchildren.



HELL'S KITCHEN

Continued from page 2

-trated crown. I roughly remember it was something like "You too can be happy!" I frowned and thought to myself, I am actually terribly unhappy, but it's still seems like quite a chutzpah to hand a guy a book that just assumes everything in his life is still in the "before" stages. I wanted someone for once to just make an assumption that a zero like me actually might already be an "after".

A Chabad student then entered my subway car at 42nd Street. To make room for him, I quickly removed the food bag from my adjacent seat, allowing the beloved waft of snack-box vapors to (as the restaurant's name promises) kosher delight me. The steam tickled my face. As I went to scratch, I felt the unpleasant bump of yet another zit. Suffice it to say that eight solid weeks of fried food doesn't bode well for a healthy complexion. G-d only knows how my arteries survived!

As my eyes rolled up towards the heavens in self-disgust, I made eye contact with Dr. Zizmore, known to those in the New York metro area as Dr. Z, the famous dermatologist to the non-stars and not so rich. Granted, this was not actually Dr. Z in person, but his happy face plastered on a subway advertisement for his busy Fifth Avenue clinic.

Directly below Dr. Z., within the same ad panel, was a striking example of a young woman with terrible acne pocked skin. Fluorescent lighting and a lack of cosmetic cover-up painfully highlighted the callous texture of her ravenously destructive condition. The adjacent photo to the right showed the obligatory miracle of this woman's "after" look. Her transformation afforded her an unnaturally smooth skin tone. Not only did she have her zits sandblasted off her face, but she went in for the extra few bucks and had all of her pores surgically removed as well. Selfishly, I didn't care about her improved complexion. I just envied her success.

My anxiety level began to rise. I nervously pulled on the brim of my cap, shading my eyes from Dr. Z's pitch-woman's taunting smile. I focused again on my little booklet as the train chugged towards Times Square. Its pages promised the secret to achieving happiness, but by just contemplating its premise, I felt impossibly stuck against the enormity of my pressing discontent. I was still just a fed-up "before" in the same vein of the acne pocked lady. Unfortunately, dermatology can't yet heal the scars on one's psyche.

The young man sitting next to me cleared his throat with a subtle cough in preparation for speaking. He looked at my Kosher Delight bag and then up at me with polite

My anxiety level began to rise. I was still just a fed-up "before" in the same vein of the acne pocked lady in the ad. Unfortunately, dermatology can't yet heal the scars on one's psyche.

concern. For once, there was not an "Are you Jewish?" uttered, as I have learned from experience to be a standard line in the realm of introductory outreach dialogue.

"Excuse me, what time does Shabbos come in?"

I hadn't yet figured on any sort of Shabbat observance at this point in my Jewish identification reclamation strategy. I was still trying to get down the fundamentals of kosher. Unexpectedly, while contemplating my response, the proverbial cartoon light bulb appeared to clarify my muddled thoughts and provide me with an unexpected jolt of excitement.

Something as transient as my Kosher Delight snack-box-to-go bag gave this young man the impression that I was an actual participant in our shared faith. Never in my life had someone asked me even anything remotely related to Yiddishkeit, and this man, an actual Chabad chassid with such visibly impressive religious credentials, made an assumption that I might be in possession of something as valuable as candle lighting times. The ascent my *neshamah* took at that moment sent my heart racing.

The encounter must have been fully irrelevant for him in the grand scheme of his hurried day, especially when I shrugged my shoulders and responded, "I'm sorry. I don't have a clue." But for me, it was a confirmation of my spiritual progress. I walked off the train feeling more inspired to continue my pursuit for meaning through a Jewish life. As that day faded into Shabbat, I even felt just a bit like an "after" at a time when I sure needed it.



DISCOVERING PERSONAL G-D
Continued from page 7

reality that the answer to the question is that it isn't enough. It isn't enough to simply accept and do what needs to be done. Eventually, everyone gets tired; we are not machines. At some point, we need to feel that reassuring warmth of a parent. It isn't enough to know you are not alone. We need to know that we are valued and loved.

So what I was missing was something that I had at times thought wasn't needed - at times thought could be filled with intellectual pursuits, or during the times I felt the most distant, simply didn't really think existed at all in reality. I found myself feeling something that I never expected: jealousy.

For most of my life, I thought people who had this deep joy and connection were foolish. Maybe even liars. I couldn't understand what they had so I dismissed it as unnecessary.

With age comes wisdom; at least, that's the plan. I was, and am, incomplete. Pride, fear of the unknown, fear of rejection, fear of being fooled kept me at a distance, just outside. I would watch my fellow Jews with such ease speak of love of G-d, being loved, the comfort they feel, and an ember of envy began to grow. The very personal part of the conversion process, I suppose, was far from over.

I was advised to study Chassidic teachings by someone I trust. I carved time out (often well past midnight) to begin what I initially assumed would be a fruitless effort. I learned with my husband, I learned by myself, and I felt the connection begin to strengthen once again, and it felt... really good. With each passing week, I felt not only that eternal connection grow, but I also seemed to suddenly notice where I had eroded, how edges that had once defined me as a Jew had gotten a bit worn and blurred. How much of my life had tipped into the realm of the mundane at the cost of the essential? Quite a lot. And so the idea of not only returning to reconnect with that centering, calming routine, but of once again covering my hair more carefully came into my mind.

I had been covering it with a scarf or hat, and while I can and will only speak for



I admired my daughter's ease and lack of self-consciousness. To her, all of this, all of Judaism, was as natural as breathing, while to me it was something I had to wrestle with and don't really know how to stop wrestling with.

myself, I found that over the years I had become less concerned with how much hair was showing. Covering my hair was an afterthought and not a defining feature. And I planned my trip back to Brooklyn and the Ohel hoping to once again feel a bit of that centeredness that I had felt.

I approached the Ohel more concerned about the new layout of the buildings than anything else. There was a part of me that wanted the easy way out - to go on autopilot and not think. To distract myself just a bit and act as though this was simply routine. That part of me quickly crumbled. With my daughter at my side, I felt oddly nervous. We sat and wrote our concerns, our fears, our questions, our requests and notes of the good things we have in our lives.

I admired my daughter's ease and lack of self-con-

sciousness. To her, all of this, all of Judaism, was as natural as breathing, while to me it was something I had to wrestle with and don't really know how to stop wrestling with. One of the greatest joys I can imagine is seeing my children grow into adults who are comfortable with G-d, who trust Him and feel loved by Him. I checked for what felt like the thousandth time that I had the letters and names entrusted to me, and then we made our way down the wet path under the gray sky.

I shyly knocked and walked in. Checking that my daughter was OK, I turned my attention to Psalms. Over the past year or so, I had finally seen, and then admitted I saw, what was missing - a relationship with G-d. I had thought about what I would say to the Rebbe, imagining him hearing and hoping I would be given a moment of clarity with an answer on how to build this relationship with G-d. I had even written some of it down and held it in my hand, but found myself unable to really say anything. All I could do was cry.

I had, for the most part, given up on prayer. How much of this struggle is rooted in my refusal to push myself? Growth can be deeply uncomfortable, and often happens after we have been knocked back or wounded.

If I see the hand of G-d in the existence of the Jewish people, then I must see His hand in the twists and turns of my life. But proof of existence is not the same as proof of love. For me, that will require stepping off of reason and going beyond it, and that is frightening; it will be a leap I have to take again and again as I struggle with my nature.

I remained still and in the silence for a few moments with the book open before slowly beginning to say the prayers. I don't have the relationship with G-d that I need, and I am sometimes at a loss as to how to build one, but I believe in Him completely, and I know our Father will be patient with me.

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PURIM IN GROSS-ROSEN

by Pinchas Menachem Feivlovitz

Tired, starved, and down-trodden, we Jewish prisoners plodded into the barracks where we spent a few miserable hours on hard bunks before another day of back-breaking labor. We were too exhausted to think, but when our minds wandered back to times long gone, we could not help but wonder if it had all been a dream. Would we ever live again as we once had, before our parents and children had been murdered, and we were dropped into an unending hellish existence where death seemed to be a welcome (and inevitable) reprieve?

It was Purim eve, but what was there for us to celebrate in the German concentration camp of Gross-Rosen?

Suddenly, one of us leaped down from his small space on the bunk and began an impassioned speech that will forever remain in my memory:

"My fellow Jews," he called out, "Dear brothers in suffering! Today is our Purim, when we remember the miracles G-d did for our ancestors. He who dwells in Heaven saved our nation from being decimated. The enemy fell into the pit that he himself had dug. Today we once again have a double-edged sword pressed against our necks. Our enemies are trying to destroy us, but do not allow terror into your hearts! The Haman of our day, Hitler and his lackeys, will not be able to

overcome G-d's chosen nation. 'Netzach Yisrael lo yeshaker - The eternity of Israel will not lie.' The bells of freedom are already ringing in the distance. We will yet live to see justice meted out against our enemies, just like our ancestors in Shushan of old. Be strong, brothers, the Jewish nation lives on!"

Beads of sweat appeared on his face. His lips trembled, his eyes glistened, but he said no more.

Then another prisoner jumped down from his bunk and took his place next to the orator. Sweetly, with a voice laden with nostalgia and hope, he sang the words of the blessing said after the Megillah reading, in which we thank G-d "Who fights our battles and pays comeuppance to our mortal enemies."

As the rest of us absorbed the last echoes of the tune, the two men lithely climbed back into their spots on the tiered bunking and silence reigned once again.

In our minds, we were blissfully transported back to the happy Purims of years past, but we knew the joy would not last.

The following morning, the block commander stormed into the barrack: "Cursed Jews!" he shouted. "Last night someone here spoke disparagingly of our Führer. Tell me who it was! If I do not know who it was, you will all be punished before the day is



Biesinitzer Grund (Goerlitz) concentration camp, a subcamp of Gross-Rosen, Poland, May 1945. (Photo: US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Teddy Znamirovski.)

done!"

His words were met with defiant silence.

He got angrier and his voice became louder. "Dirty Jews!" he called out shrilly. "I am giving you 10 minutes to identify last night's speakers. Make no mistake about it, your lives are on the line."

Ten minutes passed, and no one uttered a word.

"Run, swine, run!" the commander barked, and we Jews began to run as fast as we could, while the guards rained down a shower of rifle butts and whips upon our heads and backs.

"Quick, quick," they shouted as rivers of blood spurted from our heads and our arms. Our backs sagged and our feet ached.

But we had only one fear:

that last night's brave performers, who had gifted us with hope and courage, would give themselves up in order to save us from further suffering. One even tried to run out of line to identify himself, but his neighbors didn't allow it. "No, no," they hissed with clenched teeth, "Stay strong. We are all responsible for one another."

I have no way of recalling how long this went on, because every moment felt like eternity. We ran with our last strength, panting, with no air to breathe. Our tongues hung out, and tears mingled with sweat on our cheeks. But no one even considered ratting on the heroes of the previous night.

Yes, even the prisoners of Gross-Rosen merited their own Purim miracle - two miracles, actually: That no one dropped dead from the diabolic run we were forced to

endure, and that we all had the courage to keep the identity of those two men secret.

Editor's Note: The late Pinchas Menachem Feivlovitz was a Holocaust survivor who fought (and was wounded) in Israel's war of independence. An adherent of the Gur Chassidic group, he devoted much of his energy to chronicling and telling the atrocities of the Holocaust, through his personal experiences of five years under Nazi rule. Together with his wife and fellow survivor Cipora (whom he met and married after liberation), he raised a family in Israel. At the time of his passing in 2007, he left dozens of descendants, devoted to Torah and Jewish life. This vignette was recorded by Feivlovitz in his book, 'Odeni Zocher (I Still Recall)'.

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Need To Hit The Refresh Button Every Night

by Chana Cotlar

Ever had a really hard day?

Like the days that leave you plopping into bed at night feeling sad/uninspired/-frustrated by the day's events, feeling guilty for some moments that were, well, suffice it to say, not your proudest moments in life.

Raise your hand if you can relate.

Too bad you can't see me because I'm raising both my hands. And if I had a third hand, it would be raised, too.

We all have those days.

After one such day not too long ago, I was saying the *Shema*, as I do every night before retiring to bed. It is also a time for personal self-reflection. A time to do a *cheshbon hanefesh*, an accounting of one's day, of both the good and the not-so-good, resolving to improve and grow in the days that lie ahead.

And then it hit me, simple yet profound: How fortunate we are that G-d, in His abounding kindness, wove the institution of nightly sleep into the fabric of our daily lives. You see, G-d could have just as easily created us with consistently charged batteries (the kind of batteries my kids wish their toys had). But He created us with the need to recharge our batteries each night, and with that comes the ability to hit the refresh button every single day.

The gift of renewal.

The gift of new beginnings.

Each and every day.

A time to pause, reflect on the day's events, take stock of which areas in your life need improvement and growth, and then take those lessons with you as you enter into a peaceful sleep. The sediment

of the unpleasant and difficult is left to settle behind you in the day that has now ended. A fresh start. New opportunity. The challenges, mistakes and mess-ups do not define you. Their sting is now of the day that has passed; only the light of the lessons they contain follow you into sleep and the day that lies ahead.

A dimension of the soul rises above to be with G-d as we sleep below. Hence, the *Modeh Ani* prayer when we awake in which we express our gratitude to G-d for restoring this dimension of our soul to us anew each morning. It basks in the holy spiritual light above and then descends back to our bodies, recharged, refreshed and with a renewed sense of purpose to fulfill its G-dly mission here on Earth through Torah and mitzvot.

I like to keep a Post-It note near my bed with a list of some of the areas in which I am currently working to improve and grow. (I love lists and visual aids!) I try to use these quiet moments at the end of each day to reflect on where I stand in each of these areas and how I'd like to take the next baby step towards growth in the day ahead.

I feel uplifted and immensely grateful as this thought percolates within my mind and heart. The Grand Master and Creator of our world designed our lives - if we are aware and in tune to its message - in a way that allows us to rise above guilt, sadness and frustration, so that we would not wallow in these emotions for too long. Nightfall beckons us to enter the cocoon of sleep, committed to emerging the bright and beautiful butterfly that we are at our core. Ready to soar and fly and greet tomorrow.

1 + 1 = A Holy One

by Yitzi Hurwitz

In the section of Shekalim, which is read before Purim, we are told how every Jewish male was required to give a silver half-shekel coin for the communal offerings. In ancient times, there were two currency systems: one holy and one secular. A holy shekel was worth double a secular one.

The currency the Torah refers to here is a holy shekel, which was 20 geira. A half of a holy shekel was worth 10 geira, which is the value of a regular shekel. So, a half holy shekel is the same amount as a regular shekel.

Why a half-shekel? And if a half holy shekel is a regular shekel, why not simply require a regular shekel?

This is similar to what the Maggid of Mezeritch explains about the trumpets that G-d commanded Moses to make. He said: "Fashion for yourself two *chatzotzrot* ('trumpets')." The word *chatzotzrot* could be divided into *chatzi tzurot*, which means "half forms." The two *chatzotzrot* symbolize that G-d and the Jewish people are, so to speak, two half-forms, which complete each other.

In the same sense, every Jew is like a half, and we become whole through connecting with other half-shekels - our fellow Jews.

How does this work?

G-d created us in His image. Kabbalistic teaching explains that just as He has

10 G-dly attributes, so do we have these 10 attributes. And just as G-d connects to the world with both masculine and feminine aspects (sometimes called the masculine title of *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* and sometimes the feminine *Shechinah*), so are we divided into two genders, each with a unique purpose.



Our great sages tell us that when "10 [Jewish people] are together, the Shechinah - the Divine Presence dwells among them." They are not praying or learning; all they are doing is being together, and the Shechinah is with them. Why?

Because we have a *neshamah* (soul) that is a part of G-d, we each carry the Shechinah with us. Now, when 10 of us are together, the Shechinah shines, regardless of what we are doing. I can just imagine that adding davening and learning Torah to the gathering can make the Shechinah shine even brighter.

When a Jew connects with G-d, you have both halves of the form. Each half is a whole

on its own - each is 10, a whole shekel - but together, they become a holy shekel.

The same is true for Jewish people. Each of us is perfect on our own, but we are only half of a holy shekel; we need another to be whole. The mitzvah of loving your fellow makes you whole. G-d likes to be where there is love and unity among friends.

This, of course, is also the case for couples. When you are in a loving relationship, the two halves become one whole. In order for that to happen, you have to see your partner not as a half, but as a whole. And then the two shekels become one holy shekel. When this happens, G-d wants to take part in your relationship, making it holy. If you bring G-d in, you take your relationship to a whole new level.

G-d wants us to connect with Him. But He wants us to love each other first.

May Hashem bless us with good and strong relationships - with our friends, spouses, and ultimately, with Him. Our unity and love will surely bring us to the ultimate and open relationship with G-d that we yearn for with the coming of Moshiach. The time has come.

Dedicated to my wife, Dina Hurwitz, my other half-shekel, who has been a rock throughout my difficult battle with ALS.

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שֶׁהַחַיּוֹת בֵּי נַשְׁמֹתַי Sheh-heh-cheh-zar-ta Bee Neesh-mah-tee
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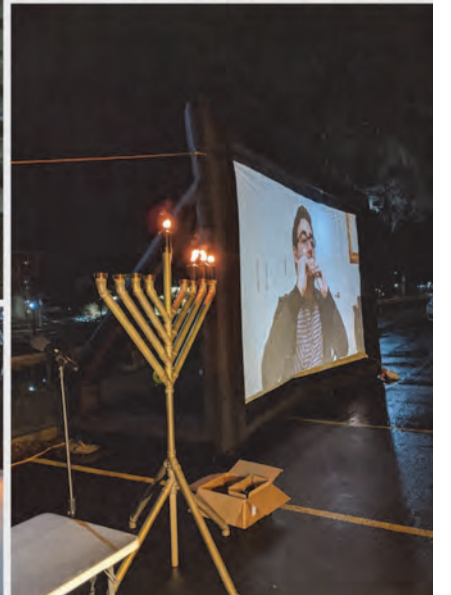
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