

Good Shabbos Everyone. In this week's portion *Beha'aloscha* Hashem commands Aharon through Moshe to light the large Menorah in the tabernacle. In commanding Aharon, Hashem uses the interesting word "*Beha'aloscha*." Rashi explains that the word "*Beha'aloscha*" contains the root meaning "*to go up*," (as in "*an aliyah to the Torah*.") Thus the Torah chose the term "*Beha'aloscha*," to indicate that when applying fire to light the Menorah, one should make sure that the flame on the Menorah goes up -- "*aliyah*," and burns on its own, before removing the source flame from the Menorah. If lighting a candle with a match, for example, one would leave the match burning on the candlewick until the flame of the candle burns high.

When we look deeper into the symbolic meaning of the verse, we begin to see a beautiful, spiritually uplifting meaning of "*Beha'aloscha*..." We read in Proverbs that "*The soul of Man is the lamp of Hashem*." (Mishlei 20:27) We see that the soul is compared to a lamp. Similarly, the Talmud tells us that the soul of a man is called a candle. (Shabbos 30b) We can now begin to delve into a deeper mystical level of understanding of the verse "*Beha'aloscha Es Ha-Neros*..." -- "*when kindling the lamp*..."

Every Jew has a soul which is a spark of Hashem From On High. Hashem is the Origin of the Holy Fire, which is the Source of Life. Hashem keeps the pilot light of the soul alit as long as we are alive, however, we as individuals are responsible for making sure that the Holy Flame of the soul burns high. Let us now re-read the verse based on our new-found understanding... "*when kindling the soul, you shall make sure that the flame of the soul burns high*..." Let us hopefully be inspired by the following story, which is a continuation of last week, as told by Michèle Sankar.

"...Now, I'll change the direction of this story a bit. I was always interested in my family history. My Irish grandparents had lovely stories of their ancestors. My Hungarian grandfather also talked about the difficult years growing up in southern Hungary. My Hungarian grandmother did not like to discuss the past at all, saying that the wars and Communism were painful to discuss.

Fortunately, my father's sister had an excellent memory and was able to help me put together my family tree shortly after I got married. My grandmother's name was Eva, and her mother was Elly. Elly's father was a doctor. Really? A doctor? And what was his name? Simon. Simon? But no typical Hungarian man has the name Simon unless.... I decided to take a chance, and I wrote to the caretaker of the Jewish cemetery in the town where Simon once lived. Did they have a burial record for a Dr. Simon Winter, who died in 1943? Yes.

Things unfolded, leading me to more documents and discoveries that are another story altogether. Suffice to say, I discovered that my paternal grandmother was a Jew, born to two fully Jewish parents in 1914. In 1923, things were not good for Jews in Hungary, so my great-grandfather had the family baptized to improve their political and social situation. They did not maintain connections to most other family members, and lived thereafter as Catholics.

My grandmother was devastated when I discovered her "shameful" secret. But my grandmother was a Jew, which means that my father is a Jew. The two people who were the most distraught by my conversion were Jewish according to Torah law. My grandmother was devastated when I discovered her "shameful" secret and did not acknowledge or discuss it with me. I respected how painful it was for her, so I didn't probe – but my heart was aching. She passed away just before Passover three years ago. My research led me to discover that some of my Jewish ancestors and their families were killed during the Holocaust. Some tried to take refuge in the Portuguese safe-houses of Budapest, only to be forced out by the Hungarian Arrow Cross and murdered. Another survived and left the country, childless. My great-grandparents had to wear the yellow star, yet somehow survived in Budapest during the Holocaust. I do not know more because the one remaining relative from this time period refuses to discuss any of it with me. Even that person's own children do not know that their parent is Jewish. My Catholic grandfather must have known about his wife's Jewishness, but if he did, he never mentioned it. My father and sisters were certainly surprised by the news. We learned, however, that during the war, my grandfather hid a Jewish colleague in their apartment. I also have old letters attesting that he looked after some belongings for Jewish neighbors when they were sent to the ghetto – and that he returned all of it.

More than ever, I felt responsible for bringing back the Judaism that was lost to my family through murder and assimilation. My children and I are the only living Jewish descendants of my great-great-grandparents. Hashem had a reason for bringing me back to Him. I needed to be the voice – and the soul – for those who could no longer speak. So what was I going to do about it? It was a tremendous responsibility that Hashem entrusted to me. The truth is that during the first few years of married life, we had become somewhat lax in our observance. While I didn't write or go shopping or watch TV on Shabbat, we drove to synagogue, reheated food in the microwave, and flipped lights. I was blessed with three children. They all went to Jewish babysitters,

and on to Jewish Day School.

Kosher? We had a separate meat and dairy section in our kitchen, and only food products with a kosher symbol were allowed. Despite the stringency at home, however, we still ate out, ordering "vegetarian" or fish.

One day, my husband came home and said, "Did you know that there is a synagogue here in Richmond Hill?" "You're kidding!" I replied. "Where is it? What's it called?" "It's Chabad Lubavitch, and it's actually in the basement of the rabbi's house." I looked at him. "Lubavitch? Are you kidding me? That's really Orthodox. Aren't they all black hat and beards? No way!" I assumed they would know that I "didn't belong."

The truth is, I was worried. Such a small group in a personal space... I wouldn't be able to slip in anonymously or check out the lay of the land. I assumed they would know that I "didn't belong," that I was "just" a convert. I thought that I would be judged by stern and solemn people. No, thank you. A few weeks later, David convinced me to give it a try.

On one lovely Shabbat, we reached the home of Rabbi Mendel Bernstein and his family. In we went, and a nice young brunette named Toby sat near me and smiled. She was friendly, made nice small talk, and didn't ask any uncomfortable questions. After an hour, it occurred to me that she was the rebbetzin.

We became regulars. My oldest son, about 8 years old, began bugging me about covering my hair. For the sake of peace, I started to put a kerchief over my head. Over the period of a couple of years, the kippahs and tzitzis stayed on my boys even when they were out of school. My pants remained unworn in my closet, and I began wearing more modest clothing. It was a new critical point in my life. Through increased learning, I knew that our growth had to continue. I decided that instead of announcing what I was going to observe, I needed to ask myself when I was going to embrace other aspects of Jewish life. These observances weren't burdens; they were gifts – gifts that had been taken away from so many Jews in the past, and I was grateful for them.

Just as the instruction manual for our new appliances is written to ensure the best results – even when it tells us what not to do – so too Hashem wants what's in our best interests, and gave us an eternal manual called the Torah. We quickly learned that when a person wants to increase in observance, obstacles soon disappear and life becomes easier and happier. Being Jewish according to Torah law is truly a joy for me, but there were difficult times too.

Unlike my friends, I couldn't refer to my bubby's kreplach recipe, or my zaidy's traditions. Everything we did we had to borrow and personalize, secretly watching the rabbi, for example, to make sure we were doing a mitzvah right. And that scared me. I had a fresh Jewish soul and I didn't want to soil it. But I also know that, as humans, Hashem always gives us another chance. Mistakes don't undo the good that has been done, and it doesn't tarnish the good we will do in the future. We need to live in the present, to make this moment count. I am a Jew. I never get tired of saying it, thinking it, believing it, loving it I used to feel sad that I had nothing Jewish to offer my children... no traditions, no stories, no heritage.

Now I know that every woman, no matter what her history or status, influences the dynamics in her home. Like most Jewish mothers, I fret over my menus for the High Holy Days, I grumble about the cleaning we need to do for Passover, I go into panic mode in the half-hour before Shabbos starts. But deep down, I am intensely grateful.

And that "stern Orthodox community" I was so worried about? How wrong I was! We quickly became a part of the Chabad family in Richmond Hill, sharing services, classes, celebrations, and friendship. This is a home where we have never been judged – only embraced. I am a Jew. I never get tired of saying it, thinking it, believing it, loving it. Every day, there is that a thrill in me that exclaims: "Yay! I'm a Jew!" Hashem made me work for my Jewishness, and because of that, I appreciate it every moment. I don't believe that any event in our lives is just coincidence. Every one of us has a wonderful ability to renew our commitment to Torah and good deeds, to learning, praying, and making a difference to others – every single day.

My wish for you is that every day you get hit with that thrilling realization, "Yay! I'm a Jew!" and that you do something with it. When someone gives you a designer jacket or an expensive purse, you don't leave them in the closet. You take them out, use them, and enjoy them. It's the same for your Jewish life. Don't keep your Jewish flame hidden in the closet. Take it out, utilize it, and go gently if you must. Flames can be shared without the giver losing any light; the more we share, the brighter it becomes. I pray that each of us treat every day as our first day as a Jew. **Good Shabbos Everyone.**