**Shabbos Stories for**

**Parshas Shemini 5772**

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**All Beginnings Are Difficult**

**By Rabbi Label Lam**

 And now if you will heed My voice and you will keep My covenant - you will be to Me a treasure from amongst all the nations for the earth is Mine. (Shemos 19:5)

 And now: If now you will accept upon yourselves, it will be sweet for you from here and further, because all beginnings are difficult. (Rashi)

**What Does Rashi Mean?**

 Prior to the event of the giving of the Torah the Jewish Nation was strongly encouraged to be in a ready and accepting mode. Like a strong sales pitch they were pressed to commit now and guaranteed that later everything would be great. What is it that creates the urgency and the need for such a pressured approach? What does Rashi mean when he says, “all beginnings are difficult”? Which “beginnings” is he talking about?

 At the end of a Talmud class in Queens we were just winding down from the learning and feeling good, when one of the fellows said something that sparked a lively discussion. He said, “Rabbi, I hate getting up in the morning to go to Davening!”

**Agreeing with the Complainer**

 I think he thought he was going to shock me with his rugged admission. Some of the other fellows started to stir in defense of prayer but I stayed still, because I agreed with him. I told him that I also hate to get up in the morning to go to Davening. “Who likes to go out from under warm covers to go to shul when the body is crying out for a little more slumber?”

 Napoleon is reputed to have said, “When I’m awake I’m Napoleon but when I’m asleep I’m a horse!” The most powerfully motivated man on the planet is conflicted at that moment It can be difficult for anybody.

 However, when already awake and in the midst of Davening almost nothing in the world feels as good. It also feels great to have Davened. Similarly, those who exercise formally may find it painfully difficult to get started each time but what gets one going sometimes is the feeling of accomplishment, the high that follows when the hard workout is done.

**The Rebbe and His Son**

 There’s a story about a Rebbe and his son that were breaking a hole through an icy lake in order to immerse themselves for purity sake. The son entered the freezing waters first. As he braced himself for the entry cries of anguish could already be heard which grew in to shouts of biting pain. “Ouch!” When he exited the frigid lake he let loose an expression of relief, “AHHHHHH!”

 His wise father who was yet to follow told him, “My son, you should always remember that that’s how it is with Mitzvos! They start out “Ouch! Ouch!” and end up “Ooooooh Ahhhhhhhhh!” Aveiros- sins, on the other hand, usually start out “Oooooooooooh! Ahhhhhhhhh!, but end up with the feeling “Ouch! Ouch!”

**Utilizing Work and Imagination**

 Which “beginnings” are difficult? Rashi tells us straight, “All beginnings are difficult.” At the beginning of each day and sometime hundreds of times a day there are new little beginnings that, in order to overcome that initial pinch of “ouch” require thinking about the “Oooooo! Ahhhhhhhh!”-that follows each minor accomplishment. It may yet become an acquired taste but that takes work and imagination. Once the great weight of inertia is overcome, anticipated is the sweet taste of victory.

*Reprinted from the Parshas Yisro5772 email of Shabbos Candle Lighting.*

**Story #750**

**Look at the Pot**

**From the desk of Yerachmiel Tilles**

[**editor@ascentofsafed.com**](http://webmailb.juno.com/webmail/new/8?folder=Inbox&msgNum=00018S00:001FXLS400001c%5e9&block=1&msgNature=all&msgStatus=all&count=1334175670&randid=797496658&content=central)

 Word went out that a well-known Jewish professional lecturer on Torah subjects was seen frequently in the company of Jewish men who had thrown off the yoke of Torah and mitzvot. In short, the speaker did not practice what he preached.

 One day, this speaker arrived in the city of Brisk, where Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik was the chief rabbi and rosh yeshiva. Upon confirmation of the man's doubtful behavior, the Rabbi forbade him to speak in any synagogue in the city.

Wants to Know Why the Rav

Forbade His to Speak in Brisk

 Immediately, the speaker came to the rabbi and said, "Please, let the Rav come hear me speak. That will prove that I am 100 percent kosher. From beginning to end, my entire speech is filled with wisdom culled from works of Torah ethics and values that have been accepted among our people for generations. Why, then, does the Rav forbid me to speak in the shuls of Brisk?"

 "Even if your words are true and correct," Rabbi Chaim answered, "I will not change my mind and let you speak in this city. You are no doubt aware that even if meat is slaughtered by an experienced authorized Jewish slaughterer and koshered in accordance with every requirement of Jewish law, if it is then cooked in a treif pot, the meat becomes completely un-kosher.

A Negative Influence on Others

 "Similarly, concepts that emerge from the mouth of a man lacking fear of Heaven will inevitably have a negative influence on those who hear them."

 Source: Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from "Stories my Grandfather Told Me" (Mesorah) by Zev Greenwald.

 Connection: Weekly Reading “kosher meat.

 Biographic note: Rabbi Chayim HaLevi Soloveitchik (1853 - 21 Av 1918) succeeded his father as chief rabbi and rosh yeshiva of Brisk in 1892. His analytical methodology revolutionized the in-depth study of Talmud until this day.

 *Reprinted from last week’s email of KabbalaOnline.org, a project of Ascent of Safed*

*www.ascentofsafed.com*

**Mob Rules**

**By Nathan Burstein**

 Former Gambino family associate Louis Ferrante recounts his transformation from violent criminal to observant Jew.

 Most ex-mobsters don’t keep kosher or observe Shabbat — but then, most ex-mobsters don’t convert to Judaism in prison, or go on to donate their time speaking to Jewish educators.



 Louis Ferrante, clearly, isn’t your typical ex-mobster. After years of criminal activity and nearly a decade in prison, the former associate of the Gambino crime family is now living what he calls “the right way” — a lifestyle that includes quality time each day with his siddur and tefillin, and writing books about his past. The transformation appears to have paid off — Ferrante’s most recent book, “[Mob Rules](http://www.amazon.com/Mob-Rules-Mafia-Legitimate-Businessman/dp/1591843987/friendsofaishat),” has been translated into 11 languages, netting him appearances on “The Daily Show” and earning him shared speaking engagements with Nobel Prize winners and the dean of Harvard Business School.

 “I didn’t know what I was going to say as I was walking out on the stage,” Ferrante says of last year’s Human Potential conference in New York City, organized by the Economist. “There are Nobel laureates, CEOs of major companies, and I have to turn my mafia experiences into something that will go well in front an Economist audience.”

**Recalling G-d’s Words to Moses**

 “But,” he recalls, “I reminded myself of what G-d told Moses: ‘I will be thy words.’”

 Whoever did the [speaking](http://ideas.economist.com/video/lessons-mafia) that day, the performance appears to have been a hit, for the same reasons Ferrante’s story has proven irresistible to book buyers and an ever-widening set of audiences at his speaking engagements.

 Born and raised in Queens, Ferrante, now 42, entered organized crime as a teenager, a story he tells in his first book, “Unlocked,” which recounts his years “sticking guns in people’s mouths and hijacking trucks” for the Gambino family.

**Doesn’t Glamorize His Criminal Past**

 Although the book is full of mafia-style color — characters named Bobby Butterballs and Tony Porkchop, for example — it doesn’t glamorize Ferrante’s violent history or glorify his work in organized crime. Subtitled “*A Journey From Prison to Proust*,” the book instead focuses mostly on Ferrante’s jailhouse discovery of literature, philosophy and music, a revelation that led him to abandon his earlier life of violence and theft.

**His Unlikely Embrace of Judaism**

 Capping off the redemption story is Ferrante’s unlikely embrace of Judaism, the result of a lengthy exploration of the major religions.

 Capping off the redemption story is Ferrante’s unlikely embrace of Judaism, the result of a lengthy exploration of the major religions.

 “I read the Gospels, the Koran, the Bhagavad Gita, and studied Buddhism,” he writes. “But the Old Testament (the Torah) was the book for me.”

 “I decided to take a close look at the Jewish people… the first to receive the Bible,” he goes on. “After all, could G-d have picked the wrong horse?”

 The answer, Ferrante ultimately concludes, was no, leading him to intensively study the religion and adopt its customs, despite early skepticism from prison chaplains.

 Fourteen years later, and nearly a decade since his release, Ferrante describes himself as “modern Orthodox or ultra-Conservative.”

**Keeps Shabbos, Eats Kosher, Davens and Reads Torah**

 “I keep Shabbos like an Orthodox person,” he says. “I keep kosher, I daven, I lay tefillin. I read Torah in the morning and at night.”

 Speaking by phone from the Catskills — where he lives partly to avoid running into old Gambino family associates — Ferrante discusses Judaism with the zeal of the convert he is. “You’re a Jew when you wake up in the morning, regardless of if you pick up a Torah or not,” he says, referring to those born into the religion. In an echo of Hillel, he asks, “But if I don’t do that, what am I?”

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**(photo credit used in graphic: Patrick Smith)**

 In the past year, Ferrante’s professional focus has switched to “[*Mob Rules*](http://www.amazon.com/Mob-Rules-Mafia-Legitimate-Businessman/dp/1591843987/friendsofaishat),” a follow-up memoir released in 2011. Subtitled “*What the Mafia Can Teach the Legitimate Businessman*,” the book offers 90 short chapters that humorously find lessons in his unusual past. (“Lesson 62: The Mafia Spends Very Little on Office Supplies: Cutting Overhead.”)

 Though the book is primarily geared toward a business audience, it contains enough surprising asides to make it fun for a wider readership. A running theme, even if it’s not explicitly emphasized, is the mafia’s flexibility and even occasional progressiveness, on issues ranging from race to “green” energy, which he argues can all be good for the bottom line.

 With its pithy packaging and unconventional author, “Mob Rules” has earned notice in a variety of venues. In addition to Ferrante’s participation in the Economist conference — where fellow speakers included another ex-con, Martha Stewart — the book has earned him a pair of appearances on “The Daily Show,” which used his criminal bona fides to satirize certain policies at Bank of America.

**Makes an Exception for Jewish Audiences**

 Ferrante now commands significant fees for most speaking engagements, but says he makes an exception for Jewish audiences, addressing them for free or for just the cost of expenses. A speech at a Jewish summer camp, of all places, led to his appearance last month at Limmud NY, a four-day gathering focused on Jewish learning. “I get paid pretty well for speaking now and swore to myself that I wouldn’t do any more freebies,” the ex-gangster says, “but I figured it’s a mitzvah.”

**Nothing In Common Anymore**

**With Past Criminal Associates**

 While probation officers initially warned him against meeting with criminals from his past, he’s not being hunted, and isn’t risking trouble by writing. On the rare occasions when he crosses paths with an old colleague during a visit to Queens, “I say hello and goodbye, but I keep moving because I don’t have anything in common with them anymore,” he says. “They don’t like me writing books, that’s not enough to send a hit team after me — I never gave up anyone for crimes.”

 That’s not ordinary talk from a “modern Orthodox” Jew, but Ferrante says his religious devotion is what has made his new life possible. “It’s important to me to get that across to any Jews I talk to,” he says. “I do know some who are very religious, and many more who aren’t, and sometimes it pains me because they’re missing a lot.”

*This article originally appeared in a recent issue of* [*The Times of Israel*](http://www.timesofisrael.com/)*.*

**Too Good to Be Good**

**Told by Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak of Lubavitch**

 At a chassidic get-together *(farbrengen)* held in the early years of Chabad Chassidism, Reb Shmuel Munkes was doing the honors. The merry chassid danced about the participants, pouring the vodka and serving the *farbeisen*—the food to follow the *l’chayims*.

 Among the dishes which had arrived from the kitchen of Reb Nosson the *shochet* was a bowl of roasted lung, a most tasty delicacy. But for some reason, Reb Shmuel was reluctant to part with this particular dish. Throughout the evening he pranced about, pouring the *l’chayims* and serving the food, with the bowl of roasted lung snug and elusive under his arm, deftly sidestepping all attempts to free it from his grasp.

 Soon the chassidim grew weary of Reb Shmuel’s game, and demanded outright that he hand over the bowl and its mouth-watering contents. But the waiting chassid ignored their angry demands and kept up his dodging dance. Finally, a few of the younger chassidim decided that Reb Shmuel’s prank had gone on long enough. They rose from the table, and soon the bowl and its bearer were cornered. But with a final leap and twist, Reb Shmuel dumped the roasted lung into the spittoon, and broke out in a merry kazatzka dance.

 The younger chassidim sat down to consider the gravity of Reb Shmuel’s crime, and decreed that a few well-placed stripes were in order. Without batting an eye, Reb Shmuel stretched himself out on the table and received his due. He then set out in search of more *farbeisen* to keep the *farbrengen* going. But the hour was late, and the best he could come up with was a plate of pickled cabbage donated by one of the residents of Liozna.

 Upon seeing the replacement dish, the expressions on the faces of those who had already imagined the taste of roasted lung grew as sour as the kraut set before them. But soon a commotion was heard in the hallway.

 The town’s butcher ran in, a most stricken look on his face. “Jews! Don’t eat the lung!” he cried. “There has been a terrible mistake.” It seems that the butcher was out of town, and the butcher’s wife mistakenly gave the *shochet*’s wife a non-kosher lung to roast for the *farbrengen*.

 Now it was the elder chassidim who sat in judgment upon Reb Shmuel. The audacity of a chassid to play the wonder-rabbi! By what rights had Reb Shmuel taken it upon himself to work miracles? Up onto the table with you, Reb Shmuel, decreed the court.

 After receiving his due for the second time that evening, Reb Shmuel explained: “G‑d forbid, I had no ‘inside information’ regarding the roasted lung. But when I entered into *yechidut* (private audoience) with the Rebbe for the first time, I resolved that no material desire would ever dictate to me. So I trained myself not to allow anything physical to overly attract me.

 “When the bowl of roasted lung arrived, I found that my appetite was most powerfully roused. I also noticed that the same was true of many around the table. To be so strongly drawn by a mere piece of meat? I understood that something was not right.”

 Translated by Yanki Tauber in Once Upon A Chassid (Kehot, 1994).

*Reprinted in this week’s email of Chabad.Org Magazine.*

**I am Real**

**By Charlie Harary**

 Living with G-d is NOT just having an idea or a belief that He exists. It’s having a relationship with Him.

 How do you have a relationship with G-d?

 There are two basic building blocks to any healthy relationship:

 First: You need two parties – it sounds simplistic, but it’s true.

 If you’re sitting around one day and your friend says, “I have a wonderful girl for you, she’s exactly what you’re looking for and she’s interested in you.” No matter how great it sounds, it’s not a relationship until you actually meet and find out for yourself.

 Second: Free choice. Both parties need to freely choose each other. Forcing somebody to be with you isn’t much of a relationship. Two people choosing to be together is the paradigm of a great relationship.

 We have a problem. Since G-d is not physical, we can’t sense Him. How do we have a relationship if we don’t know He exists? Is He here? Is He in the sky? Does He hear me? For us to develop a relationship with G-d we need to know (not just believe) He is real.

 But… The more He reveals Himself, or proves He exists, the less choice we have to be with Him. Should He ever say, “Hello,” at breakfast one morning, we’d be so awestruck by His presence that we would be incapable of choosing not to have a relationship with Him.

 But should He not reveal Himself, then we won’t know He is real. Fulfilling one pre-requisite kills the other. What does He do? He walks the fine line of proven existence and free choice. How? Let’s start at the beginning.

 The first chapter of Jewish history is quite strange. Jews were slaves in Egypt. G-d instructed Moshe to ask Pharaoh for permission to take the Jews out of Egypt.

 That doesn’t make any sense – G-d wanted to start a nation and needed Pharaoh, who He created, to give Him permission? He is G-d! He could have told Moses that at 9 A.M. Tuesday morning it’s going to get dark, gather the people and leave. The Jews could have been eating falafel in Jerusalem before the lights went back on in Egypt. Why the back and forth with Pharaoh?

 Egypt wasn’t just a country. It was the epicenter of civilization. Exodus wasn’t just to get the Jews out; it was a platform for G-d to reveal Himself to the world. And 10 plagues later even Pharaoh knew G-d existed. And it got better. Days after leaving Egypt, He split a sea.

 Then, to “seal the deal” a few weeks later, G-d revealed himself to a nation of two million people. Not to an elite few. Not to Moses on a mountain. To everyone!

 At that moment, G-d wasn’t theoretical. He wasn’t an idea or an image. He was real. The relationship had begun.

 To make sure the Exodus experience is never forgotten, G-d created a mechanism for us to remember it. Each year, at the Passover Seder, we recall the event and share it with our children. So at the Seder, millions of parents pass down the same story that they received from their parents, who received from their parents, all the way back to the event itself.

 The first principal of G-d awareness is based on the source “Anochi Hashem Elokeicha Asher Hotzeitcha M’eretz Mitzrayim” – “I Am Hashem, Your G-d, Who took you out of Egypt.”

 G-d is saying, I am real.

 But, we can do more than just look to a specific event to find G-d.

 Look at Jewish history: Mark Twain famously asked: “What is the secret of the Jews’ immortality?” We should ask the same question: How did Jews survive and thrive through generations of exile and persecution?

 Look at nature: We are begged to look beyond the “how” and ask why? I know how my body works, but why does it work so wondrously? Why are all the millions of parts so in sync? Could it all be by chance? I know how the world works, but why? Why does each aspect seem to fit perfectly into the larger design and should anything alter even slightly, we would be doomed.

 Nature is a great tool for G-d since it allows us to lose focus on the terminology of how or choose to recognize the awesomeness of why. That’s part of G-d’s plan – to give us the choice to find Him, should we want to. To see Him in Exodus, in history, in nature, everywhere. Or, not to.

 The first mitzvah is to know G-d is real and choose to have a relationship with Him.

Reprinted from the April 16, 2012 email of info@thesixconstantmitzvos.com

**The Yiddish Language**

**Alive in... Japan?**

**By Rachel Hirshfeld**

 A Japanese linguist, who has spent decades compiling the world's first Yiddish-Japanese dictionary, has proved that one does not have to be Jewish in order to love Yiddish.

 “It was in the hills of Kyushu Island in southern Japan where Kazuo Ueda carried out his impressive and quixotic quest, devoting his life to a language few Jews understand, and even fewer Japanese have even heard of,” National Public Radio (NPR) reported.

 Ueda, who originally specialized in German, is now Japan's leading scholar of Yiddish.

 "Yiddish was full of puzzles for me," Ueda says. "That's what I love about it. Reading sentences in those strange letters — it's like deciphering a code."

 Since Ueda was isolated from actual speakers of the language, Ueda immersed himself in Yiddish newspapers and literature.

 His magnum opus, the 1,300-page, 28,000-entry Idishugo Jiten, or Yiddish-Japanese dictionary, was published several years ago, notes NPR. Ueda’s publisher refused to release details but said that the sales of the dictionary, which coasts more than $700, are expected to be extremely low.

 "Every day, he would sit down to work on his dictionary right after breakfast. He never took any time off," said Ueda’s wife. "But for him, this wasn't work but sheer joy. So I thought, this is the way things had to be."

 Jack Halpern, a Yiddish-speaking resident of Japan and one of Ueda’s great admirers said the passion of the Japanese linguist often baffles Jews.

 By taking on Yiddish, Ueda grappled with a language that defies easy translation because of its many culturally specific words. "You can translate it, but you can't translate the connotation, the feeling, around the word," says Halpern. "There's something about shlimazel, that when you say it in Yiddish, it's the right language to say it in."

 However, Ueda has no regrets. "I wrote it purely for the pursuit of learning," he says. "I don't expect a wave of people to start learning Yiddish," he says.

*Reprinted from the April 17, 2012 email of Arutz Sheva (Israelnationalnews.com)*

**Pantheism and Judaism**

**The London Controversy**

**By Rabbi Tzvi Freeman**

 David Nieto was a brilliant scholar, a wise doctor, a true community leader and a righteous man. But I doubt he knew what he was getting into when he accepted the post as rabbi of the Spanish-Portuguese congregation in London at the dawn of the 18th century. And who knows if he had any idea of the controversy he would spark.

**A Country Obsessed with Science**

 Rabbi Nieto arrived in England to find a country obsessed with science. Sir Isaac Newton had established firm laws of nature, and Sir Robert Boyle was busy enforcing them. Indeed, Mother Nature had taken on a new life all of her own, and was touted as the heir apparent as supreme deity. Taking a cue from the writings of Baruch Spinoza, John Toland had coined the term “pantheism,” challenging the dualist nature of Christianity and proclaiming that nature alone and not G‑d was to be worshipped. The laws of nature were declared to be absolute and fundamental to reality. The old “Abrahamic” G‑d, with all His personal likes and dislikes, was to be retired in favor of a world run by nothing other than “natural law.”

**An Historic Shabbat**

**Afternoon Lecture**

 So it happened that one November Shabbat afternoon in 1703, Rabbi Nieto stood on the podium in the grand Bevis Marks Synagogue and addressed the congregation. Something like this:

 “My beloved brethren, listen to me clearly, and know that what I am going to say is a fundamental belief of our people, as it has been since we were founded. There is no such thing as nature. The word simply does not exist in the Hebrew language. About 500 years ago or so, some people took the word *teva* and decided to use it to describe what they called the laws of nature. But in truth, no such thing exists. King David [writes in his Psalms](http://www.chabadgsb.com/article.asp?AID=16368#v7) that G‑d ‘covers the sky with clouds and prepares rain for the ground.’ Indeed, G‑d is nature, and nature is none other than G‑d.”

**Accused of Being a Pantheist**

 At which point one of the most prestigious members of that congregation, Joshua Zarfatti, began to fume. From that day on, he refused to even enter a building in which “the heretic rabbi” stood. “A pantheist in our midst!” he cried, rallying supporters against the rabbi. “We must rid our community of this evil disease!”

 Rabbi Nieto did not back off an inch, and actually published his words in a book the following year, which he called *Della Divina Providencia*. London burned with that controversy until August of 1705, when [Rabbi Tzvi Ashkenazi](http://www.chabadgsb.com/library/article_cdo/aid/112072/jewish/Rabbi-Tzvi-Ashkenazi-Chacham-Tzvi.htm), esteemed and respected halachic authority of Altona, responded to the congregation’s request to adjudicate the matter. [His response](http://chabadlibrarybooks.com/pdfpager.aspx?req=829&pgnum=27) came in the form of a letter cosigned by two other rabbinical judges of Altona, and it exonerates Rabbi Nieto entirely.

 Rabbi Ashkenazi cites classic sources to support Nieto, such as the *Kuzari* of Rabbi Yehudah Halevi, where he writes that “G‑d, blessed be He, is the one who is called nature in truth,” since G‑d is the one who (in the words of the Talmud) “nurtures every creature, from the largest horned mammals to the tiniest insects.” He points out that several Kabbalistic works have noted the numerical equivalence of G‑d’s name *Elokim* and the word used for the nature of things, *ha-teva*. In sum, he writes, “We must thank the consummate scholar R. David Nieto, whom G‑d preserve, for the sermon he preached to warn the people not to allow themselves to be led away by the opinion of the philosophers who talk about nature, because great injury arises therefrom, and he enlightens the eyes with the true belief, which is that everything comes from the providence of G‑d.”

 Was Nieto a pantheist? Certainly not—and he makes that point very clear in his book. His G‑d, the G‑d of Israel, can not be equated with the Creation itself, which He transcends entirely. But neither was Nieto a dualist, nor a deist. G‑d is not separate from nature or the world He has made. Nature is G‑d working in consistent patterns, and limiting Himself, so to speak, to the parameters He has set for each thing.

 In effect, nature is nothing more than [G‑d playing within His own game](http://www.chabadgsb.com/multimedia/kabbala_toons/default_cdo/aid/1255322/jewish/Isifier-Tutorial-Investmentization.htm).

*Reprinted from this week’s email of Chabad.Org Magazine.*

**It Once Happened**

**The Command**

**To Eat a Bagel!**

 A severe decree was being formulated against the Jews. Rabbi Menachem Mendel, known as the "Tzemach Tzedek" (the third Lubavitcher Rebbe), sent his youngest son, Reb Shmuel (later known as the Rebbe Maharash) to Petersburg in an attempt to get the decree rescinded. Traveling with Reb Shmuel was his older brother Reb Yehuda Leib, twenty years Reb Shmuel's senior.

 Before commencing the journey, Reb Shmuel insisted that Reb Yehuda Leib agree not to bless anyone during their trip. "Our father is the Rebbe and he is the only one who should give people blessings," he declared. Having no other choice, Reb Yehuda Leib agreed to these conditions.

 In every town they visited along the way, people converged on Reb Yehuda Leib. They begged him, as the son of such a great tzadik (righteous person), to give them a blessing for health, a living, children, etc. To each person, Reb Yehuda Leib replied, "Go visit my father, surely he will bless you."

 In one particular village, there was a woman who was especially persistent. She had not been blessed with children and was certain that, with the blessing of a tzadik (righteous person), she would indeed merit to have children of her own.

**The Woman Begged and**

**Pleaded for a Blessing**

 The woman stationed herself in front of Reb Yehuda Leib. She begged and pleaded, screamed and cried that he must bless her to have children. But still Reb Yehuda Leib refused to bless the woman. "Go to my father, the Rebbe," he stated simply. "Surely he will bless you."

 The woman was not satisfied with this answer. She continued to cry out to Reb Yehuda Leib that he should bless her. Finally, at wit's end, Reb Yehuda Leib said, "Go to my brother. Perhaps he will bless you."

 The woman repeated the entire scene in front of Reb Shmuel. She begged and pleaded, cried and screamed that Reb Shmuel bless her to have children. But nothing could move Reb Shmuel. He insisted that only his father, the Rebbe, could do anything for the woman. Seeing that she would not take "no" for an answer, Reb Shmuel told his brother and the carriage driver to get ready to leave. They quickly got into the carriage to begin their journey home and away from the woman.

**The Carriage Didn’t Budge**

 But the carriage didn't budge. The woman had cleverly placed a stick in the spokes of the wheels to keep them from turning.

 Reb Shmuel climbed down from the carriage and, in annoyance told the woman, "Go eat a bagel" - equivalent in today's vernacular to "go fly a kite."

 Satisfied at last, the woman left Reb Shmuel and Reb Yehuda Leib to continue their journey. She promptly went home and made bagels, concentrating all the while on the blessing that the bagel would surely elicit. It occurred to the woman that just to be sure that the blessing would really be actualized, she should maybe eat two bagels. So that is exactly what she did.

 The following year, Rabbi Menachem Mendel passed away and Reb Shmuel, though the youngest of his seven sons, was chosen to succeed him as Rebbe.

 One day, a man came into Reb Shmuel's study with two cakes which his wife had baked for the Rebbe. "You blessed my wife last year that she would have a child, so she has asked me to bring you these cakes in gratitude."

**No Recollection of the Event**

 Reb Shmuel had no recollection of the event so the man recounted the entire episode to Reb Shmuel. He finished by saying, "You said to my wife, 'Go eat a bagel.' That is exactly what she did and your blessing came true."

"But why," asked Reb Shmuel in amazement, "are you bringing me two cakes?"

 "My wife had wanted to make sure that the blessing would really materialize so she ate two bagels and had twins!" said the beaming father.

 "Know," Reb Shmuel told the husband, "I saw that there was a heavenly decree that you and your wife were not destined to have children. It was only in exasperation that I told your wife to eat a bagel, not as a means of blessing. But because of her simple faith, her strong faith in the blessing of a tzadik, the decree was annulled and you and your wife were blessed with children."

*Reprinted from this week’s issue of “L’Chaim,” a publication of the Lubavitch Youth Organization in Brooklyn, NY.*

**Saving a Vestige of Buffalo’s Jewish Life East Side Synagogue Critical Point**

**By Mark Sommer**



***Photo of the landmark Buffalo, NY shul that was turned into a church and which can now be reverted to an historic replica recalling the once dynamic Jewish community that thrived in the upstate New York community.***

 Broken parapets, water seepage and rubble outside a former East Side synagogue’s boarded-up and barricaded entrance tell a sad tale — one that supporters hope might have a happy ending.

 Congregation Ahavath Sholem, also known as Jefferson Avenue Shul, with its golden-brick facade and onion-shaped metal dome, is one of the few remnants left of an East Side Jewish community that flourished from the 1880s to the 1940s.

 “The shul is one of the last remaining vestiges of Jewish life on the city’s East Side,” said David Torke, who in January convened a meeting aimed at saving the building that attracted 30 people, including preservationists, architects, attorneys and business owners.

 “The coalition that’s now stitched together to save the shul is part of a renewed interest in East Side heritage properties,” he said.

**Volunteers Working on a**

**Restoration and Reuse Plan**

 Volunteers are now involved in determining the structure’s overall physical condition, working on a restoration and reuse plan and identifying potential funding sources.

 General contractor Edward Waddell on a recent day observed vines growing into the blackened walls, and mortar missing between foundation stones that allowed water to infiltrate, an old building’s worst enemy.

 But Waddell also was struck by the artistic construction, from the stamped fascia that once went around the upper perimeter, to the decorative wrought-iron railings that led to the entrance of the Orthodox shul.

**The Craftsmanship No Longer Exists**

 “The craftsmanship you find in this building you don’t find today. It doesn’t exist,” Waddell said.

 The building, at 407 Jefferson Ave., was designed in 1903 by A.E. Mink in the Moorish Revival style popular for synagogue architecture in prewar Europe. Nearby, William Street bustled with Jewish-owned businesses, including bakeries, kosher butchers, delicatessens and cigar shops.

 “I really think that synagogue was very much a shul that was striving to be the landmark shul of the area. It was known as a stylish shul,” said Chana Kotzen, archivist for the Jewish Buffalo Archives Project. She said few photographs exist of the building or other Buffalo synagogues from that period.

**Important to Preserve**

**The Jewish Heritage**

 Economic mobility and East Side urban renewal eventually conspired to scatter Jews to North Buffalo and later, the suburbs. But Kotzen said it’s important that the Jews’ presence on the East Side be preserved.

 “I really think we would be losing a physical reminder and connection to the East Side Jewish community that was once very vibrant and quite large,” Kotzen said.

 The synagogue was sold in 1960 to Saints Home Church of God and later to Greater New Hope Church of God in Christ, the owner for the past 30 years.

 During that time the building continued to decline. The small Pentecostal congregation lacked the funds to bring the century-old structure up to code after being cited for seven Housing Court violations, and despite receiving a $10,000 preservation grant in 2002 from the New York City-based New York Landmarks Conservancy.

**The Church Vacated the Premises**

 The church vacated the premises in 2005. Rev. Jerome L. Farrell, who Torke said is willing to divest the building to the local coalition, moved to Arizona and the building landed on the city’s tax foreclosure auction list in 2009, without any takers.

 The building also went onto the city’s demolition list but was recently removed by Housing Court Judge Patrick M. Carney to give the group more time in its long-shot effort to save the synagogue.

That was done despite bricks that fell onto the sidewalk and street during a recent wind storm — another indication of the building’s precarious condition.

 Torke, who lives on the East Side and blogs about threatened buildings, said the city and Housing Court have been “very cooperative” in giving the group what will likely be a final chance to stave off the wrecking ball.

 Ted Lownie of HHL Architects recently walked through the building and found water damage to be the primary problem.

“This is a building on the edge. It could go or it could be saved, and I think that at the very least a plan for what is going to be done has to be developed by the end of this summer so people have something to believe in,” Lownie said.

**Successful Effort in**

**Cleaning Up Cementery**

 Beth Jacob Cemetery, on Lansdale Place off Koons Avenue, another remaining landmark from the Jewish East Side, was in serious disrepair before a concerted cleanup effort was successfully undertaken in 2008.

 Paul McDonnell, chairman of the Buffalo Preservation Board, said saving a synagogue is unusual in Buffalo. “We’re usually dealing with abandoned Catholic churches. This is unique in the sense that not many historic buildings from the Jewish faith are around any more, and that makes it all the more special,” McDonnell said.

**Effort to Gain Designation on**

**National Register of Historic Places**

 Tim Tielman, Campaign for Greater Buffalo’s executive director, who wrote the local landmark designation application for the former synagogue in 1997, is now writing a nomination to get the building on the National Register of Historic Places. That designation could help a restoration or redevelopment project obtain a variety of government grants and tax credits.

Louis Petrucci, the city’s assistant director of permit and inspection services, also said the building could he an asset to the East Side.

 “It would be nice if they could do something, especially because you can see how that corner is changing with all the new housing and commercial developments. It’s a building we’d all like to save,” he said.

*Reprinted from this week’s email of the AJOP (Associaton of Jewish Outreach Programs) Update. The article was originally published in the March 31, 2012 edition of the Buffalo News.*

**A Story That Says It All**

**By Rabbi Elazar Meisels**

 The following story was told to a family member of mine by a physician who has treated numerous family members, Dr. G., an elderly Jewish man who affiliates tepidly with the Conservative movement. I've only used his services a few times and never dreamed that he possessed an appreciation for his Jewish heritage, but, as the following story illustrates, I severely misjudged him. I heard the story over Pesach, and it struck me as a powerful illustration of some important points about the non-observant Jewish world and the kiruv movement.

**The Doctor’s First Grandchild**

 Dr. G's daughter gave birth to a baby boy, an event that brought great joy to him and his wife, especially since this was their first grandchild. The excitement accompanying the occasion was increased due to the fact that the grandparents were unlikely to merit many more grandchildren, since their only other child is a confirmed bachelor. It was also a big event due to its rarity. The arrival of grandchildren, Jewish or otherwise, was not a common occurance in their social circle.

 To Dr. G.'s relief, his daughter informed him that she and her husband had decided to give their newborn son a bris milah in accordance with Jewish tradition. However, since no one they knew had celebrated a bris milah in recent years, they had no idea where to turn to find a competent mohel.

**Asked for a List of**

**Recommended Mohelim**

 Finally, Dr. G's daughter called up the Conservative synagogue where they were members and asked whether the synagogue could recommend a certified mohel. The secretary graciously provided the names of three practitioners who were all reputable and had been used by members in the past.

 Too busy to make the arrangements herself, Dr. G.'s daughter requested his assistance in choosing a mohel from among the recommended list. Dutifully, he called the first name on the list only to discover that this particular mohel had passed away eleven years ago!

 He called the second name on the list and, indeed, this mohel possessed some impressive credentials. She was a board-certified obstetrician with vast experience performing britot, and she politely advised that they need not be particular about performing the circumcision on the eighth day.

**Free to Choose the Time**

**Most Convenient to Them**

 They were free to choose whichever date and time suited them best. "After all," she reassured them, "This is a big event and it's got to work for all involved." Furthermore, she was prepared to perform the surgery in the hospital, and then they could plan a meal for another time, if that was more convenient for them.

 Something about her casual dismissal of the practice of a bris taking place on the eighth day struck Dr. G. as wrong. He may not have been observant, but even he knew that there was a good reason to perform the bris on the eighth day, and he was uncomfortable with the idea of abandoning tradition. He reasoned that once they were going to do this painful procedure, they might as well do it in full accordance with Jewish law. He therefore politely declined her services.

**Agrees to use the Services**

**Of an Orthodox Mohel**

 Somewhat frustrated by his first two attempts, Dr. G. called the third name on the list, and this time he reached an Orthodox mohel who was friendly, competent, and mindful of Jewish law. The arrangements were made; the bris was performed on the eighth day, and his grandson was circumcised in accordance with halachah. Yet, delighted as he was that his grandson had been properly circumcised, Dr. G. did have one problem with the mohel which he communicated to the family member who shared this story with me.

 He found it highly inappropriate that the mohel insisted on cracking so many jokes as he performed the bris milah. "After all," he explained, "Isn't a bris milah a solemn occasion? Does it really need to be watered down with inane jokes just to put people at ease?"

 When I heard this story, the following three thoughts came to mind:

 (1) Sad as I am to admit this, I was not at all shocked that the Conservative synagogue had recommended a mohel who was dead for eleven years. Anyone who is familiar with the sorry state of religious observance in the movement knows that the bigger surprise is that they recommended an Orthodox mohel at all.

 (2) Unfortunately, the trend in non-observant circles where bris milah is still observed is to insist on utilizing the services of a trained physician who performs the "surgery" in a hospital. The days when even the non-observant used an Orthodox mohel exclusively are largely behind us. Nowadays, it's doctors, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, who perform the circumcision and from a halachic standpoint, many of these brissim are invalid.

**Why Not Charm the Audience**

**With Inspiring Messages?**

 (3) Why, indeed, must an Orthodox mohel resort to cracking jokes at a bris instead of charming his audience with inspiring messages that reach the deepest recesses of their souls at this auspicious moment? I'm aware of the fact that an Orthodox mohel may be viewed with a certain degree of suspicion and that a bris milah can be a sensitive and touchy topic in non-Orthodox circles.

 Perhaps a dose of levity may sometimes be required to loosen things up and allay suspicions. I've been present at brissim where Orthodox mohelim did a masterful job elevating those in attendance to a higher spiritual level while maintaining a balance between levity and seriousness, instead of lowering themselves in an attempt to earn brownie points.

 But, the Torah needs no window-dressing and even those who are distant from Torah like Dr. G., resent the type of behavior exhibited by his grandson's mohel. It's unnecessary and can cause more harm than good.

*Reprinted from this week’s email of Partners in Torah-Mentor Talk*

**A Moment with Rabbi Avigdor Miller, Zt”l**

**Did the Jews Go Like Sheep During the Holocaust?**

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| **QUESTION:** |

The expression that the Jews of World War Two "went like sheep to the slaughter," is that true?

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| **ANSWER:** |

|  |
| --- |
| don-mccullin-sheep-to-slaughter |

Why talk about the Jews? Didn't the French in World War Two go like sheep to the slaughter? The French prepared beforehand a Maginot Line. Now this line contained all the technology of modern warfare.

**The French Also**

**Yielded Like Sheep**

 There were deep trenches, there were weapons of warfare; they were trained in defending these installations. When Hitler came, it was like it didn't exist. He went through it like nobody's business, and the French just yielded like sheep before the wolf. So the French also went like sheep to the slaughter.

 Not only the Jews; everybody did. It's only because the world has an attitude of trying to belittle the Jews, so the Jews are pointed out. What happened to the Polish army? The Polish were big balei gieva, showoffs. They were proud of their national prowess. When the time came it was nothing .The Polish army melted away with all the soldiers and tanks. It was nothing.

**The Jews Didn’t Have Any Tanks**

 The Jews didn't have any tanks. They didn't have any soldiers. What do you expect of them? What could they do? If the Jews would have fought back not one would have remained. Who remained of the Warsaw ghetto? Nobody! Who said it was such a smart thing? It's only foolish people, sensationalists, who talk about the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto. It's as silly as could be. If they hadn't made the uprising a lot of Jews would have remained.

 Jews remained all over the world. Wherever Hitler went, Jews remained. Of course not enough. But the fact that they fought back meant it was a death sentence. The chachmei hatorah (Torah Sages) didn't say fight back. Because after all, the Germans were not that thorough, a lot of Jews escaped.

 But when they started fighting back then the Germans brought all their tanks and all their flame throwers and they wiped out all the Jews. So going like sheep is not a foolish tactic. When you have no alternative the best thing is not to fight. It's a silly thing that's used by American people. Now I don't wish it on American Jews, but if they were in the same situation they wouldn't have been a bit better.

**The Folly of the Boycott**

 Our forefathers understood this; they didn't fight against the nations. They sought to placate the nations. And by the way, it was one of the biggest mistakes, before World War Two when they made a boycott against Germany and they enraged the Germans. Had they followed the council of our sages at that time, they would have bribed Hitler’s lieutenants. You know, Hitler’s lieutenants were mercenary people. You could buy them. You could send things to them - secretly. They would have pocketed a lot of money, but they would let a lot of Jews out. The story would have been different.

 And so, this bravado, this false heroism of fighting back and being killed like a hero, is not the way chosen by Jews. We believe it's better to live not like a hero, than to die like a hero.

*Reprinted from this week’s email of “A Moment with Rabbi Avigdor Miller, zt’l” that is based on a transcription of one of many questions posed to him by members of the audience attending his classic Thursday night hashkafa lectures.*