**Shabbos Stories for**

**Parshas Balak 5773**

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**The Human Side of the Story**

**Shampoo and the**

**Jewish Problem**

**By Rabbi Mendel Weinbach, zt”l**

“You didn’t shampoo your hair so we can’t operate!”

This shocking statement was made by a nurse to the wife of the head of a Day School in Minneapolis who had not been given instructions on how to prepare herself for surgery.

The only way she would be able to avoid postponing the operation and remaining in the hospital an extra day was to rush out to a drugstore and purchase the required shampoo.

But when she reached the nearby pharmacy she was disappointed to find it closed. After desperately banging on the door she was relieved to see a clerk open it, only to inform her that there was no way he could sell her anything since all the computerized cash registers had been shut down.

Explaining her urgent need for the shampoo, the lady begged the clerk to give her a tube and promised that her husband would arrive at eight o’clock, opening time, on the next morning to pay for it. Her appeal touched the clerk’s heart and he consented.

The next morning her husband, a Slonimer *chassid* in traditional black garb, did indeed arrive at the designated hour to make payment. To his surprise, this created a hubbub among the clerks. They had made bets that morning as to whether he would actually come to pay. One clerk who lost

the bet cried out, “It’s not fair. You didn’t tell us his wife was Jewish!”

*Reprinted from last week’s email of OHRNET, the Ohr Somayach Torah Magazine of the Internet.*

**Old-School Brooklyn Hat Store Keeps Hasids and Hipsters Looking Dapper:**

**After 65 Years, Bencraft Hats is Going Strong**

**By** [**Nate Lavey**](http://forward.com/authors/nate-lavey/)

Stanley Goldstein sits at the center of a narrow hat store in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, fielding customers’ questions about brim sizes, crowns and colors. Bencraft Hatters, which was first opened in 1948 by Goldstein’s father, has been selling hats to Jews and non-Jews for 65 years and carries everything from cowboy hats and flat caps to the fedoras and Homburgs favored by the religious crowd.



**Hat Man:** Stanley Goldstein doles out advice on

headwear at Bencraft Hats in Williamsburg. (Photo by Nate Lavey)

At 85, Goldstein still oversees much of the operation in Williamsburg, while Steven Goldstein, Stanley Goldstein’s son and the other owner of the business, can often be found shuttling between Williamsburg and the Goldsteins’ other store in Boro Park. In their own way, the two stores represent different part of New York’s Jewish community:

The Williamsburg location accommodates a more secular crowd, including hipsters, while in Boro Park the clientele tends to be distinctly Orthodox.

Steven explained that “there are three or four hat stores in Boro Park, and for the most part each hat store takes care of a different sect of the community.” Bencraft is mostly oriented toward the Lubavitch and Modern Orthodox communities, which are not heavily represented in Boro Park. That means that customers sometimes trek across the city just to try on a [Borsalino](http://www.borsalino.com/).

**Challenge Finding Equipment**

**To Mend Hats**

But even though [Bencraft](http://bencrafthats.com) has been in business longer than many of its clients have been alive, the Goldsteins are facing difficulty finding the equipment to mend hats and, even more rare, people with the skills to operate that equipment. In the damp basement of the Boro Park store, the “flanging room” is cluttered with old sewing machines, hat blocks and flanges — wooden molds used to shape hats to the wearer’s preference. Some of the equipment is more than 100 years old and includes a tired Singer sewing machine used to repair leather hatbands. Most of the store’s newer equipment, still decades old, was bought from other area hat stores that have closed down.

Still, amid the ribbons, hatbands and hand-written sales slips there’s a sense that the store provides not a glimpse into the past, but really a look into the future. With New York’s Orthodox population on the rise, Jewish hat sellers are likely to have a growing clientele, and Bencraft is even considering opening a location in the heavily Orthodox town of Lakewood, N.J., to take advantage of the opportunity offered by a dense hat-wearing population.

Back in Williamsburg, things seem pretty much like they’ve always been, with the subway rumbling overhead and people of all stripes stopping by to say hello to the elder Goldstein, who says, with a grin, that he has no plans to hang up his hat anytime soon. “As long as I keep myself going, I’m happy. I can’t stay home — too much television, too many books to read and too much nudging from my wife.”

*Reprinted from the June 7, 2013 edition of the Forward.*

**Don’t Be Afraid!**

**By Rabbi Tuvia Bolton**

Five foot three, sixty five years old, bespectacled and a bit bent-over, Mr. Joe Schwartz (fictitious name) was depressed.

It happened gradually. For the first twenty years he ran a small grocery story of his own near his home in a completely Jewish area in Brooklyn; but then gradually the Jews started leaving. The Goldmans, the Bernsteins, the Fishers; his best customers and more were either dying or moving out.

Things looked bad; the crime rate was rising; it was becoming dangerous to walk the streets. The merchandise wasn't moving off the shelves and when it did he didn't bother to renew it. He began to feel out of place in his neighborhood mini-market.

But he didn't want to leave and begin somewhere else either. He had built this store up from nothing and he liked working there. He certainly did not want to retire; that would just make him feel obsolete. But on the other hand he was losing his desire to wake up in the mornings.

Then one day he saw an article in the paper about a Rabbi in Brooklyn called the Lubavitcher Rebbe that gave free advice to people and he, as an observant Jew, decided to give it a try.

He took the subway, got off at Kingston and Eastern Parkway, walked up the subway stairs and then to the large red-bricked building just across from the exit; the main Synagogue and headquarters of the Lubavitcher Chassidim, and entered.

Bearded young men with pleasant eyes were bustling around in the halls and the song of Torah learning filled the air. Someone shook his hand, three people said Shalom Aleichem! And in no time he was in the office making an appointment, in three weeks he would have a private audience.

Three weeks later the night arrived. He was scheduled to see the Rebbe at 11:00 pm. He arrived at ten, but it wasn't until three in the morning that he actually entered.

The Rebbe's room was brightly lit and unusually quiet. Bookshelves lined the walls. The Rebbe was facing him, seated behind a large, mahogany desk, small stacks of letters and papers before him.

Mr. Schwartz handed him the letter he had prepared. The Rebbe took it, read it carefully for a few seconds, looked up and asked quietly in Yiddish.

"Do you want to leave the store or not?"

Mr. Schwartz began to explain the pros and cons but when he finished the Rebbe again looked at his letter and asked:

"But what do you want? Do you want to leave or not?"

"No!" Mr. Schwartz answered as emphatically as he could. "I don't want to leave. I want to stay. But I'm afraid."

The Rebbe waited for him to continue.

"I'm afraid of the gangsters and I'm afraid there won't be any customers left. But I don't want to leave. That's why I'm here."

The Rebbe looked at him earnestly, smiled and said: "There is nothing to be afraid of. Don't be afraid of the people. And don't worry about not making money; you can make money there also. May G-d bless you and give you much success and good news."

Mr. Schwartz returned home a new man. He told his wife what the Rebbe had said and the next morning he went down to the store, ordered new stock and began to clean the place up he even decided to paint a little.

Sure enough, as his mood lifted little by little people began to trickle in. There were more Jews left than he thought and some of the locals came to buy too, some even wanted kosher products as well and became good customers. Everything seemed to be working out…..

Until the robbery.

There he was; Mr. Schwartz, in the newspaper! It was a small picture of him standing in his store with two huge policemen, one scratching his head in wonder pointing at two bullet holes in the ceiling of the grocery.

The caption read 'Rabbi Routs Robbers' and underneath was an interesting story.

“Last night when Joe Schwartz an elderly but lively observant Jew from Brooklyn had finished the day in his mini-market, emptied the cash-register and was preparing to leave and lock up, he was still behind the counter when two huge robbers suddenly pushed their way in and closed the door behind them.

One pulled out a gun while the other leaned over the counter and opened the cash register. When he found it empty he and his accomplice both began pounding and kicking the counter and even tried to reach over and grab Mr. Schwartz. But he just took a step back, out of their reach, and yelled at them. "Get out of here, the both of you, or I'll call the police! You aren't getting a penny!"

Schwartz reported that one with the gun, to prove he meant business, pointed it in the air, fired two shots then pointed it at him and began screaming, "Give the money or I'll blow your brains out! I'll kill you."

But Mr. Schwartz folded his arms and didn't budge. People started gathering outside and in the distance a police siren was heard so the robbers looked at one another and fled out the door knocking a few people over as they ran down the street.”

The article concluded with a quote from Mr. Schwartz explaining to one of the reporters how he kept his cool:

"It wasn’t so hard. I just did what the Lubavitcher Rebbe said. He said that I shouldn't be afraid so I wasn’t. See! He was right!"

*Reprinted from last week’s email on the parsha from Yeshiva Ohr Tmimim in Kfar Chabad, Israel.*

**Confessions of**

**The Shadchan**

“Hello, Rabbi Stein? This is Mrs. Gross. I hope you remember us. My daughter, Ettel Leah and I came to meet you last month. She’s a lovely girl and we hope you are keeping her in mind.” Click

“Hi, Rabbi Stein? It’s Shua Applebaum. Faigy, my daughter, is anxious for you to come up with something. Why are you not returning my calls? My number again is 516-332-4136.” Click

“Hello? Hello? Yes, Rabbi Stein? Uh- cough- this is –uh- Mrs. Aviva Goldstein. I have a daughter who just returned from seminary in Eretz Yisroel. She is really an outstanding girl. She does chesed all the time and was top in the class. I have many references…We – uh – we would like to set up an appointment with you. Please call me at 845-777-6767. Or I guess I can also be reached at…” Click

Yes, hello. Rabbi Stein? This is Mrs. Gross again. I just wanted to let you know that Ettel Leah just received her M.A. degree from a correspondence course. She’s so bright and she just wants a boy who will sit and learn. We’re hoping you will come up with something soon. The number here again is 718-565-1212. Hope to hear from you real soon!” Click.

“Hello? Yes, Rabbi Stein? This is Mrs. Gross again. I also just wanted to remind you that Ettel Leah is looking for a tall boy. If you remember, she herself is quite tall – 5’7” The number here again is 718-565-1212. That’s 718-565- twelve, twelve. Thanks so much!” Click.

It was 11:01 p.m. The messages on my ‘business line’ kept on coming in as usual. Aaah!. It wasn’t easy being a shadchan. Sometimes I even wondered why I had gotten started in the ‘profession’ at all. Lately, it seemed that I had neither a day nor a night to call my very own! I wondered if the President of the United States was as busy as I!

But, ah, yes, as my Rosh Yeshiva had reminded me, I was involved in avoidas hakodesh. I thought back to how I had actually gotten into this in the first place. As one of the first of my own group of friends to become engaged and married, I and my wife had attempted to set up my two chavrusas who had, of yet, not been so lucky.

And lo and behold! Before you knew it, they too had marched down the wedding aisle! It was a sweet taste of success for me at the time. Soon my reputation had grown and – voila- here I was today: a bonafide shadchan! But- aaah! – it sure wasn’t easy!

I made some markings in pencil in my little black ‘shidduchuchim’ notebook. I stopped to digest the messages of before. Now, what to do about this Mrs.Gross? She didn’t stop calling. True, her daughter was a fine girl – but there were many such fine girls.

And, it seemed the Gross’s were quite picky. The boy’s family had to be just so. The boy had to be just this shnit and have had to be from just that yeshiva. When? I thought, would people understand that no shidduch can be custom ordered! Only Hashem was able to create spouses. Certainly not me! Oh well! I could only try.

The next morning I made it to the yeshiva bright and early in the morning . It wasn’t easy getting up at this hour but when I could, I did. It gave me that extra slot to learn before davening with the regular minyan and getting on with my busy, super hectic schedule.

As I passed the room leading into the bais medrash where the early risers davened in the vasikin minyan , I noticed the same tefilin bag that inevitably was there, propped on the table, whenever I made it in this early. I recognized it well. The gold embroidered lettering bore witness to the fact that it belonged to that bochur, Eliyahu Langer.

Hmm, I thought. He certainly is a real catch! Tall, yeshivish, litvish, good midos, good learner, good family…and now this…outstanding! To actually get up each morning so early! Unusual! I had never really considered Eliyahu to be the type. Hiding his true pnimiyis…A real find!

Then I had my brainstorm! That’s it! Ettel Leah Gross! Eliyahu Langer, the serious bochur who made a point to get up for the vasikin davening every morning…now I knew that Eliyahu was everything the Gross family was looking for. And more.

I immediately got straight to work. I knew where to locate the Langer phone number. I’d spoken with the bochur, Eliyahu numerously. How bashert it was that I had chanced again upon that tefilin bag this morning! It had been what prompted me to think of the Gross girl. As the saying goes – Hakol Bidei Shamayim, everything is in the Hands of Shamayim!

“Hello, Mrs. Langer? Yes, this is Avi Stein. I’ve called you in the past about several suggestions for your son, Eliyahu. I have another name for you to look into. Her name is Ettel Leah Gross…”

It didn’t take long for the Langer’s to leave their reply message on my answering machine. “Yes,” Mrs. Langer sounded excited. “If she is what her references say about her, Ettel Leah Gross is exactly what my Eliyahu is looking for. We’ll give it a try. Looking forward to hearing good news from you!” Click.

It wasn’t so easy to convince the Gross side that their daughter’s future might lie within the Langer family though. “I don’t know.” Mrs. Gross pronounced slowly. “My Ettel Leah is looking for someone very, very serious. We did hear very nice things about this particular bochur, however, he may be a bit too leibidik for her. I’m still quite hesitant to begin this whole parsha. Why waste everyone’s time?”

“Listen, Mrs. Gross.” I used my honed business convincing skills now. I knew where to strike, when, and how. “It is true that Eliyahu Langer is a leibidik bochur. But, believe me, I know from my own personal experience that he is as ehrlich and serious about yiddishkeit and learning as they come. In fact,”

My voice now dropped for a dazzling dramatic effect, “he is maybe one of the very few bochurim who make a point to daven early every morning – rain or shine, winter or summer – in the vasikin minyan of the yeshiva!” And then came the clincher.” Mrs. Gross, I myself, bear witness!”

“Really?” Mrs. Gross’s tone was changing. “That is quite unusual for a young bochur! Hmmm. I’ll talk it over with my husband and Ettel Leah and get back to you soon. Thank you!”

Indeed, it was not long afterward that I listened to my answering machine with the Gross family’s message of consent. “We’re interested. Let us know about the details of the meeting,” Mrs. Gross’s voice said.

After that, there was little to talk about. Within a month Eliyahu Langer and Ettel Leah Gross were chasan and kallah!

MAZEL TOV! It was another worthy shidduch facilitated by Avi Stein!

But as the handshakes and words of gratitude reached me, I modestly declined to take the credit. “No,” I said shaking my head to the negative. “The credit goes to The One Above. Hakol Bidei Shamayim. I was merely the shaliach.”

Soon the actual chasuna took place. What an affair it was! The music! The atmosphere! The chasan himself, known to be a leibidik vibrant soul was the true life of the party! It was a simcha to behold. I reaped the nachas.

Just before I, the honored shadchan, was requested to speak at the last sheva brochos, I got up to greet the choson with my notes in hand. “Dear Chasan,” I said with a smile.

Tell me, you’re not making it to the vaskikin minyan also during sheva brochas, are you?”

The chasan looked at me without a trace of expression. Then- “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I daven always in the regular minyan.”

I felt my eyes widen. “How is it that your tefilin bag is on the table in the room in front of the bais medrash when the early minyan davens vasikin then?” I asked, quite taken aback.

“Oh!” The chasan was grinning widely now. “That tefilin bag must belong to the chassidish guy with a similar name. Join the club! People always mix us up! His name is Eliyahu Lenger – L-e-n-g-e-r! Mine’s Eliyahu Langer – L-a-n-g-e-r!”

As I got up to speak, I threw the notes heaped with the chasan’s and kallah’s praises aside. “Rabboisai!” I began. “Speaking as a very experienced shadchan, I would like to enlighten you with one thing. Hakol Bidei Shomayim! Everything is in the Hands of Shamayim. Hashem is the true Shadchan and if He wills one party to become a life partner with another it will happen by hook or by crook! I would like to wish the chasan, the kallah and all the mechutanim a heartfelt wish of Mazel Tov!”

And with that, I, Avi Stein, the shaliach of Hakodesh Boruch Hu sat down with echoes of Mazel Tov from those present at the Langer – L-a-n-g-e-r / Gross sheva brochos.

“MAZEL TOV! MAZEL TOV!” The good wishes resounded.

*Reprinted from an email sent to me by my daughter Chava. It appears to have originally been published in the August 10, 2009 edition of The Yeshiva World News.*

**The Prophet Habakuk Meets Daniel in the Lions’ Den**

The prophet Habakuk lived in the Land of Israel. One evening when he and his fellow-workers had finished their work in the fields and were eating their supper, a spirit of prophecy came upon Habakuk. He saw an angel before him who told him that G-d desired that Habakuk bring a portion of his meal to the Prophet Daniel, who was in a lions' den in Babylon.

The angel took him and flew off with him, landing him a few moments later right in the very midst of the lions' den. There sat Daniel with the lions sprawling at his feet, like loyal watchdogs guarding a beloved master!

The two prophets settled down to their evening meal, happy in their chance of having a scholarly discussion. The lions did not disturb them despite their own hunger, but instead walked about the den circling Daniel and Habakuk as they ate, talked and blessed G-d for his mercies and miracles. Daniel told Habakuk how he came to be in the lions' den:

"When King Darius of Media had appointed me as his personal counselor," began Daniel, "all his courtiers became inflamed with jealousy. It did not interest them that I had already acted as counsellor to the previous Babylonian king, and that my appointment, therefore, was not a matter of favoritism, but because of my suitability. All they could feel was resentment that I was chosen and not they. So, they decided to get rid of me.

"But try as they would, they could find no crime to charge me with, and so they conspired to convince the king to enact some new law which would make me suspect.

"King Darius had until then always shown the greatest respect to our Jewish faith, and this, too, annoyed his courtiers very much. The king, who himself told me all this later, said he had not suspected a thing when his courtiers came to him with an air of extreme loyalty and asked him to give his seal to an important new law. The new edict read: 'Every citizen of the land should publicly acknowledge the king as the highest authority, and that only to him must every kind of request be made or prayer be said.'"

"I can see their plot against you now," said Habakuk. "Yes," continued Daniel, "after the king had passed this last law his courtiers watched every move I made! Naturally I was not going to allow any man made law to interfere with my prayers three times a day.

“These courtiers pounced upon me one day and dragged me before the king, accusing me of praying to someone other than to the king. They immediately demanded the maximum penalty for this offense - that I be thrown alive into the lions' den. This harsh punishment would serve as an example to anyone who would dare to break the new law in the future.

"King Darius, who was really not evil, but had been misled and drawn into this new law without giving it proper thought and consideration, was horrified when he saw the results of his thoughtlessness. He regarded me as a friend and honored advisor, and now he was being expected to have me mercilessly thrown to hungry lions. But, having put his royal seal to the decree, he had no choice but to carry out the law.

"Yet, I did not lose hope," concluded Daniel, his eyes shining with great faith in G-d. "I prayed to G-d that he show these heathens that He and He alone was, is, and ever will be the One and Only Master of the Universe which He created and controls. I prayed that He spare my life, and not allow the hungry lions to touch me, so that all people would see the miracle and acknowledge G-d's greatness above all mankind.

"Imagine, therefore, the wonder of my enemies when I was thrown into this deep pit from which there is no escape, and instead of the famished beasts pouncing upon me and tearing me to pieces, the lions came gently fawning upon me and kneeling down before me in submission. Then they settled around me in a circle as if to protect me. This wondrous miracle left no possible doubt but that G-d chose to save me from hurt, that He is the Master, and that only what He wills takes place!"

When Daniel finished his story, he and Habakuk bade each other farewell, and the angel took Habakuk and transported him back to his home in the Land of Israel, in the same manner as he had carried him to Daniel.

Later, Habakuk heard, as did the whole world, that King Darius had Daniel removed from the den. At the same time, the King ordered that Daniel's enemies be thrown into the lions' den instead. This time, however, the lions behaved differently. As soon as the courtiers came hurtling down into the lions' den, the beasts pounced upon them and tore them apart, giving a fitting end to such cruel tyrants who wanted to give this horrible punishment to the innocent, G-d-fearing and law-abiding Daniel.

*Reprinted from “L’Chaim (Parshat Bamidbar 5773), a publication of the Lubavitch Youth Organization. Excerpted from “The Complete Story of Shavuot” by Nisan Mindel, published by Kehot Publications.*

**Parsha Insights**

**The Last of the**

**Kiddush Wine**

**By Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair**

It’s difficult for us to imagine, but not so long ago, there were ordinary-looking people who displayed extra-ordinary powers.

There are literally hundreds of stories of Jews in the Second World War who risked and surrendered their lives, rather than transgress the smallest commandment of the Torah.

One of these holy souls was Rabbi Shemuel David Ungar, the spiritual leader of Nitra. Rabbi Ungar had a reputation as a holy person and a great teacher far beyond his native Slovakia.

In early 1944, Rabbi Ungar fled to the woods around Nitra to escape deportation by the Fascists. Even though he was faced by acute hunger, he refused to make the smallest compromise in his observance of Jewish law.

As the weeks went by, he became weaker and weaker. A friend managed to find some grapes (Heaven only knows from where) and begged him to eat them.

He replied, “How can I eat them now? If I use them now, I won’t have wine to make Kiddush on Friday night. Should a Jew enjoy grapes if he has no wine to sanctify the next Shabbat?”

When winter came, his health started to fail. Nevertheless, he still spent hours learning Torah at the mouth of his bunker, despite the heavy snow and the bitter cold. Suffering from starvation and exposure, Rabbi Unger passed from this world a few weeks before the fall of the Third Reich.

The Talmud relates the story of a non-Jew, Dama ben Netina, who possessed a precious jewel needed to replace a stone missing from the breastplate of the *Kohen Gadol*.

The Sages came to him and offered him a fortune for the stone, but he would not sell it to them because the key to the safe in which the jewel was kept was under his father’s sleeping head. He would not wake his father even for a king’s ransom.

Because he was prepared to give up so much to honor his father, he was rewarded that a red heifer was born into his flock, and he sold that animal to the Sages for the same amount that he had forfeited.

Why was Dama ben Netina rewarded specifically by a red heifer being born into his flock?

The role of the Jewish People is to be a “nation of priests” and a “holy people”, singled out from the rest of the nations by their exemplary behavior. So, when Dama ben Netina, a non-Jew, demonstrated such self-sacrifice to honor his father, it awakened an accusation in the Heavenly courts against the Jewish People.

For here was a non-Jew whose devotion to the mitzvah of honoring his father was at least equal to that of the Jews, and where was the exemplary difference of the Jewish People?

Thus, the red heifer which was bought from him by the Sages demonstrated that even though Dama ben Netina was capable of giving up a fortune for a mitzvah that logic dictates, the Jewish People are prepared to give up an equal fortune for a mitzvah that is infinitely beyond the grasp of

human logic, merely because it is the Will of their Father in Heaven.

And a holy Jew, freezing in a Slovak winter, to whom logic says eat the grapes and worry about Shabbat later, has the power to ignore the gnawing pains of hunger in his stomach. All so that he will not miss the chance of sanctifying the day of Shabbat and He who created it.

Reprinted from last week’s email of ORHNET, the Ohr Somayach Torah Magazine of the Internet.

**I Never Got to**

**Mozambique**

**By Chaya Harrison**

In 1988, I was twenty-two years old and living in an apartment in the McGill Ghetto—an area adjacent to Montreal’s McGill University, inhabited mostly by students. On the first night of Chanukah, my identity as a Jewish woman had become a mixture of many things, most of which were questions.

As I lit the candles of my family’s menorah, I felt that I was a Jew by culture, not by religion. My perspective was largely influenced by my education and the world I lived in. My major was in English literature, and my minor was in any course I could get into, such as history, religion, psychology and women’s studies.

I was being taught how to analyze, break down and interpret information, and above all, to think critically. Translation: question everything and believe in nothing. I was in university to learn, to acquire knowledge, to grow intellectually. I felt privileged to have reached this point in my education—learning for learning’s sake. Career choices would come later. Now I wanted to pursue knowledge with a capital K.

My Jewish education consisted of Conservative afternoon Hebrew school, happily ending in grade six. Hebrew school was boring and uninspiring, but my parents were committed to giving me a foundation of Jewish knowledge, even though most of my Jewish classmates from public school were not going. We started out in grade one with two classes of thirty children, boys and girls; by grade six, we were a grand total of six girls.

Armed with a twelve-year-old’s knowledge from afternoon Hebrew school, my Jewish beliefs were being challenged in university. Feminism played an important part in my studies. In and out of the classroom, Judaism was criticized as patriarchal and oppressive, where women were relegated to the sidelines. That Passover, as we sat reading the *haggadah* in English, I struggled with these issues, insisting on substituting “She” when G‑d was referred to as “He,” and adding “Goddess” to “G‑d.”

Many of my friends yearned for answers to spiritual questions: How do we know there is a G‑d?

Where is the feminine side of G‑d? What is our purpose in this world? Some pursued their spiritual paths in Eastern religions, some were into New Age; but sadly, most of us had no idea that Judaism contained the answers and the depth we were looking for. So I dabbled in this and that, and, I read popular books like *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, *The Tao of Pooh*, and books by author Herman Hesse.

One friend, who called himself a pagan, lent me a book beginning with an exercise in visualization. I was to imagine myself in white robes approaching an altar . . . I stopped. I could not go any further. I was Jewish, and this was so foreign that I could not pursue it until I knew more about my own religion. This thought consistently kept me from turning to any other practice. But I didn’t move forward either. It took months until an incident occurred that utterly changed the course of my spiritual journey.

I was riding my bike to school one day. The path I took on that particular day was, shall we say, Divine Providence. In my backpack were application forms to teach English that fall in Mozambique. It had just been deemed the most wretched place on earth, and that was where I desired to begin my journey.

My plan was to teach there for a while, then travel, eventually making my way to Japan. My thoughts turned elsewhere as I passed the Jewish “Y” on Westbury Avenue. I saw children playing outside, and the following questions entered my mind: Is there really something different about them? What distinguishes them from any other group of children? What makes them Jewish?

My thoughts were interrupted as I made a left-hand turn and an oncoming car struck my bicycle, sending me flying into the air. It felt a lot like the springboard diving I had done for many years, but this landing was on concrete. Luckily, my hand broke my fall, not my helmetless head. My first thought was that I was going to miss my class. The doctor at the hospital informed me that I had fractured my wrist and would be in a cast for two to three months, impressing upon me how fortunate I was to have sustained only this injury. Plans for my trip were shelved.

During this time, my friend Claire’s mother had asked her daughter to invite some friends over on a Friday night, since she and her husband would be away and wanted “the house not to miss Shabbat.” Although at first completely uninterested, somehow Claire agreed. That Friday night at the table, there were four of us: Claire, Cara, myself and Jeremy, who was not Jewish.

We lit the Shabbat candles and made *kiddush*. (At this point, my Hebrew school background served me well.) Claire cut and passed the *challah*, just like her father did every Friday night. We ate a delicious Shabbat meal prepared by her mother, and sat at the table talking, just the four of us. Something quite mysterious occurred that Friday night, for in a matter of weeks each of us began our separate journeys back to Yiddishkeit in a most profound way.

Claire and Jeremy attended a talk on “Codes in the Torah” that Saturday evening which profoundly moved them. Soon after, Claire and Cara went on a Shabbaton. Within two months, Claire went off to Israel to learn, and Cara soon followed. Jeremy began reading and learning more about Judaism. I was not yet ready to take a step anywhere, and returned to my two roommates, one of whom was French Canadian and a practicing Buddhist, while the other was Italian and into New Age and the Chinese Book of Change.

Eventually, Jeremy started passing me some of his books. The first one was Adin Steinsaltz’s *The Thirteen Petalled Rose*. That was the ticket for me. It was the first time that I realized that Judaism, as a religion, was so deeply profound, mystical and philosophical. Mitzvot and the Torah were described in the most sublime and beautiful ways. It became apparent to me that life did have meaning, a plan and tremendous purpose. Judaism believed in reincarnation, souls, and everything I had been searching for elsewhere.

Although my parents were not equipped to answer my questions, I had always been grounded, attached to my Jewish roots. They had provided the link from one generation to the next, and I wanted to strengthen it. My parents had planted the seeds of Yiddishkeit, and I was about to take it to the next level. My mother ingrained in the family the importance of going to *shul* on the High Holidays, of having an open home, where guests were always welcome. T

hey gave me a strong set of principles regarding the value of honesty and hard work and of doing for others. My mother, the social activist of the family, always strongly voiced her opinion about social injustices. Coming from this environment, I was quite prepared to pursue whatever I believed in with total commitment.

The first mitzvot I attempted to observe were Shabbat and *kashrut*. Much to the dismay of friends and family, I jumped in with full intensity. I was single, with no real obligations to anyone, so it brought about… extreme change. To add to the fray, everyone wondered, more than anything else: was this a cult?

That Passover, I met Rabbi Moishe and Nechama New through Claire and Jeremy, who had already become acquainted with them. I became very close to the News and spent every Shabbat with them, truly feeling welcomed into the family. The atmosphere in their home was relaxed, welcoming, and non-judgmental. A world opened up to me that embraced the spiritual and physical in seamless harmony.

My interest in feminism was evolving. If Judaism was truth—eternal and G‑dly—then it had to be fair. G‑d could not be sexist. My endless questions and challenges posed to Rabbi New were answered with clarity, eloquence, and lots and lots of patience. Then it dawned on me that there were questions about women that had to be answered by a woman. Woman to woman. So, I asked Nechama more questions, observed her in action, and came to a remarkable conclusion.

I began to understand and appreciate that true feminism was embodied in the Jewish woman: active, self-assured, balanced, with a deep and intellectually profound sense of purpose. Nechama had shattered the stereotypes and misconceptions that I had held about the role of the Jewish woman. Society, and academia in particular, had vastly shortchanged women, largely ignoring and undermining the significance of our mothers and grandmothers in our lives. Throughout Jewish history and up to the present, they have been powerful role models. We, as Jewish women, do not need to reinvent ourselves. Our heroines are right in front of us.

Back in my home and universe, I felt I was living in two worlds: struggling in school with university courses, and falling in love with a Judaism I was reclaiming as my own. The dreaded question/accusation reared its ugly head: “You’re becoming *religious*?”

Try as I might, I could not convince anyone of the beauty and richness I was seeing unfold before me. Their born-in-the-wrong-era flower child/hippie/Eastern religion wannabe was becoming *religious*…. What was this socially active, sports-minded, career-minded idealistic socialist feminist doing? Running to *shul* on Shabbat? Praying? Wearing skirts? No one could reconcile the Anne they knew with the Chaya I had become. My guru ate kosher, had a beard, and wore a black hat and a *kapota* (long black coat).

Two months later, I was encouraged to go to Crown Heights, Brooklyn, for a weekend Shabbaton organized for people of diverse backgrounds. That weekend many wonderful things occurred, as did some moments where I found myself struggling. On Friday, after candle-lighting, Rabbi Manis Friedman gave a talk to women only. He was speaking of their inherent spiritual superiority to men.

My hand shot up within seconds. “Where are the men? Shouldn’t they also hear of our elevated status?” I was not shy. I listened, challenged, and listened some more. At one point during the service on Shabbat morning, I ran out of *shul* upset that the census described in the Torah reading included only men.

Shabbat day, after lunch, there was a panel discussion in someone’s home on the status of women in Judaism. I was impressed as speaker after speaker told their stories, how one was a *shlucha* (Chabad-Lubavitch emissary) in Florida, one was a stockbroker in Manhattan, and one was a teacher. These women, like Nechama, were self-assured and educated, and reflected a deep inner peace.

This was the rule, not the exception. I saw again and again that they embodied a feminism that was not compromised by their observance. In fact, it complimented it. I was quite relieved at the thought that I did not need to go to Mozambique after all.

One final story. My husband and I were living in London, Ontario, where he was in school, and we were helping the Blocks, the Rebbe’s *shluchim* to London. We had come in for Rosh Hashanah to be with my family in Montreal. I had cooked much of the food in London and was bringing it to my parents. I stopped at Bassie’s, proudly showing her all the food that I had prepared.

She looked at it and said, “It must be so hard.” I said, “Yeah, it was a lot of work; I think it will work out.” I will never forget her response. “I don’t mean hard for you . . . I mean for your parents.” It took a second and then I understood. I was busy with myself. Had I thought for a moment about my family and the compromises and effort they were going through, my mother in particular, trying to accommodate me? The lesson has stayed with me always, and I continue to learn from her daily.

I feel I am forever a *baal teshuvah*—one who returns to Jewish observance. The transmission of Torah values, the atmosphere we are to create in our homes, our marriages, our families, is a lifelong learning process. It has been twelve years since I started to become observant. With each year and each milestone—marriage, the birth of a child, a *bris*, my children’s education, the first *upshernish* (first ceremonial haircut of a boy, at age three), every *yom tov*, and all the daily challenges in my life—I am forever grateful for the ongoing support and encouragement from my friends, and most of all, from my family.

And by the way, Claire became Kreina; Cara became Bracha; and Jeremy became Yermiyahu, my husband.

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