

BETH ELOHIM NEWSLETTER

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In this issue:

We're Marching 1, 2

Our story of rebirth

The Heart of Passover 1,2,3
Rabbi S. B. Levy

New Leadership 2
Positions:

Rabbi Yehudah 3

Gabbei Dan 4

Morah Shemenah 5

Members News

Births 4

Moves 4

Passover Dates 6

Rabbi's Message 6

We're Marching

The spirit is high at Beth Elohim as members celebrate the completion of renovations to their synagogue that included a new roof, walls, Bimah carpeting, hardwood floors, and new seating. "Last year I laid out a new vision for the congregation," said Rabbi Sholomo Levy and since that time that congregation has entered a new phase of growth, vitality, and renewed commitment that has carried us to this level. "I am so proud of our members. We inspire each other."

Thus far we have made over \$20,000 in repairs, remodeling, and new equipment and furniture. Our recent success is truly the work of HaShem moving in and through the lives of our members. What we are seeing is no less than the answer to our prayers and the result of a lot of hard work and sacrifice. As my twentieth anniversary as the spiritual leader approached, I was surprised by how quickly time had passed. And though I was pleased with many of the things that we at Beth Elohim and the entire Israelite community were able to accomplish, I had the nagging feeling that we were becoming stagnant. Although we always talked about growth, our actions were like those struggling to survive; in other words, we were playing spiritual defense instead of what I now call faith-filled offense.

Isaiah tells us "*they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall*



THE HEART OF PASSOVER RABBI SHOLOMO B. LEVY

Until recently I had believed that it was purely Pharaoh's own cruelty that prevented him from obeying the word of God. However, this year while studying the Passover story I was struck by an interesting statement that God made to Moses about Pharaoh. God said, "*I will harden his heart that he shall not let the people go.*" The first question I had was why did God, in effect, make it impossible for Pharaoh to find the compassion in his heart needed to free the Children of Israel from Egyptian captivity? The second question was, what does it mean to "harden" a person's heart? I researched this further and found references of God "hardening" Pharaoh's heart fifteen separate places in Torah and once in the writings of the Prophets.¹

The Torah uses three terms to describe the spiritual hardening of a heart—which means that the humanity and divinity that resides in the soul are restricted within that individual and are not allowed to fully express itself. Thus it is called hard. The most common word for this is קָזַק (Kazak). Many of you may recognize this as the word that appears at the conclusion of every book of the Torah. In that context it simply means strong and is placed there to remind us that the more we study Torah the stronger we become. Yet, in Exodus it is used in its negative sense to mean hard, inflexible, or stubborn. This is clearly how it is used in the seventh chapter of Exodus where it says, "He hardened Pharaoh's heart, that he harkened not unto them;

¹ Exodus 4:21, 7:3, 7:13, 7:22, 8:19, 8:32, 9:12, 9:35, 10:20, 10:27, 11:10, 13:15, 14:4, 14:8; I Samuel 6:6.

run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.” (Isaiah 40:31). We have waited and prayed for this day. Finally we are rising up, we feel like eagles, and we believe that this is only the beginning.



Bro. Etz Shalem, shown here presenting a new menorah to Beth Elohim in memory of Chief Rabbi Levi Ben Levy, is one of the new members who will be inducted during Passover.

He and all the new members are men and women of faith, hope, and action.

It wasn't easy; there have been challenges and adjustments. However, the results show that we are moving in the right direction. Weekly Shabbat attendance has almost doubled; we expect to induct almost ten new members and their families on Shabbat Hol Homoed Passover, April 15th; the choir is full of creativity and sounds beautiful; and the Sabbath School under Sister Sheminah's leadership has instituted an educational program to give our children the religious education they deserve. What I find so inspiring about the progress that we are making is that most of the ideas and initiative are coming from the people themselves. For example, I noticed how dedicated the men have been with their Torah reading since Shabbat Bereshit. We have had a minyan every week and more people making aliyah and reading along than ever. Then I learned that for some weeks now the men have been gathering every Wednesday night to study Torah with our new Gabbei, Azriel Ben Dan. This was done on their own initiative like so many wonderful things that people are doing today in the congregation. It reminds me of that passage in the Torah that describes the spirit we had in the wilderness when we worked on one accord to build the mishkan / tabernacle. The Torah says "*The children of Israel brought a willing offering unto the LORD, every man and woman, whose heart made them willing to bring for all manner of work, which the LORD had commanded to be made by the hand of Moses.*" (Exodus 35:29).

We are marching with a new spirit and with willing hearts. Don't be left behind. Walk with us, build with us, work with us, and grow with us!

The Heart of Passover (continued)

as the Lord had said" and also, "Pharaoh's heart was hardened, neither did he hearken unto them; as the Lord had said." The statements are phrased to show the fulfilling of prophecy; in other words, God said he was going to harden Pharaoh's heart and he did.

The second word, used less frequently in connection with the heart, is קָשָׁה (Kasheh). It usually refers to hard or solid objects but in Ex. 6:9 it is translated as "cruel" to describe the slavery itself. In Deut. 10:16 and other places, it is translated very appropriately as "stiff-necked;" as in stiff-necked people. But, this word is also used in Ex. 7:3 to describe what God did to Pharaoh's heart. It states, "I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and multiply my signs and my wonders in the land of Egypt."

The final and least used word is אָמַץ (Amats). In Deut. 15:7 and I Sam 6:6, it is described as something we should **not** do: "thou shalt not harden thine heart" and we are warned, "wherefore then do you harden your hearts, as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts?" However, like קָזַק (Kazak), it can have a positive connotation and is used repeatedly in Deut 31 to mean courageous as when a person hardens themselves against evil rather than against God. Thus it is this word used in the familiar expression "Be strong and of a good courage."

Now that we understand the various words used to describe the hardening of a person's heart and have looked at a few examples of it, we can now focus on why this occurs, how we can identify it, avoid it, and cure it if we suffer from it. God tells us that He has "no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?" (Ezek 33:11) Yet, it appears that there are times when God must make an example of someone who has hardened his own heart. If God allowed that person to have a "change of heart" once He began to inflict pain upon him, then, it would seem that God is punishing him unjustly. Thus we see that after a number of plagues the pain had reached the point that Pharaoh agreed to let the Children of Israel go free, but this was only a temporary change of heart because God had hardened Pharaoh's heart so that it could not change sincerely or permanently. In this way,

The Heart of Passover (continued)

we were able to see through Pharaoh what happens to a person who bears hate and animus in his heart and refuses to give it up.

Today, we see people around us whose hearts have been hardened by their own actions or beliefs. How can you tell who these people are? And, more importantly, how can you tell if your heart has been hardened? Typically, a hard-hearted person is someone who refuses to empathize with the suffering of other people; they are not sensitive to the feelings and concerns of those around them; they thrive most when they are insulting or attacking another person or group; they believe that they or their group is superior to other people or groups. A hard-hearted person can not reach out, he/she has no desire to feel or create the love of which I speak. Such a person always believes that is the *other man* who needs his heart softened. These are the classic symptoms of sclerosis of the spiritual heart. We would be fools, in deed, if we immune from this common affliction, which in our society, is reaching epidemic proportions.

It is important that we remember himself, he loved his family, and But this love obviously did not not share his nationality, culture, think they love those closest to of those bonds tend to be stifled feel for others. Often that hate to them. Those they love must rage. Evidence of this self-the hearts of our youth. It is some parents and leaders who fail feeds on those who carry it



believed that our history makes us

and understand that Pharaoh loved he loved his fellow Egyptian citizens. extended to people like us, who did or beliefs. Hard-hearted people often them, but the quality and expressions and even corrupted by the hate they backfires and is turned on those nearest often suffer and bear the brunt of their destructive behavior has even attacked growing and is even encouraged by to recognize that hate is a cancer that around in their hearts and minds.

What cure is there for a hard heart? Well, assuming that God has not made it your fate, there is much that we can do. I say we, because the harsh realities of life are such that we all find ourselves being harder than we want at times. God told Ezekiel that as part of His regathering of Israel He will “*put a new spirit within you; and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them a heart of flesh.*” (Ezekiel 11:19) We must want this. By asking God to give us a new heart of flesh we implicitly acknowledge that we presently have hearts of stone—otherwise why would we be requesting a transplant. Yet, in a spiritual sense this is exactly what we want. We are saying that our present heart has clogged arteries that block the flow of life-giving Torah. We are saying that we have an irregular heart beat--sometimes loving but sometimes cold. In other words, our pace makers are not fast enough to keep pace with the things that anger us. Realizing that we have a dangerous heart condition is the first step, asking Hashem to soften or replace this heart of stone is the second, and carefully watching what is happening to our hearts is the third. We must be aware how negative thoughts affect us. Negativity in all its forms is like spiritual cholesterol, sodium, stress, and saturated fat upon our hearts. In short, our spiritual health requires that we watch our social and political diets. The results of not doing so can be a spiritual heart attack. I didn't say it; it was written in stone at Sinai.

This year try something different when you get to that part in the Hagaddah that talks about the contrary son who says “you” instead of “we” at the seder. The traditional answer is to tell that person that he would have been destroyed. Though true, that response strikes me as being hard. The questions shows not only a lack of knowledge but also perhaps a lack of love, which breeds feelings of alienation and estrangement. This year lets try to open our hearts to everyone and make a special effort to bring those who are contrary and self-absorbed in their individual problems and success into the unity of our oneness. Let us find new ways to turn the person into a brother or sister and bring those dangling on the margins close to the center of our hearts.

Finally, if you know someone whose heart has stopped feeling, you must perform spiritual CPR on them. Use your lips to speak comforting words, words of love, respect, and assurance. And, teach them a safer, more fulfilling and peaceful way to live. That way is the true way of Torah”

Mazal Tov

New Positions, Promotion, and Appointments

In order to provide strong, unified leadership and effective management the following individuals have been appointed.

Rabbi Eliyahu Ben Yehudah officially became the assistant rabbi of Beth Elohim at our general meeting on March 19, 2005. Rabbi Sholomo Levy expressed how delighted he was to have a person of Rabbi Yehudah's distinction in this important position. Rabbi Yehudah has been an outstanding, loyal, and exemplary member of Beth Elohim for over a decade. He and his wife Rabbinec Nadivah have actively supported the congregation over the years, their children had their Bar Mitvahs at B.E., and together they give B.E. the

New Assistant Rabbi



honor of having the first Hebrew Israelite Boy Scout Troop in the United States. Rabbi Yehudah was the president of his class in the Israelite Rabbinical Academy and subsequently became President of the New York Chapter of the International Israelite Board of Rabbis.

Rabbi Yehudah knows the congregation and the congregation knows, loves, and respects him. He fully understands and supports the vision that Rabbi Sholomo Levy established for us and has already proposed ways to add his energy and creativity to reaching our collective goals by creating a cultural center within our new space. He is a multitalented musician, a successful real estate broker, a knowledgeable teacher, and a very inspirational speaker.

Rabbi Betzellel is still *emeritus* and Rabbi Benyamin Levy is now in charge of the Beth Elohim Talmud Torah Hebrew School. Together these rabbis give us what we need today: Righteous Leadership.

Gabi Azriel Ben Dan



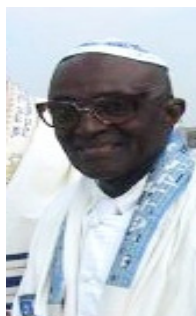
Synagogues often have rabbis, cantors, and a gabi. The rabbis provide spiritual leadership, the cantors sing many of the songs and prayers, and a gabi is a special position given to a highly respected lay leader of the congregation who instructs other members on matters of synagogue procedure. The gabi is often an elder who is well respected for his knowledge and kindness. This definition accurately describes Azriel Ben Dan who has just become Beth Elohim's first gabi.

Gabbaim (plural) have done a wonderful job serving our community at other Israelite congregations. We think most fondly of the job Gabi Lee has done at Commandment Keepers E.H. Congregation for so many decades. Sometimes, a gabi becomes as rabbi—as was the case with Gabi Poinsett at Mt. Horeb before he became Rabbi Poinsett. Gabi Azriel Ben Dan is off to a great start. He leads quietly and by personal example. He has been teaching our members the deeper reasons behind many of our customs, which fosters greater respect for our rules and traditions. Now our members have yet another person they can go to for help and guidance. Mazal Tov

They Moved Away



Danisha and Juan, our newly wed couple, have moved to Atlanta, Georgia, to continue their new lives together. They convey their happiness, ask for your continued prayers, and express how much they miss their family at Beth Elohim.



Brother Adam Hickshaw has also moved to Atlanta, Georgia, to be with his children. He is enjoying his retirement, but also misses his spiritual family at Beth Elohim terribly. He has said that Passover is going to be particularly difficult for him and asks that we pray for him and stay in touch.

Sister Shemenah Has Plans for our Children

Since assuming her new role as the Shabbath School Teacher as Beth Elohim, Sister Shemenah has created a new curriculum that strives to give our children a quality religious education. She said “Our biggest challenge is that we only have the children once a week, so we must work closely with the parents to make sure that what is taught in the synagogue is reinforced in the home.”

This is a challenging task today because so many parents need help raising children who are bombarded with a wider variety of activities and interests than any other generation. School work, athletics, household chores, family time, and recreation are just some of the positive things that compete for their time. Sister Deborah Levy, Nechikah Jackson, Tanya Propheet, and Morah Deborah are assisting her in this effort, but they need our collective support. Our children are our future!



Building Fund Drive Needs Your Contribution

You have all seen and heard about the progress we have made at Beth Elohim. This has come about because of the hard work and sacrifice of our most faithful and loyal members. If you have not done your part yet, give a generous donation to show that you support our efforts.

The mandatory Shekel Offering is \$100 and all of it has been designated for the purchase of new comfortable chairs to replace our old pews. Don't let this burden fall on your brothers and sisters. Do you share. Give as much as you can today. Mail your Shekel Offering or pay it online at www.blackjews.org



Also remember our:

- ✓ Shabbat School Fund
- ✓ Building Fund
- ✓ Shekel Offering
- ✓ Tithe Offering
- ✓ Season Fee

Honour the LORD with thy substance, and with the firstfruits of all thine increase: So shall thy barns be filled with plenty, and thy presses shall burst out with new wine.

Proverbs 3:9-10



Beth Elohim

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Passover Dates

Search for leaven Tuesday April 11th Evening

Burning of leaven Wednesday April 12th Morning

Fast of the first born Wednesday April 12

Seder Wednesday April 12 Sunset

Passover Thursday April 13

Omer Counting Friday April 14th Evening

Shabbat Kol Hamoed April 15 (Induction of New Members)

Erev Seventh Day Tuesday April 18th Evening

Seventh Day Wednesday April 19th (Yizkor)



Important Spring Dates

Yarzeit Chief Rabbi Levi Ben Levy Friday April 21 (Candle)

Beth Elohim General Meeting Sunday April 30th

WE NEED YOU...AND LOVE YOU

Despite the fact that we have made spectacular progress in recent months and are growing at a fantastic rate, we are making a special effort to reach out to members who we have not seen in a long time. Families can grow, but family members can never be replaced.

Beth Elohim will always be your home and home is where you are welcomed, loved, and needed. There are lots of new faces, new energy, and new ideas; but our hearts have not changed. At our core we will always be the congregation that Chief Rabbi Levi Ben Levy founded to be a place where people come to serve the God of Israel with "all your heart, all your soul, and with all your might."

Whether you are a new member or an old one, now is the time to increase your commitment and involvement in the congregation. The spirit of our Shabbat services has never been

higher, our rabbis have been inspirational, our choir has been wonderful (their CD is available), we have weekly Torah discussions during Kiddush, Rabbi Benyamin Levy's Hebrew class is going strong, the children are learning a lot in the Shabbat School, and Gabi Azriel Dan leads a weekly study group.

If you have moved away, then I encourage you to become a part of our online community. It will keep you up-to-date and involved. There are recent pictures of all of our events and a live chat room where you can talk to us.

A chain is only as strong as its weakest link. With you we are stronger. With us you are stronger. Let's strengthen each other!

חזק. חזק. ונתחזק!

Rabbi Sholomo Ben Levy