

MOONLIGHT

The UK's Quarterly Rosh Hodesh e-Newsletter

Editorial

Welcome to the Shavuot edition of Moonlight. Shavuot is the most spiritual of festivals without an outward physical signs.

This is a special time of year for women. Because our sages say that when the Children of Israel were gathered at Mt Sinai the Torah was given to the women – why? So that it might be handed down to through the generations.

The women had earned this merit because of the way they had rejected the Golden Calf.

Each Jewish woman continues to carry this responsibility.

In today's society where assimilation is eroding the community women have an even greater role to play to ensure the continuity of our heritage.

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The Songs of Creation by Neshama Carlebach

In 1989 when my father went to Russia, he was interviewed on television. They asked, "Shlomo- your people have been persecuted, threatened, harmed and ripped apart for centuries. Why are you so happy?" I wish I could somehow describe here my father's big shining smile and laughter when he heard this question. He said something that I would never forget: "I know it's been so painful and hard for us, but can you imagine how many Bar Mitzvahs we've had, how many weddings, how many simchas, how many times we've danced with the Torah all these years?" He had the most unbelievable way of seeing the good in the world and his undying optimism and joy was injected into my heart in the deepest way.

My father said that when Hashem created the world, he didn't just say "Let there be light". He sang the world into being. Every blade of grass, every animal, every tree has its own song, its own Niggun as it was given the Gift of Life. When he was a child, my father said as he walked in the world, he could hear them all, so many melodies. Of all the gifts G-d has given us since the creation of the world, The Torah is the crown and glory. It is both our map to discovering truth, holiness and

meaning in life as well as G-d love letter to us, in which we are filled with the depth of the love he has for us, his children. On Shavuot we are blessed to receive it all, we are unafraid- we open ourselves to the wilderness, jump into this relationship with utmost faith "Na'aseh V'nishmah" and feel ourselves surrounded by the music of every human being, every blade of grass.

My father always spoke of how beautiful and good the world was, but learning about the world and how it is not always the happiest of places, was just too heartbreaking.

When I was a little girl, I made the decision that I never wanted to read another newspaper. It was only filled with bad news and I decided I wanted none of it. When I told my father that I was never again going to read the news, he smiled in a way that I knew he really understood me. He told me, for some reason, so sadly, the world is meant to be this way. For some reason, our hearts are meant to be broken, that it's the only way we can appreciate the miracles and light that always come down to us even while we are broken. Because the truth is that sadness and tragedies also have their own songs and are filled with beauty, having been created by G-d. I never understood this concept as a child, even though it's something I

heard over and over again. I was able to see that we had to live through loss and emptiness in our lives, but I never could see the point. Didn't Hashem love us and only want the best for us? Wouldn't it just be so easy for Him to send us only joy?

On Shavuot, we learn that a broken heart is the most complete. After weeks of self examination, fixing ourselves and walking in the desert, we are finally ready to receive the Torah.

It says in the Shma "V'hayu Hadvarim Ha'eileh asher anochi m'tzavcha hayom al l'vavechah"- "Let the words that I'm commanding you today be upon your heart". Why wouldn't it say, take these words and put them *in* your heart? It is because, as we learn, a broken heart is the most full heart. We pray for our hearts to break open with longing for G-d. Then, when everything is broken open, the words of Hashem will penetrate deep inside of us. The words of the Torah will then comfort us in the saddest and most empty places inside. Its songs will soothe our beings.

That is what Shavuot is all about.

We stand before G-d and allow all our moments when we had given up on the goodness of the world to be filled with G-d's words, with the Torah, with love for each other. This is the ultimate gift of freedom we received when

we were taken out of Egypt. Now we are free to love, free to be loved, free to fix ourselves, free to count our days, free to be who we're supposed to be and with strength and honor set out to fix the world. And every time we open our broken hearts and take in these gifts, we create a new melody, add it to the original songs of our creation, songs of our sadnesses and of our openings and revelations. We become a symphony of beautiful niggunim attesting that Hashem Echad., G-d is One, the world is one and all its manifestations are one. **Neshama Carlebach is following in the tradition of soul singing and story telling established by her father, Shlomo. Her talent and charisma endear her to all people of all ages.**

Idols and Images By Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz

What picture do we see in our mind's eye, when we think of God? I imagine that most of us are probably a bit shocked by the very question. God doesn't look like anything! We're not meant to have any 'picture' of Him. After all, the second of the Ten Commandments tells us:

You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. You shall not bow down to

them or serve them
(Shemot 20: 4)
But not all Jewish thinkers interpreted this as a total ban on imagining God in visual terms. Do you recognize this quotation?

They saw You ancient,
and they saw You young,
As both white hair and black upon Your head was hung;

Salvation's helmet on His head He wore;
His right hand and His holy arm the victory Him bore.

The image of His head appears like fine pure gold;
Engraved upon His brow, His holy name is told.

Perhaps rather surprisingly, this is part of *Anim zemirot*, more properly called *Shir hakavod* (Song of Glory), written by Rabbi Yehudah ben Shmuel of Regensburg, who lived about 1150–1217 (I've used the translation by Jakob Petuchowski, in his book *Theology and Poetry*). We sing it every Shabat -- in fact we entrust it to young children to lead -- usually without realizing what it's all about. Some rabbis have actually banned it in the past! And contrasted with the first text -- about the absolute ban on making images -- it points up one of our biggest problems.

How can we talk about God? How can we talk about something which is

beyond our understanding? When my younger daughter was small, she was fascinated by the question of 'what God is like', and trying to give her some idea of how different God is from human beings, I once used the analogy of ants. If she were an ant, I suggested, and was used to running around and collecting food and bringing it back to the nest, and did very little else, how would she be able to understand if a human suddenly bent down and talked to her and tried to tell her about going to school, or about playing hide and seek, or about reading books? The poor old ant is never really going to understand, even if it is bright enough to realize that this enormous thing making noises at it is actually a living being. We're not much better off than ants when it comes to understanding or describing God.

Some Jewish thinkers thought the ant shouldn't even try to understand or to describe what it experienced. Rambam -- Maimonides, the great twelfth century philosopher -- said that we cannot speak of what God IS -- we can only speak of what God is NOT. Thus we can say that God is not bad, not limited, not human, not male, not female, not like us. I once gave a six-year-old Israeli girl some felt pens and a piece of paper to play with, and she made a picture by taking a smaller piece of paper, placing it on the larger

one, and then scribbling over it with all the felt pens. When she removed the smaller piece of paper, there was a white, empty space in the middle of the larger sheet, surrounded by hundreds of colourful scrawls. She looked at it and announced 'That's like God' -- and I knew exactly what she meant. She had the same idea as Maimonides and many other Jewish thinkers, and for her, the untouched, 'empty', undefined space in the centre of all the shape and colour was a good way of describing God.

Now this is all very well for philosophers, but most people find it very hard to cope with such an abstract, distant God. We all want and need a God we can love, who we feel cares about us as people, who looks after us and hears us when we pray. It's very hard to love an abstract philosophical concept, and Jewish thinkers (and God Himself!) have always realized this. As early as the Torah, we find that God is described as raising a 'right hand', as 'sitting on a throne', even - in Bereishit -- as 'walking in a garden'. Clearly God doesn't have a problem with this sort of verbal image, if He includes it in the Torah. The prophets also try to describe some knowable image of God -- the two best known examples are the visions of Isaiah and Ezekiel, both of which we read as *hafforot*. And the Talmud is full of very human (and

sometimes animal) images of God -- God laughs, God roars like a lion, God is sad, God wears tefilin, God is angry. We are familiar with many verbal pictures of God from the prayers -- father, judge, king, master of the universe, creator, friend of the soul (*yedid nefesh*), and we probably do have an unconscious picture in our minds when we think of God -- very often of an old man with a long beard sitting up in the sky, an image many people learn as children and never really get rid of.

Here we come up against a problem -- the Torah says very clearly that we should not make images of God. Obviously this means carved or moulded images, representations of God in stone or metal or paint or embroidery or other artistic forms. And Jewish art has always avoided this, apart from a couple of 'hands of God' that appear in mediaeval manuscripts, which may have been influenced by Christian art of the time. But does this ban apply to images in words or in our minds? We know that physical images are banned because of the danger of idolatry -- people may come to believe that the stone or metal or cloth image has divine power, and they might worship it instead of God. Can this happen with verbal and mental images? And if so, what are we to do about it? Can we think about God or pray to God without any images at all? Should we all adopt

Maimonides' position and ban all descriptions of God? Rewrite *Avinu malkenu*, 'Our Father, our King', and the other prayers, and get rid of that pervasive old man with the long beard?

Jewish tradition has by and large recognized that we can't rid ourselves of all mental images. Rabbi Ishmael, a second-century CE teacher mentioned in the Mishnah and Talmud, stated that 'The Torah speaks in the language of humankind'. We are human, and we use our human experience to envision God, to talk to God, to make a relationship with God. But -- and this is the crucial point -- that is not to say that we should just sit back and use and make our images of God uncritically. We need to realize that the images we use are just that -- images, inadequate representations of something that by its very nature will always remain unknown to us at the deepest level, but that paradoxically, we are commanded to love and to seek. *Anim zemirot* starts by saying just that, before it launches into its shocking list of images:

Your glory I shall tell,
though I have never
seen You;

I know not what You are,
but image can describe
You.

Through Your prophets
and in Your servants'
mystic speech

You let us a mere
likeness of Your glory
reach.

In different visions their
analogies came,
But, for all their similes,
You remain the same.

This is what we should be
doing more consciously --
examining the images we
use when we talk to or
about God, adding new
ones, varying them, so
that we do not mistake the
image for the real thing,
and do not fall into the trap
of a new sort of idolatry --
worshipping images that
we have made and
confusing them with the
unknowable and infinite
God. Perhaps this is part
of what the Torah means
when it forbids us to make
images carved in stone or
cast in metal -- images
that are unchangeable,
that come to replace the
truth behind the image.
We should use images in
a more fluid way, changing
them so that we do not get
too attached to one, or to
one set, and so that we
realize that no image fully
represents God.

Especially when we are
talking privately to God,
informally, in our own
words, we should widen
the images we use to gain
a rounder, fuller, more
complete -- though never
perfect -- idea of whom we
are talking to. As well as
addressing God as father,
judge, king, and saviour,
we can turn to God as
mother, friend, spring of
living water, companion.
All these are images that
have been used by Jewish
poets and by our mystical

tradition for centuries -
think of the image of the
Shekhinah, the presence
of God, often described as
a lovely queen who suffers
with and weeps for her
exiled people Israel. God
is called 'Harachaman' -
the Merciful One, from the
Hebrew word *rechem*,
which means 'womb' -
God, from whom we come,
as children come from the
womb of their mother, has
mercy on us as a mother
has mercy on her children.
The rabbis of the Talmud
interpreted the whole of
the biblical book of Song
of Songs as celebrating
the relationship between a
very special pair of lovers -
God and the Jewish
people, and much
mediaeval poetry can be
read as love songs
between a man and a
woman or between God
and Israel. In fact, this
tradition carries on to
modern times, and I'd like
to end with part of a poem
by Chayim Nachman
Bialik, the greatest modern
Hebrew poet, who died in
1934. The song, *Hakhnisini
tachat kenafekh*, has been
set to music by the Israeli
singer Arik Einstein, and is
very popular in Israel; it
can be understood as a
poem addressed to a
beloved woman, or to
God.

Take me under your
wing,
Be my mother, my sister.
Take my head to your
breast,
My banished prayers to
your nest.

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Tsunami – the Jewish Response by Ruth Cohen

On December 26th 2004,
an event occurred that
would prove to change the
lives of many citizens in
South East Asia. The
Tsunami came and went,
with speeds measuring up
to 500 miles per hour.
Everything in its path was
completely washed away.
Between 200,000 and
310,000 people are
thought to have died as a
result of the Tsunami, and
the count is not yet
complete.

For a few days after I
heard about the disaster, I
was obviously in shock,
and I was glued to the
television to see the extent
of the damage and like
many others I called and
made a donation to the
Tsunami Relief Fund. But
as we tend to do following
most tragedies, by the first
week in January, I was
getting on with my life,
forgetting about all the
people who had been
affected by the great
wave. The only thing I
recall hearing was that the
Sri Lankan Government
initially rejected the Israeli
offer of immediate
humanitarian help, but
later relented when faced
with the astonishing size of
their tragedy.

In March, I received an e-
mail from a friend telling
me about an apolitical
Jewish organisation called

J-Gift who were organising a trip for 10 days to a place called Kholack on the island of Phuket in Thailand, to go and help out with the relief effort. What I didn't realise was that the trip was going to be a leaving in less than a month. After about 10 minutes consideration, I decided that if I could get leave from work then I would go (to be honest at the back of my mind I thought that there was no way that JFS would allow this). Much to my surprise, they recognised it as a worthy cause and I managed to get leave, and after an interview I was given a place on the trip. I managed to raise sponsorship without too much of a problem – thank you to all of you who contributed - and the next thing I knew I was at the doctor's collecting my Malaria tablets.

On Sunday April 3rd, I set off on the journey with 22 other people aged between 20 and 35, our Jewish heritage being the only thing we had in common. Having travelled for 15 hours, taking 2 flights, when we finally arrived at Kholack on the afternoon of the 4th (Thailand = GMT +6), the whole group were exhausted. After a brief tour of the area, as we were starting work the next day, we all had an early night.

From Monday to Friday, our schedule was working on construction sites in the mornings from 8.30 – 12.30, this included

making cement, passing buckets down the line in order to build strong foundations of houses in various building sites, replacing the previous huts where the Thais were living, and clearing tree trunks and other rubble still left from the Tsunami.

In the afternoons, we would travel to various refugee camps and orphanages, and run a series of programmes such as face painting, drawing, a football school, friendship bracelet making etc, this was probably one of the most challenging parts of the trip. We saw hundreds of orphans who have nothing left, walking round just wearing T-shirts and underwear. The clothes on their back are their only possessions.

The days were long and a continual climate of 90 degrees plus made our work difficult. It was no surprise that when Shabbat arrived, we all needed a rest. We ate communal meals provided by Chabad, and generally spoke about the trip and what we had seen. It was a time when all of us, representing the whole religious spectrum, joined together and it was very powerful.

The Thais don't work on Sundays so we utilised our day by going elephant riding, and then travelling to the city of Phuket to get a few bargains in the market. The area reminded me very much of Soho. On Monday we completed one more full

day consisting of construction work in the morning, and helping in an orphanage in the afternoon.

My main impression of the trip was that 3 months after event, the place looked as though the Tsunami could have just happened. There were very few volunteers out there helping, and it didn't seem like the money which we all pledged to the Tsunami cause had reached any of these places. There is still dire poverty, and still a great need for help, and I really felt that my going made a difference. In years to come I am sure that those houses I helped to build will still be standing.

I think it was an amazing concept that I was able to go on an all Jewish trip. We were able to bring the concept of being an 'Ohr legoyim' – 'Light unto the nations' to life. Thank you all for your support.

Ruth Cohen is a member of Wembley United Synagogue and teaches at JFS in London. She is shortly to make Aliyah and study at Bar Ilan University.

WHAT IS JEWISH WOMEN'S AID?

Jewish Women's Aid (JWA) is the only specialist charity in Europe offering support to Jewish women and their children affected by domestic violence. It runs a refuge in London, which provides a safe haven for up to eight women and twelve

children. The refuge observes Kashrut, Shabbat and all festivals and is open to all Jewish women, whatever their level of religious observance.

JWA volunteers also operate a national, freephone helpline. Speaking to a Jewish service, which listens, believes and supports them can be a turning point for many. In addition, JWA provides outreach support and counselling for women in their own homes still living with their abusive partners. The counselling and support services are also available for those in the refuge and those who have moved on to new and safer lives. A drop in service is being developed. All services are confidential.

JWA seeks to raise awareness of domestic abuse within the Jewish community and works towards its total eradication. The Jewish community is no different from the rest of society. Statistics show that one woman in four is likely to experience domestic violence at some time in her life and those affected will come from every strata of society. Domestic violence happens across the board: within all socio-economic groups, within religious and secular families, to those with higher education and those without. It happens in professional, affluent households as well as in poorer homes. In 90% of

cases of physical abuse, the children are in the same room or in the room next door.

The abuse may be physical or emotional. Many women have said that the emotional scars, which destroy their self-esteem, can be longer lasting and more painful than those left by physical assault. Women may be deprived of any contact with family or friends or denied access to their own money. Women who in other spheres of their lives are competent and effective may be virtually imprisoned in their own homes. They sometimes arrive at the JWA refuge with nothing more than the clothes they stand up in. Frequently the children who come to us are completely traumatised by the domestic violence they have witnessed.

For any woman to admit to herself that she is experiencing domestic violence is very hard. A sense of failure, guilt and shame and the fear of not being believed prevent women seeking help earlier. On average women are abused 35 times before they confide in anyone. It is widely believed that Jewish women wait even longer before seeking help. The emphasis on family values has made it difficult to raise the issue of domestic violence in the Jewish community. JWA has tackled the issue and is doing something about it. We are a membership organisation and our aim

is that all Jewish women in the UK should become members.

If you would like more information about JWA, contact us at JWA, PO Box 2670, London N12 9ZE Tel: 020 8445 8060 Email: info@jwa.org.uk HELPLINE: 0800 59 12 03. Calls are free and untraceable.

Budapest by Natalie Cohen

As we approached Luton Airport in the freezing cold at the crack of dawn in late February to catch the 6.40 am flight to Budapest, I thought I must be mad - sensible people go to warmer climates - but as my husband would say, where is your sense of adventure? The Easyjet flight was on time and we made ourselves comfortable with our 'DD sandwiches' and our (truly to be missed) Easyjet coffee. The flight took 2 1/2 hours and being one hour ahead we landed at just after 10am local time.

The temperature was below zero so I was very pleased to have put on layers of clothes a fur hat, boots and woollen gloves. My first impression were how dull everything was - I suppose I had Prague pictured in my head which of course is Gothic and picturesque. There were remnants of snow in places, particularly on the higher ground. We settled into our hotel which was very comfortable, our room had been upgraded and

the view from our bedroom picture window was of the Chain Bridge over the River Danube and on the far side, the Royal Palace in Buda. To explain, Budapest was originally the cities Buda and Pest to the West and East of the Danube respectively. Through the wonders of the internet we knew there were kosher restaurants so the tinned tuna, pot noodles, crackers and cheese stayed at home.

We decided to go on a city tour in the afternoon by coach as it was now minus 2 degrees and we wanted to get the layout of the city. It is very sprawling with many statues. I had imagined that a bus tour would be the warmest way to spend the afternoon, little realising that we had to dismount at various points and walk around with the guide. Of course, these were always the most exposed and coldest parts of the journey.

After a refreshing night's sleep, on Friday morning we went on a pre-booked a tour of the Jewish Quarter. The weather was now a few degrees plus centigrade and much more comfortable. Our guide Eva meet us at our hotel and we proceed to the Jewish quarter where to our amazement we were told that there were 70,000 Jews living in Budapest as the Germans had not started to deport the Jews till 1944 and although they reduced the 700,000 to about 100,000 it was not as drastic as elsewhere. The area reminded us of

the East End of London in the 1950's where every one knew each other and there was a real community. We were shown a flat to see how a family would live in the late 1930's, it was crowded but all the Jewish community at that time thought they were safe!

Eva showed us the very ornate Rumbach Synagogue in need of major repair but the owner at present is not prepared to spend the money.....the owner being YOKO ONO (yes we were amazed too but apparently she owns 3 other synagogues around the world). We then went to the Great Shul in Dohany Street which took our breath away as it as recently been renovated at a cost of millions of dollars. The only larger synagogue in the world is Temple Emmanuel in New York. To say it is big is an understatement it must have been unbelievable on a Yom Tov, the women in fact have to tiers and the shul holds 3,000 people.

It is called Neolog which means it is an Orthodox Service but they use the organ on Shabbat and have an electrically operated Ark Curtain.

During the war many Jews were locked in the shul by the Nazis, and 7,000 died of disease and hunger and were buried in the court yard next to the shul which of course is a very unusual place for a cemetery, thankfully fenced off so that my husband (a Kohen) did not have a

problem. Next to the Shul is the Birthplace of Theodor Herzl.

The main Orthodox Shul in Kazinczy Street also houses a Jewish Community Centre and restaurant. They normally pray in an annexe in the winter due to the cost of heating and lack of tourists. The restaurant is very reminiscent of the Kosher Luncheon Club as was in Greatorex Street in the East End. There are within the complex various communal offices and dwellings.

There were four options for Friday night and Shabbat lunch – Lubavitch, the Hanna restaurant in the Community centre, the King's (Budapest's only Kosher) Hotel and Kinnor David an upmarket restaurant next to the Great Synagogue. We chose the latter and although the food was excellent, atmosphere was a little lacking as we were the only diners.

Overall, we felt it tragic that out of such a large community, there is not much religion. Kosher meat is difficult to get and has to be imported. Apparently Pesach food is scarce and expensive. The older people attend Shul, and although the younger people are interested in practising Judaism and are able to learn, and there are Jewish Day Schools, there are two generations in the middle lost to Communism. Budapest has a lot of potential and

so does its Jewish Community but both will need significant investment of time and money from the West.

Natalie Cohen is a member of Wembley United Synagogue

Bat Mitzvah? So what? by Judith Weisberg

No, it wasn't at all like a regular or even an irregular bat mitzvah party, because there was no party at all. Lizzie's 12th birthday became rather the opposite of a celebration, because no one in the family had an inkling that there should have been a party.

For the big day itself nothing extraordinary was planned. Josh, Lizzie's father, promised her a birthday gift "as soon as we will go to town" and Sandra, the bigger sister with whom she shared a room, wished her a happy birthday the moment she opened her eyes. "I really hope you like it", Sandra said as she carefully placed a large brown package on Lizzie's bed. The early morning coolness that will herald even a hot day in the desert, filled the barely furnished room. Their lift hadn't arrived yet and the family made do with mere necessities. Sandra looked at Lizzie unwrapping the gift, while she brushed her hair in front of a round frameless mirror. "You like flowers, right Lizzie"? Sandra smiled,

while Lizzie looked at the bright red vase that contrasted cheerfully with the grey blanket on her simple iron bed. She kept looking at the vase and mumbled: "Yes, sure. Thank you very much". In the little desert town where they resided since arriving in Israel in the early sixties, she had never seen any flowers for sale. The paper ware store sold postcards with deep red roses and blushing pink carnations, but a bunch of real flowers was as non-standard here as peanut butter. She leaned back on her pillow, watching Sandra pull a large suitcase from underneath her bed. A wooden board, resting on four grey bricks, separated the two beds. Instead of a hanging closet a taut string stretched between two whitewashed walls. The sole picture in the room was their mother's photograph, which Lizzie had pinned on her side of the "night table". Lizzie's eyes flew to the windowsill where a small red pigeon had deposited yesterday two little white eggs. They had disappeared, she noticed. With her feet on the tiled floor, she placed the vase on the board, while she leaned out of the window. "Look, San", she pointed to the beige sand downstairs. "There are the shells of the pigeon eggs".

But Sandra had left already. She needed to buy a writing bloc in the small shopping centre, located in the middle of the townlet, next to the ramp that served as a central

bus station. Only there a few purple bougainvilleas climbed merrily on a large wall, and the sidewalks were lined with thick leaved aloes who were supposed to produce flowers every eighteen years or so. But they didn't need much water to stay alive.

The silence was audible in this little town. It was disturbed only by flying insects and thumping tractors preparing the ground for new buildings. In the dark evenings – there were no lampposts yet- the crickets seemed as numerous as the millions of stars above. There were no cars. So now and then a donkey-pulled cart came dawdling through the streets. The only motors connected to wheels were the rambling blue busses, which arrived every hour from the nearby big city and the trucks driving to and from the textile plant. An occasional dusty army carrier would pull in as well, hitting the gas until he pulled over. Within minutes scores of little kids, as well as some older boys, would surround it, dreaming of a future in which they would be the proud driver of such a car. Basically everything was always quiet, dry and yellow, a vast contrast with Lizzie's Dutch hometown, where cars, rain and abundant flowers were the norm.

"Happy birthday, Liz", she sang quietly to herself while she jumped in her school uniform, a dark

blue skirt with a sky blue blouse. Her father had left to his job already. It was just a few minutes after seven. Life started early here to avoid work during the hot afternoons. All the same Lizzie felt a little festive, distinctly different, when she set out to school. A birthday is a birthday wherever you are. She was one the youngest students in he class because her European education had launched her on higher didactic level in comparison to her classmates who originated mainly from northern Africa.

“Hey, Liz, what ‘s up”.

Claire was out of breath when she caught up with Lizzie.

“Can you see I am not the same? It’s my birthday today”. Lizzie smiled broadly.

“Mazzal Tov, so you’re a real teenager now. Thirteen is a nice age. I feel like I am finally beginning to catch up with the adults”, Claire’s blond her and blue eyes made her look Nordic even though she was born in Morocco.

“No, I am twelve now”, Lizzie answered.

They had almost reached the ten or so cabins that formed their school, but Claire halted.

“But that is very special. You are Bat Mitzvah today. Mazal Tov. That is really nice. I remember my Bat Mitzvah. It was so special”.

“So when is the party? It’s so funny. I was sure you were Bat Mitzvah already”.

She spotted more kids from their class and yelled: “Hey, guys, Lizzie here is Bat Mitzvah today”. Within seconds she was the centre of attention.

Lizzie was a friendly kid and well liked in her class. She responded in her natural way:

“Fine , I am Bat Mitzvah. So what? Twelve is just another number from zero to a thousand”.

They looked at her as if she had fallen from the moon.

David was the first one to counter: “But Bat Mitzvah is something else. It’s very special”. It’s like when a boy becomes Bar Mitzvah. My Bar Mitzvah is in two months and already now we are very busy with everything”.

The seven-thirty call saved her from the embarrassment of not knowing what to answer. She felt stunned. What in the world was so extraordinary in becoming twelve. Fine, so it had a name. Bat Mitzvah. So what?

Lizzie felt so uncomfortable about the friendly and excited nods that her classmates kept on communicating to her, that she fled at the first break and raced home. Home was the two story building – as yellow as the adjacent desert- in which they lived now. The structure contained sixteen small apartments. In front was a street, lined by little dugouts in which tiny trees tried to survive the crushing summer’s heat. When she reached her street, she noticed the old man in the funny trousers

who came every day to water the trees. Lizzie had looked at him many times and wondered about his pants. They were so baggy that the cross point between the two leg pieces was hanging as low as his knees. She ran by him as if he too was aware of a secret she had missed.

Lizzie considered him as alien as the flat little clay ovens behind the yellow building in which most women baked their pita breads in the early mornings. They all wore a flowery cloth on their head. Orange hair tufts stuck out.

“Why do they all have orange hair,” Lizzie had asked Morrisette, a cute little girl who lived next door.

“It’s henna, a kind of dye. It’s against the Evil Eye”, Morrisette had answered her. It was the first time Lizzie had seen her, about to lower a string-held heavy plastic container with dough through the window, down to her mother who kept calling her. Lizzie knew that the strong fragrance of freshly baked spicy bread would waft into her apartment within minutes.

“It’s also very pretty, such colourful hair”, Morrisette answered. The dough had safely landed on the stony sand.

“Shall I bring you a pita, Leezie?” Morrisette couldn’t say Lizzie. Yes?” She didn’t wait for the answer and darted down the stone steps really eager to help her mother, or maybe just to be outside.

But this morning Morrisette was not in view. The street and the building seemed deserted. The apartment was empty too, but Lizzie noticed the same little red dove sitting in the window. She tiptoed to the icebox in order not to scare her away. She searched for cold water, but there was none.

"Bat Mitzvah", she thought. My father never told me anything about that".

The pigeon had flown away and Lizzie looked out of the window in the depth of the desert, which started beyond the clay ovens. Morrisette and the clay ovens were as alien to her as the iceman who brought them twice a week a huge bloc of ice for their "fridge". They were as alien as the girls who sometimes came to class with clipped hair that smelled of kerosene because of the lice that the school nurse kept finding. Sandra's red vase juddered when she retreated. In a moment she found herself behind the building next to the row of ovens. She walked further on the hard soil. Every few meters a kind of tough, seemingly dried out shrub emphasized the emptiness of this terrain. Stones were all over and the rocks looked like they were made of sand. She bent down when she noticed a sliver of red sticking out from under a large boulder.

"Make sure not to shove your fingers under the rocks because that is where the yellow scorpions and the black snakes like to

hide", the teacher had warned.

'But what is that red sliver?' she wanted to know.

In the distance she heard the hoarse yelp of a fox. The yellow building, the icebox and Morrisette disappeared from her mind, when she discovered a bright red poppy under the rock. And when she searched for more, she found little red and yellow flowers hiding in tens of crevices around her. She walked towards a lone tree with young green leaves, and stooped down in awe when she discovered between its roots scores of small black tulips.

Even though she knew she shouldn't, Lizzie sat down on the desert floor and watched the miniature flower garden. She felt that she finally encountered something normal.

Only when the sun began to burn on her head, did she pick herself up." I will come back here tomorrow. Every day", she said out loud.

The rest of the day she was very quiet. She did ask Sandra what this whole fuss about the Bat Mitzvah celebration meant, but Sandra waved it away by explaining that is was some Jewish superstition she shouldn't be concerned with.

"But why did you leave school so early", she wanted to know. "Claire came, and another girl as well, to ask why you had left"?

"Oh, nothing really". Lizzie didn't tell her about her confusion or the flowers she had found.

She did reread her mother's letter though time after time. It was a real birthday letter, she felt.

"My sweet girl", her mother wrote, "I wish I could be with you on this wonderful day. Of course every birthday is significant, but when a girl turns twelve, she is really on her way to adolescence. I am sure", the letter continued", that your father and Sandra will spoil you today and I hope you will buy something really nice with the money I sent you. Please let me know what you chose. I hope to see you soon and I am looking eagerly forward to your next letter". So maybe she too knew something about this Bat Mitzvah business.

Twenty dollars her mother had sent. The money excited her, and she cried every time she read her mothers' words.

She missed her mother. Her letters were always so sweet and gentle. "But why did she go away", Lizzie wondered so now and then.

Whenever she raised the topic with her father, he sarcastically remarked:

"yes, she was always good with words. It's easy of course. One writes a sentimental letter, mails it and one's duties are accomplished. Very easy". Her father made long days as manager of the local textile plant. Today she heard his step earlier than usual. Smiling he walked in. While she poured him a

cup with water, he said: "Go understand these people, girls. When I told my workers its Lizzie's 12th birthday they got all excited and my boss even urged me to leave earlier. So I did".

He had barely finished a soothing shower, and was just closing his sandals when a strong knock called him to the door. Two of his employees, each carrying a package uttered a loud mazel tov and obviously waited to be invited in.

"Please come inside", said Josh while beckoning Sandra to call Lizzie. The men sat by the bare table, astonishment clearly on their face. Lizzie walked in wearing shorts, which seemed to bewilder them. Claire and two other girls came next. They handed Lizzie presents, while kissing her on both cheeks. When she was about to unwrap the gifts they whispered: "No, you do that later".

Sandra had run to the grocery store and came back with nuts, crackers and sweet orange lemonade. After an hour or so the room was full with people, who were discussing mainly the cost of living and the weather. Even so long minutes of silence prevailed. They clearly felt awkward. The nuts and the crackers remained untouched. The door opened once more and Morrisette walked in, carrying a tray loaded with dripping honey pastries as well as a bottle of Araq and little red glass cups.

Within minutes every one drank lechayim, ate a pastry, shook hands with Josh while wishing him mazel tov and left, leaving Josh, Sandra and Lizzie stunned amidst a heap of presents.

Sandra couldn't stop talking when they got ready for bed. "Wow, did you have some birthday, Liz", she kept on saying. "What a ton of nice presents you got."

Lizzie pinned a little wilted red poppy next to her mother's picture. "You see, San, it wasn't a birthday, but a Bat Mitzvah, whatever that may be". "I really ought to find out what is so special about it", she added.

The presents, among which was a Jewish prayer book for women, sat in Lizzie's suitcase under her bed. She wanted to look at them later, all by herself. The large red vase was still standing on the makeshift night table. Obviously the small red poppy would never fit in there. But it did fit in Lizzie's heart. Together with Claire, Morrisette and the plant workers, it had granted the gift of belonging to a lonely girl in a strange country and sweetened her struggle.

Judith Weisberg is a Dutch journalist living in Jerusalem. The mother of two children, her son recently celebrated his Bar Mitzvah

DENISE'S KITCHEN

Vanilla & Lemon Cheese Cake

Shavuot is the time of year when it is traditional to eat dairy produce and dairy based meals. Not that we particularly need a religious reason to enjoy cheese cake – I can't believe how popular this dish has become over the last few years in both the Jewish and wider community.

Frozen and fresh cheese cakes are in every supermarket and in every possible flavour. All restaurants seem to feature some sort of cheesecake as a dessert and no afternoon tea is complete without a slice of cheese cake.

The best recipes are tried and tested, served at room temperature and rich without being heavy. Mine can be used at Pesach if you change the base to plava and the cornflour to potato flour.

Preparation Time: 20 minutes

Cooking Time: 30 minutes
Serves 8

Ingredients

1 packet trifle sponge bases
675g cream cheese
Juice & zest of 1 lemon
55g soft margarine plus 1 tablespoon – to grease tin
2 eggs separated
75g caster sugar plus 1 tablespoon
1 tablespoon cornflour/potato flour for Pesach
1 tablespoon vanilla sugar

1 teaspoon vanilla
essence
150ml double cream

Garnish

Zest of lemon and a
dusting of vanilla sugar
Thick yoghurt with vanilla
seeds stirred in or buy a
vanilla yoghurt

Method

1. Pre-heat the oven to
190C/375F/Gas mark 5
2. Grease and line a loose
based bottom 22cm/9"
cake tin
3. Arrange the trifle pieces
on the base of the cake tin
overlapping where
necessary.
4. Put the cheese, sugar,
zest and juice of lemon
into a mixing bowl.
5. Add the margarine,
yokes, corn flour and
finally the cream. Whisk
together until smooth.
6. Whisk the egg whites in
a separate bowl until they
are at the soft peak stage.
Add 1 tablespoon of caster
sugar.
7. Carefully fold the egg
whites into the cheese
mixture. Pour the mixture
over the sponge base.
8. Bake for 30minutes or
until the cake is set around
the edges and slightly
brown.
9. Leave to cool in the
oven for 2 hours and then
transfer to the fridge.

Serving the stylish way:

Remove from cake tin.
Garnish with zest of 1
lemon and thick yoghurt
with vanilla seeds or
vanilla yoghurt.

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