

# A New Yavneh Publication

16 Adar 5768 // 22 February 2008

## A Taste of History

### Anecdotes from Yavneh's Past

By Toby Robison

One of the nice things about Stevenson Hall (83 Prospect) was that it was an old, aging building. Here at CJL, on Simchat Torah, if you go downstairs to the auditorium while we're dancing in the shul, you can watch the ceiling bounce a couple of inches. It's scary, and I always wonder whether the architect was told to make sure the shul floor would bear the weight of thirty vigorous dancers with a few dozen spectators. But that's nothing! At Stevenson Hall, the ceiling bounced more than a foot! (That was okay, until somebody noticed. Then it was scary.)

## Announcements

- Kiddush this week is sponsored by Jonathan Sapan. Thanks to all our sponsors!
- Rabbi Ross *might* be giving a shiur following davening Saturday morning, depending on how he is feeling, given his case of strep. We wish him a *refua shleima*.
- This Saturday evening there is a hockey game vs. Cornell (7 PM, Baker Rink), a juggling show (8 PM, Frist), and a production of Macbeth (8 PM, Intime). Around 9:30 PM, there will be a small melava malka in Daniel Mark's room, G305 Hargadon. All are invited to converge there.

## Minyan Times

Friday Mincha	5:25 PM
Kabbalat Shabbat	After Mincha
Saturday Shacharit	8:45 AM
Saturday Mincha	5:15 PM
Saturday Maariv	6:33 PM

## Things to Anticipate

- On Thursday March 6th, at 5:45 PM, Rabbi Menachem Leibtag will be giving a shiur over dinner titled "Why Judaism is a 'Catholic Marriage' - Tracing the Biblical Concept of Covenant." Dinner is free for upperclassmen and grad students.

- Purim Party! On Sunday, March 23rd (right after spring break) there will be a Yavneh Purim costume party in 73 Spelman. Entertainment is currently being planned by Jeff Mensch, Mendy Fisch, and *Noam Tanner!*

## Obscure Halacha

### How Frum are You?

By Menachem Lazar

Many of us are familiar with the custom of taking three steps backwards and then forwards before beginning the silent Amidah. Perhaps surprisingly, this custom is found nowhere in the Talmud, and is first mentioned by the twelfth century German rishon R' Elazar ben Yehudah, also known as the Rokeach, in his commentary on the Siddur. As quoted in the Rema (OC 95:1), he states, "When one arises to pray, he should take three steps forward." The Rokeach and Rema provide no source or reason for this custom, nor do they mention the prevalent custom of stepping backwards first.

Later commentators explain that we learn this halacha from Avraham, Yehudah, and Eliyah, each of whom took a step forward before beseeching others. (One of these events appears in this week's Haftorah!) Add them together and we have three steps forward before we, in a similar fashion, beseech God in prayer. Not much is said about the reason, though the simple explanation seems to be that we step forward to symbolize our approaching God.

What about moving backwards first? Many achronim, including the Eliyah Rabbah, explain that there is in fact no significance to this minhag. The minhag developed, presumably, as many people prayed next to walls, and they could not step forward without first moving back. However, there are also those that attribute greater significance to this act. The Kaf Hachayim explains that moving backwards is an act of humility in which we acknowledge our unworthiness of approaching God in prayer. According to Wikipedia, "the steps backward at the beginning represent withdrawing one's attention from the material world."

Notwithstanding the disputes about detail, all agree that what we do before the Amidah is meant to help us focus on the prayer. It would do well for each of us to take a moment, while walking back or stepping forward, to think about the meaning of prayer and the role we choose to take in it.

## A Quick Thought

By Rabbi Josh Ross

This week's parsha is a tough one. It is gloriously depressing and dramatic. At no other point in history were we the Jewish people, as individuals and as a nation, closer to God. Just a short while earlier we sang the song of Certainty, the *shirat hayam*. We witnessed all the miracles God wrought for us one after another after another. And not minor miracles - big ones. Then we got the Torah. So what do we do? We completely fall off the *derech*, immediately. As soon as possible. Hello Golden Calf. Hello history of the Jewish people.

When I think about this story there is little to salvage in terms of a positive message. There is plenty to learn, mind you - but, you know, nothing I can write that you don't already know, or don't already not care about. So instead I'll tell you what I have always wondered: Why more people didn't try and stop the making of the *egel*. Where, if you will, had all the heroes gone? We have a midrash which says Hur tried, and was killed - but really, no one else?! Where is our Braveheart moment? At least by the spies we had Joshua and Caleb! Shouldn't a few people have said, "gosh - hold on a sec here?" Every time I think about that it leads me to the fact that sometimes in a situation that big, it's not so simple not to participate. Reading the parsha now we can judge, but it is different to actually be there. We know this is true historically time and again, and it is also true in any smaller, personal setting when you know that everyone is doing something wrong, and yet you know that you can't stop it. It happens on campus every day. So rather than inspire you with really helpful advice like "Don't ever do anything wrong" or "Don't ever sin" I thought maybe we could look around and see if we can't find some heroes in this week's parsha after all.

And, lo and behold, we do - in a great midrash in Pirke De Rabbi Eliezer:

Aaron said to them, "Break off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, sons, and daughters and bring them to me." The women were unwilling to do so, saying to their husbands, "You desire to make a graven image, a molten image without any power in it to deliver." And they refused to give up their jewelry. The Holy One, blessed be He, gave the women their reward in this world and the world to come. What re-

ward did He give them in this world? Rosh Chodesh. What did the men do when the women would not give them their jewelry? They broke off the earrings in their own ears and gave them to Aaron, as it says, "All the people broke off the rings in their ears." In the ears of their wives is not written, but in **their** ears.

Yay! Women are the heroes! The truth is, I don't want to dwell on the gender issue per se (or the reward), but on what the *midrash* presents - which is an interesting reflection of reality that we can apply to our lives. The simple fact is, sometimes you can't stop things. No matter how hard you try. Sometimes it's just bigger than you are. But! But you can choose not to participate. You can choose not to add to the problem. Maybe you can't stand up with glorious theme music swelling in the background and scream something meaningful, but you could just refuse to take part. Like last week, I am choosing to go in small, baby steps, right? Obviously if you can stand up and stop something you know to be wrong you should. And sometimes in Judaism, you need to do that even if it means your death. But too often, on campus and in life, I hear a student say, "Well I won't be able to change anything so who cares?" Or the famous, "Everyone is doing it, so it's not a big deal."

As someone who grew up with the whole apartheid crisis, I remember how one of the things that had a huge impact was the boycotting of South African goods. And that was simply a choice not to buy. Or Spielberg choosing not to help with the Olympics because China won't try to help in Darfur. Sorry if this sounds 'Social Action-y' - it isn't meant to. I'm just saying that through this semester and in life, remember that sometimes choosing not to participate can make a difference. Maybe it won't solve the problem, maybe it won't fix everything. But as we see from the *midrash*: even in the worst situation God will reward those who try to make a difference, even if the difference is simply not participating.

## Want to Write?

Have a good idea for a column? Contact Greg Burnham (gburnham@) if you are interested in writing for this publication. We'll publish most anything relating to Judaism or Judaism at Princeton.