**Shabbos Stories for**

**Parshas Nitzavim 5772**

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**Good Shabbos Everyone.**

**Milk and Honey**

 In last week's parsha, we read about some of the mitzvahs which are tied to the land of Eretz Yisroel. Part of the tithing-of-produce ceremony requires the person to make a declaration. As part of that declaration, the person asks Hashem: "Gaze down from Your holy abode, from the heavens, and bless Your people Yisroel, and the ground that You gave us, You swore to our forefathers, a land flowing with milk and honey." (Devorim 23,15) The following story illustrates this Brocha.

 Yaakov Chaziza has always lived on a moshav located on the border with Lebanon. Thus, his life has always been filled with worry about the possibility of an attack. He and his neighbors live every day knowing that at any minute they may have to grab their machine-guns and be called into action. Yaakov used to be the only religious person on the moshav. When the others played cards in the social hall in the evenings, he would be learning in the moshav's shul.

 As a farmer, he was, of course, careful about keeping all the halachos pertaining to farming and agriculture. For example, he kept the laws of orlah — not partaking of a tree's fruit during the first three years of its life — and Shemittah — letting the land rest in the seventh year.

 Aside from the plots he owned himself, he also owned a few plots in partnership with some local farmers, who were not religious. As a result, he would occasionally find himself in conflict with them about halachic issues. Usually, they were able to work things out; one time, however, they were not able to come to an agreement. That event would change the lives of the people on the moshav forever.

 As was normal for farmers in the area, Yaakov rented the farming equipment he needed each season. One year, one of his partners took charge of the rental without checking the day and date with Yaakov. The equipment was rented on a Friday, and had to be returned by Sunday morning, because the partners intended to do the work, which consisted of harvesting the crops, on Shabbos.

 For Yaakov, of course, this was completely unacceptable. He would never allow work to be done in his fields on Shabbos, and he begged his partners to push off the harvest to a later date. However, they would not give in to his wishes.

 In the end, the others' fields were harvested, while Yaakov's portion of the crop remained standing uncut. It had been a very bad year for the crops. The lack of significant rainfall had led to a poor return on the produce. The three other partners were happy to have salvaged at least a small portion of their fields. They mocked Yaakov and told him how foolish he had been to allow his crop to continue to grow. The inevitable result would be that Yaakov's entire crop would be lost.

 Yaakov ignored their taunting, knowing that he had done the right thing. Three weeks passed. During that time, it rained very hard — unusual for this time of year. As a result, Yaakov's crop flourished, and when he eventually harvested it he found that it far surpassed all his previous harvests. Not only that, but the yield was greater than that of his three partners put together. The other farmers were astonished!

 This time there was no doubting Yaakov or the laws he followed. Yaakov's harvest caused a tremendous buzz among the members of the moshav. They were inspired to begin a change of lifestyle and started learning Torah instead of sitting around playing cards. It started with a few men, but the number grew, and within a few weeks there was a large group learning Torah. It changed their lives, but they could never imagine just how much.

 It was a mere three weeks after Yaakov had begun his shiur. As the men left their makeshift beis midrash, happily discussing what they had learned, they heard a tremendous explosion. As soon as they realized it was a bomb, they all ran to their homes, afraid of what they would find. Their families were huddled together, shaking from fear; thankfully, there were no injuries or casualties.

 Upon checking the moshav for damage, they were shocked to find that the bomb had hit the very social hall where they had usually spent their weeknights, playing cards. But this week, they had been elsewhere, learning Torah with Yaakov. They hugged each other and thanked Hashem for sending them a messenger who had introduced them to the beauty, truth and salvation of Torah. (from A Touch of Warmth, p. 124, Reb Yechiel Spiro)

*Reprinted from last week’s email of Good Shabbos Everyone.*

**At GOP Convention, Have Kipas, Will Turn Heads**

**By Stewart Ain**

**Frum Lakewood contingent, led by leading Republican donor, gets rare access. Says one delegate: ‘Jewish conservatives?’**



**Several members of the Lakewood contingent hold**

**prayer service in Tampa hotel. Meyer L. Seeve**

 Tampa — Delegates to the Republican National Convention here this week were surprised to see men wear yarmulkes walking through the convention floor and mingling with other delegates.

 “People kept coming over to us all night and asking what we were doing here,” said Judah Ribiat. “We said we believe in the principles and values of the Republican Party. One of them asked, ‘How can we get the other 80 percent of Jews to join you?’”

 The men — 14 in all — were from Lakewood, N.J., and had come at the invitation of their synagogue president, Dr. Richard Roberts, who three months ago sold his generic drug company, Specialty Pharma Co., for $800 million and has long been a financial supporter of the Republican Party.

 “Our mission here is a Kiddush HaShem [the sanctification of G-d’s name] — it’s not for business interests,” said Roberts, a medical doctor who also has a doctorate in biophysics. “I told everybody that sometimes frum [observant] people need to show others how secularly and ‘with it’ we are. Our mission is to be our frum selves and to let people see what frum Jews are. And the reception has been overwhelmingly positive from many senators, governors and staff people, and from non-Jews who just come up to us to say hello.”

 He recalled one non-Jew coming up to him with “eyes wide open and saying, ‘Jewish conservatives?’ He was in shock.” (In fact, there were only eight Jews in the New York delegation.)

 One delegate, an ophthalmologist from Detroit, greeted Roberts warmly and said he believes that four years ago he and his wife were “the only Jews at the convention.”

 “I told him that as Orthodox Jews we have many of the same values as the Republican Party,” Roberts said, adding that he told someone who handed him a Romney button imprinted with the Star of David that he didn’t need such a button.

 “Because we wear yarmulkes, we don’t need buttons for people to identify us as Jews,” he explained.

 Because of Roberts’ support of the party and its candidates, the group has had private meetings with a who’s who of the Republican Party. On Monday, they met with Utah Sen. Orrin Hatch. On Wednesday, just hours after New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie delivered the convention’s keynote address, they sat down with Christie and 40 other governors for a lengthy meeting.

 Each has credentials to get into the convention. With the help of the local Chabad, they have had the use of a Torah all week and have conducted morning prayers in a hotel in Clearwater Beach, about an hour from the convention center. Roberts said he decided on the trip too late to book closer accommodations.

 They arranged to have kosher food sent to their hotel each day from kosher caterers in Tampa and Orlando. And each evening at 8 p.m., they hold afternoon and evening services in a private lounge reserved for the Republican Governor’s Association, a group dedicated to electing Republicans to governorships throughout the country. Richards is a member of the RGA’s executive roundtable. And they watch the convention from the floor or from a private skybox reserved for the Republican Governor’s Association.

 One of the group, Daniel Lemberg, stressed that they chose to become Republicans “because of a thought process; we’re not just fundamentalists blinding following a leader. Jews, as well as the Republican Party, should be affected by values and should consider whether it’s time to stop following blindly values they had without thinking about them.”

 Roberts, 55, who was raised as a Reform Jew in the Philadelphia suburb of Abington Township, is a baal teshuvah, a returnee to the faith who has embraced an observant lifestyle. He said he became frum at the age of 30 and five years later married a woman who grew up frum; they have six children and all were raised attending right-wing yeshivas in Lakewood.

 “I always felt a strong nationalistic attachment to the Jewish people, although I knew nothing about the religion,” he said after putting away his tallit and tefillin one morning.

 Roberts credits Rabbi Michael Skobac with helping him become a baal teshuvah. He said when their first child turn a year old, he and his wife decided to move from Yardley, Pa., to Lakewood because it had a “more developed frum community with kosher stores, shuls and yeshivas. … My oldest daughter is this year teaching Navi [the prophets] in a frum high school.”

 Although he said his parents were at first “reluctant” to see him choose this lifestyle, Roberts said that when he married and started having children “they both appreciated the superior quality of life and the relationships we had in my frum family.”

 Because of his success in the pharmaceutical business — his company was the only one to receive Food and Drug Administration approval to develop and market the gout drug colchicine under the Unapproved Drug Initiative — Roberts has given back to the Lakewood community. Four years ago he built a shul, Kolel Ner Avraham. It now has a membership of 130 men and boys who pay no dues; any contributions they make to the synagogue are given to the neighboring shul that had previously existed there. There is a waiting list for membership in his shul.

 Roberts’ contributions to politicians over the years got him into some difficulty only once. During the recall election campaign of Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker — a labor-backed effort to unseat him — Roberts sent him a $50,000 check.

 “What I didn’t realize was that five days before the election, Walker had to publish the names of his donors and the amounts they gave. I was the second largest donor. Two days later, I received threatening e-mails from pro-union advocates threatening my company and threatening me and accusing me of being anti-worker.

 One of the single mothers who joined my company as a secretary and is now in a significant management position was incensed that I was called anti-worker and said the opposite is true. So because of those e-mails, I immediately wired the Walker campaign another $50,000.”

 Roberts said Walker called him after winning the election and apologized for the threatening e-mails.

 “I said, ‘No apology needed, it’s not your fault.’ He said, ‘I guess you doubled down.’”

 Roberts said he told Walker that although many donors might expect something in return, “all I’m asking for is that he maintain his integrity because that is important for the country. I’m concerned about the future of this country and believe the Democrats are destroying the incentive for people to be productive, which also leads to decay in society.”

 “If you want to be kind to economically challenged people in the inner cities, giving them money to not work … is well intentioned but misguided. The Republican way is well intentioned and properly grounded to help people up.”

 This was the first national political convention any of the group ever attended. Larry Mandel said it was “good to be here and good to be seen — frum Jews participating in the political process. I don’t think we’d be here if we didn’t think we’d make a difference.”

*Reprinted from last week’s email of the AJOP (Association of Jewish Outreach Professionals) Update. The article originally appeared in the August 30, 2012 edition of Jewish Week (of New York.)*

**The Story of**

**Mahanoy City:**

**The Disappearance of a Jewish**

**Community in a Small American Town**

**By Rabbi Akiva Males**

*****A main street in present-day Mahanoy City. Photo: Wikipedia Commons/Doug Kerr***

 An Unusual Request. As Kesher Israel Congregation, the shul where I serve as the rabbi in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, is about a twenty-five minute drive from Hersheypark, I get a kick out of answering visitors’ questions each year around Sukkot time.

 During Chol Hamoed Sukkot this past year, however, my cell phone rang with a completely different kind of call.



***Mahanoy City’s Jewish community laid the cornerstone for Beth Israel Congregation in 1923. Today, the abandoned shul stands as a testimony to the small Jewish community that once existed there. Photos courtesy of Rabbi Males***

 “My grandfather passed away several days ago, and we’re looking for a rabbi who can officiate at his funeral. Can you help us?” asked a young Jewish woman whom I had never met.

 The night before the funeral, I met with the family and learned that the deceased had been born and raised in a small Jewish community that once existed in Mahanoy City (about an hour and a half northeast of Harrisburg). I was surprised to hear that he had lived there, as I had not known that Jewish communities—of any size—had once existed among Pennsylvania’s rough-and-tumble coal-mining towns.

 I made a mental note to find out more about the history of Mahanoy City’s now-vanished Jewish community. In the days that followed, I could not find any information online and decided that I would drive out to Mahanoy City to research the “old fashioned way.”

 Several weeks later, my wife Layala and I visited Mahanoy City. The town is rather small, and one can sense that with mining long gone, the town and its residents are in an economic depression.



***Tombstone of the sheimot of Beth Israel Congregation***

 ***in Mahanoy City’s Jewish cemetery, established in 1932.***

 We parked our car along the main street and walked into a small shop. The store owner had vague memories of a synagogue that once functioned in Mahanoy City, but she could not say where it was located. She gave us the name of the only Jewish woman still living in town and informed us that the woman’s late husband had owned a shirt factory that had employed many of the women in the town. She had fond memories of her long-gone Jewish neighbors, but was not able to help us any further.

 Stopping to speak with an elderly mechanic outside his shop, we discovered where the shul was located. We soon stood before a tall, narrow structure, locked and boarded up, perched on the corner of a modest block of row-houses. As we took in the sight, we were struck by how out of place the shul seemed to be.

 The words Congregation Beth Israel in Hebrew appeared prominently above the doors. The building’s other inscription was located on its cornerstone—1923. While gazing at the building, we imagined the excited crowd that must have been present almost ninety years earlier when the cornerstone was laid. Sadly, in 2011, nothing of that Jewish community remained.

 So many questions raced through my mind: When and why did Jewish families arrive in Mahanoy City? What was Jewish life like for the members of Congregation Beth Israel? Why did the shul shut its doors?

**The Last Jew of Mahanoy City**

 A passerby suggested we visit the woman up the block who was the last Jewish resident of Mahanoy City. We arrived at the modest home, noticed a mezuzah affixed to the doorpost and rang the bell. When nobody answered, a friendly neighbor emerged and asked if he could be of any help.

 I explained that we were in town hoping to learn more about Mahanoy City’s all but forgotten Jewish community. While he had no information to share, he assured us that he would pass on my contact information to his neighbor whom we were hoping to meet.

 Later that night, back at the hotel, I received a phone call from Mahanoy City’s last Jewish resident. We had a pleasant conversation, and she truly appreciated my interest in the history of her town’s Jewish community. While she provided me with additional leads and was able to answer a few of my questions, so many more remained unanswered.

 The next morning, I visited the town’s small, well-kept Jewish cemetery. Like the shul, the cemetery—with its Hebrew-engraved tombstones—seemed incredibly out of place.

One of the tombstones I came across marked the site where the shul had buried its sheimot in 1937.

 In the months that followed, I pursued many different leads in my quest to find out more about the history of the Jewish community of Mahanoy City. I spoke with several people who had grown up there. I also tracked down and spoke with the rabbi who served Mahanoy City’s Jewish community from 1948 to 1955 (he is now retired and living in Florida).

 What follows is a composite sketch of the Jewish community that once existed in Mahanoy City, based upon information I was able to dig up.

**Birth of a Jewish Community**

 Upon arriving in America in the late 1800s, many Jewish immigrants were faced with the same problem—earning a living. They were forced to peddle various goods, but the markets in the large immigrant centers were already saturated with peddlers.

 Many enterprising immigrants began searching for better locales to peddle their wares. Word spread that with so much less competition, a hard-working peddler in Pennsylvania’s small coal-mining towns had a better chance of making a living—and maybe even opening a successful store—than he could ever dream of back in the big cities.

 Before long, Jewish peddlers, shopkeepers, and small business owners became a common sight in the small towns throughout the coal-mining region. (I was repeatedly told, however, that no Jews ever became actual coal miners.) As more and more Jewish immigrants made their way to America’s welcoming shores, many joined their family members or friends from the “Old Country” in those locales. Small Jewish communities throughout the mountainous Pennsylvania coal region began to appear.

 One such community was in the small mining town of Mahanoy City. The Jewish peddlers and their children prospered and were respected by the town’s miners for their honesty, charity and work ethic. At the height of the town’s economic boom, a few Jewish-owned local clothing factories existed and employed many local miners’ wives. Traveling meshulachim making the rounds of the coal region’s small Jewish communities would stop in Mahanoy City.

 As Mahanoy City’s Jewish community never numbered more than about fifty families, its members did their best to socialize with and share as many events as possible with other small Jewish communities in the coal region—particularly Shenandoah and Frackville. A small three-story home was purchased and became Mahanoy City’s Jewish Community Center. Aside from housing a Hebrew school, the JCC also served as the hub for the Jewish community’s social and recreational activities.

 By 1923, Mahanoy City’s Jewish community was able to lay the cornerstone for a respectable new synagogue. The town’s Jewish cemetery was established in 1932.

 Sadly, for the most part, religious observance among many members of Mahanoy City’s Jewish community waned, similar to what occurred in so many other Jewish immigrant communities across the United States. 1

 For those who remained observant, traveling shochetim would make their way through the Jewish communities of the coal region to properly slaughter chickens. Though Mahanoy City never had its own mikvah, members would frequent the mikvah in nearby Hazleton, Pennsylvania. And most of the people I interviewed told me that their grandparents had two sets of dishes and would celebrate Pesach in a traditional manner.

**The Decline of a Community**

 By the late 1940s, the shul’s minyan only met consistently on Friday nights (about twenty-five to thirty people attended) and Sunday mornings (followed by a light breakfast). The Shabbat morning minyan only attempted to meet every other week, and even that was a challenge.

 As Sabbath observance declined in Mahanoy City, it became ever more difficult for the shul to continue its Shabbat morning minyan. One man told me that as a young boy in the 1940s, he was a regular at shul on Shabbat mornings. If they did not have the requisite ten men for the minyan, some of the older congregants would send him next door to telephone one of the nearby Jewish-owned factories. The factory owners would permit the precise number of men needed to temporarily leave work in order to assist the shul’s struggling minyan.

 By the mid-1950s, the balcony was no longer in use. Men and women sat in the main sanctuary—with no mechitzah between—and Congregation Beth Israel aligned itself with the Conservative movement. 2

 By the late 1950s, Mahanoy City’s Jewish community began its rapid decline. As the synagogue’s membership fell, the shul could only afford to hire a rabbi for the High Holy Days. Congregation Beth Israel gave up trying to organize regular services by the 1970s. With the building used so infrequently, in 2003 the few remaining members sold off the synagogue’s sifrei Torah and stained glass windows, and the doors were locked and boarded up.

 How many more vanished American Jewish communities like Mahanoy City are out there? How many more are there yet to be?

 Though it has been less than 100 years since its cornerstone was laid, no one officially owns Congregation Beth Israel’s building anymore. As it is too expensive for the city to tear the structure down, the abandoned shul with its Hebrew inscriptions stands as a matzeivah (tombstone) of sorts to the Jewish community that once existed.

 The families of those buried in Mahanoy City’s Jewish cemetery are putting together a plan to ensure its upkeep.

**The Death of a Community**

 What caused Mahanoy City’s Jewish community to decline and eventually disappear? When I asked that question to the people I interviewed, I received the same answers:

 1) The older generation passed away.

 2) The younger generation left for schooling and better job opportunities.

 3) As the country moved away from using coal as a fuel, local mining operations all but ceased, and the region’s economy declined. With so few economic opportunities in the area, no new Jewish families moved in to replace those who had left.

 The more I learned about the history of Mahanoy City’s Jewish community, the more I realized how its story mirrors that of so many smaller Jewish communities that once existed across America.

 Recently, I noticed this item in Harrisburg’s Jewish newspaper:

 *Throughout the United States, Jewish communities sprung up as itinerant merchants (“peddlers”) settled to provide goods for local areas. Small towns throughout the nation had main streets lined with Jewish businesses. Each of these communities had synagogues and Jewish cemeteries.*

 *Throughout Pennsylvania, Jewish communities thrived as the steel mills, coal mines, and shmata (clothing) factories provided solid economic bases for local Jewish merchants.*

 *But times change. Mining, steel making, and clothing manufacturing are all but gone from the area. “Main Street” has been replaced by Wal-Mart and the shopping mall filled with national chain stores. The Jewish-owned small business is a fast dying memory.*

 *The offspring of the merchants of these towns had no reason to return to the communities following their college years. Instead, they migrated to the major communities, leaving the old towns with one or two, or, in many instances, no Jewish families remaining . . .* 3

 Though other factors certainly play a role, the fate of any Jewish community is tied to its local economy. This is especially true of Orthodox communities whose membership requires a mikvah, day school, and consistent minyan. None of those institutions can be sustained without a critical mass of community members willing to maintain them.

 Since I began researching Mahanoy City’s Jewish community, I find myself haunted by the following questions: How many more vanished American Jewish communities like Mahanoy City are out there? How many more are there yet to be?

 **Notes**

 1. For an excellent article dealing with religious observance among Jewish immigrants and their descendants, see Jeffrey S. Gurock, “The Winnowing of American Orthodoxy” in *American Jewish Orthodoxy in Historical Perspective* (New Jersey, 1996), 299-312.
 2. For a sense of just how common this phenomenon was in America at that time, see Baruch Litvin, *Sanctity of the Synagogue* (New Jersey, 1987).
 3. Howard Ross, “The Cemeteries are Dying!” *Community Review*, November 19, 2010, page 4.

*Rabbi Akiva Males serves as rabbi of Harrisburg’s Kesher Israel Congregation, an OU-member synagogue. He and his wife Layala moved from Kew Gardens Hills, New York to Pennsylvania in 2007*.

**Adopting Our Daughters**

**In the Footsteps of Moses**

**By Rabbi Chaim Bruk**

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| Rabbi Bruk with his wife Chavie and their two daughters. |

**Rabbi Bruk with his wife**

**Chavie and their two daughters**

 Growing up, I enjoyed over one hundred first cousins, and loved our hectic family gatherings. Jewish tradition encourages having children, many children. The first commandment of the Torah (Bible) is “Be fruitful and multiply.” We consider every child to be of infinite value and a source of immense blessings. Having more than one or two children has its burdensome challenges, but we are taught that it’s absolutely worth it.

**Married Under a Gorgeous Texas Sky**

 On March 22, 2006, I stood under the gorgeous Texas sky, mere moments before placing the ring on my beautiful bride Chavie’s finger, and I was dreaming. With my eyes closed and my thoughts heaven-bound, I prayed and hoped that we too would merit G‑d’s blessings and—like our friends and almost every other young Orthodox Jewish couple—together raise our very own family, a home in which for the next twenty years dirty diapers, crying, and of course lots of smiles is the way of life.

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| Rabbi Bruk with his wife Chavie and their two daughters. |

From a medical standpoint it would

be impossible for us to bear children

 Evidently, it’s not always so simple.

 After consulting with world-renowned infertility specialists, and after various medical procedures, we were informed in June of 2008 that from a medical standpoint it would be impossible for us to bear children. While the news was devastating, we remained strong and—guided by the teaching of our mentor Rabbi Menachem Schneerson, of blessed memory—were determined to turn this unfortunate situation into a blessing.

 If one hasn’t experienced adoption, it’s hard to appreciate the gift that it is. It’s a heavenly experience, where one feels G‑d’s guidance along every step of the way.

 On Tuesday, November 10, 2009, our first angel, Chaya, came into our life. She was born in Russia, nine weeks premature; we met her in New Jersey, embraced her, and haven’t stopped smiling since. Less than one year later, on October 3, 2010, we welcomed our second baby, Zeesy—born in the U.S.A.—who has added even more joy to our life. Their love for each other is overflowing, despite the occasional fight over a toy; they share a bedroom, and really can’t get enough of each other.

 As a rabbi who believes in the absolute truth of the Torah, it’s this ancient wisdom that gives me insight regarding all matters of life, including adoption. Less is more, and the few tidbits shared by the Torah regarding adoption are extremely powerful and inspirational.

 Moses and Esther are two figures in the Torah who were adopted. In 1393 BCE, when the wicked Pharaoh, king of the Egyptian empire, decreed that all Jewish male babies are to be drowned in the Nile River, his very own daughter Bityah found a hidden newborn Jewish boy. She rescued him, adopted him, raised him in Pharaoh’s palace, and even named him Moshe (Moses)!

 Similarly, in the book of Esther, we read about Mordechai adopting his young cousin Esther in 402 BCE, raising her, caring for her—and eventually she goes on to become the queen of Persia, who saved the day in the miraculous story of Purim.

While my original dream only included the biological option

for family building, G‑d’s ways are mysterious and vast

 So, while my original dream only included the biological option for family building, G‑d’s ways are mysterious and vast. G‑d has a plan for every couple: for biological parents it includes birth pangs, hormonal changes and physical recovery, and for adoptive parents it’s the test of patience, the worry of the unknown and the drastic emotional roller coaster. Most couples are given G‑d’s natural blessings; it’s only certain ones whom G‑d gifts with the even loftier, perhaps supernatural blessing of adoption.

 Yes, Chavie and I still hope and pray every day for medical advancements that will gift us with biological children; why not try that avenue as well? But it takes a lot more than DNA to raise a beautiful family. Chavie and I know full well that adoption has its rough moments, but it’s a unique gift, saved for only a select few, who I believe are handpicked by G‑d for this special task.

 Chaya and Zeesy bring us joy and blessing 24/7, and we thank G‑d every day not only for bringing them to us, but for doing so with miracles upon miracles.

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