

I S S U E S

A · M E S S I A N I C · J E W I S H · P E R S P E C T I V E

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A TINY DOT OF PURE WHITE PAINT

by Edward Brown

Moses and God had an ongoing dialogue which began at the burning bush and continued until the day Moses died. I'm no Moses, but God spoke to me when I was a young man just as clearly as in a conversation you might have with your friend over a cup of coffee. I don't know why, and I certainly did nothing to deserve it. *(continued on page 2)*

(continued from cover)

I was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1960. My dad was a certified public accountant and my mom a homemaker. Dad grew tired of the cold and snow and took a new job in California. My parents, brother and two sisters (I'm the youngest) moved to San Rafael in the San Francisco Bay Area. They say I retained a Brooklyn accent until I was about five years old!

At school, I was one of the very few Jewish kids in my class. Although I didn't experience much anti-Semitism in school, there was some in my town. At my Hebrew school, the kids were pretty mean. They had been picked on at their public schools because they were Jewish. So when they came to Hebrew school, they took it out on my friends and me!

The neighborhood kids would tell me (what I assume they learned in Catholic school) that I had killed Jesus! Well, I had heard the name Jesus before, but I assured them I hadn't done it. "I wasn't even born then!" I told them. I didn't hate Jesus, but I began to really dislike the people who said they followed him.

My family attended Rodef Shalom, a Reform temple in San Rafael. We went faithfully until I was eight years old and then, for whatever reason, right after my brother was *bar mitzvah*, we stopped. And I no longer went to Hebrew school.

We were more culturally Jewish than religious. But I remember the excitement of searching for the *matzah* at Passover and opening the door for Elijah. And my dad—who almost never missed a day of work—always took off Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Hanukkah was also fun, but I wished we also had Christmas, like my friends.

I didn't think about God much. I do remember when I was eight or nine, a strong fear of death came over me. When I told my grandmother, she said, "Why are you worrying about death? Look how old I am, and I'm not worrying."

My mom had hired a gardener, a sweet Jewish man named

Hylan Slobodkin. From time to time, Hylan would try to talk to me about Jesus! I must have been only eleven or twelve, but I would get angry at him. "Hylan, you're Jewish!" I exclaimed. "You're turning your back on us Jews. Gosh, there aren't that many of us left. We can't have anyone abandoning ship!"

After getting my B.A. from Golden Gate University, I enrolled in graduate school there for a master's degree in taxation. I was dating a young woman named Eva, who was attending San Francisco State University. One of the women on her floor invited her to church, so she went. She began to bring some friends, and then invited me.

"You know I'm Jewish," I said. "What would I go to church for?"

"Well, they're really nice people," she replied.

OKAY, I'M GOING TO OPEN MY HEART A LITTLE BIT. IF THIS GUY JESUS IS REALLY WHO YOU SAY HE IS, YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TO EXPLAIN IT TO ME—LOGICALLY.

So, mainly to please her, I went. Calvary Chapel in San Francisco was a very small church at the time. But the people were really nice. In fact, when they found out I was Jewish, they said, "Oh, that is so cool!" I thought, *What!? These people are the exact opposite of the people who didn't like me when they found out I was Jewish.* So I kept going and kind of put up with the teaching. One of the guys there gave me a Gospel of John, but I never read it.

Then, on a summer evening in 1984, I had my "burning bush" experience. Only mine involved a motorcycle. While at home, I suddenly sensed God "speaking" to me. It wasn't as if I heard him and looked around and said, "Hey, who said that?" It wasn't an audible voice like the one which called to Moses from the bush. It was more internal, but very real. It was like having a dream when you're awake. But I was definitely alert.

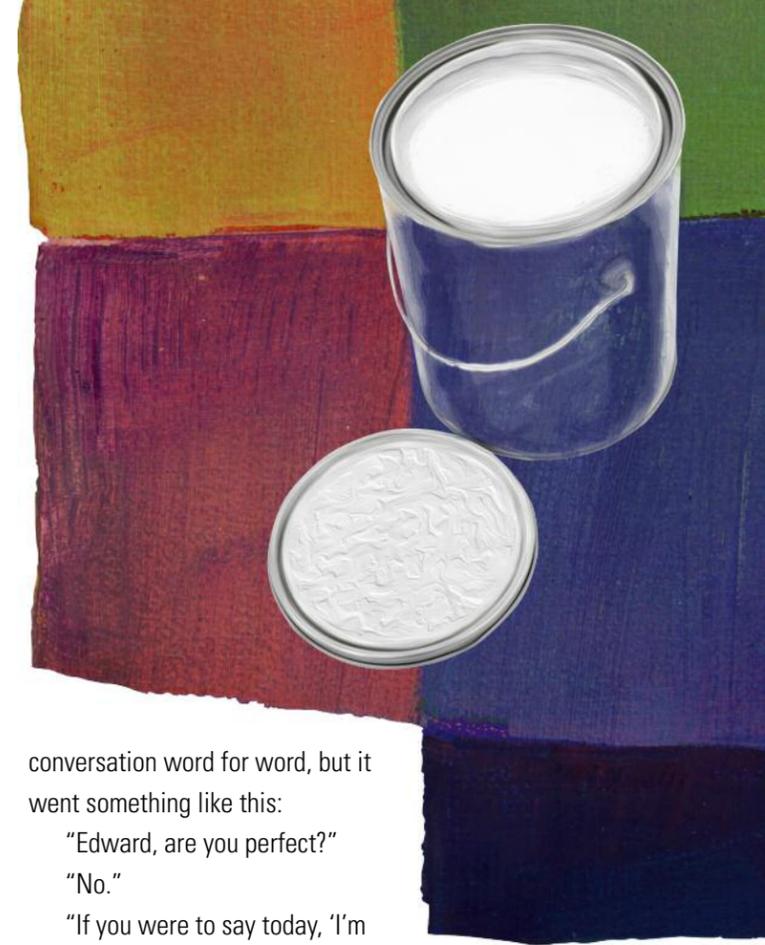
God told me to grab a blanket and the Gospel of John and ride into the countryside to Big Rock, about ten miles away. You would think I would have done what he said. But, like Moses, I was reluctant. I thought, *I don't know, the sun's starting to go down.* And I didn't go.

Then two weeks later while I was in the shower, God told me to do the same thing! I thought, *Okay, this time I'm going to listen.* I got dressed and headed out on my motorcycle. I rode past Big Rock and then began wondering where to stop. Then I heard God say, "I'll tell you when." I kept riding and finally he said, "Look to the left. See that pasture? Stop there."

I stopped, put the blanket down and started reading the Gospel of John. Only I wasn't getting anything out of it. And the sun was going down. So I packed up and headed home. I started doubting if I had heard from God. "God," I said, "I need some sign that this was really you leading me out here." He said, "Okay, here's the sign. You're going to run out of gas . . . right now!" At that moment, the engine started sputtering. I was running out of gas! Fortunately, my bike had reserve fuel, so I tapped into that.

Then I asked God, "Why did you bring me out here and then not talk to me?" He said, "Because you ignored me the first time. I wanted you to know how much I was going to share with you if you listened to me. This was a test to see if you were going to obey."

Months passed, and I kept going to Calvary Chapel with Eva. But I felt kind of distant from God. At that time in my life, I didn't "need" him. Everything was going well—good relationship, good business, good everything. I was doing fine on my own. Soon after, Eva suggested that we go to an evening class at the church about the foundations of a relationship with God. On December 16, 1984, we went, and the pastor said something that made me stop and think. I said to God, "Okay, I'm going to open my heart a little bit. If this guy Jesus is really who you say he is, you're going to have to explain it to me—logically." Suddenly, I wasn't hearing the pastor anymore. It was just me and God. I can't recall the



conversation word for word, but it went something like this:

"Edward, are you perfect?"

"No."

"If you were to say today, 'I'm going to be perfect from now on,' could you?"

"No."

"Even if you answered 'yes,' what can you do about all the things you did in the past that were not good?"

I had no answer. I knew I couldn't undo things of the past. God continued:

"Now would you agree that I am perfect?"

"Okay, I'll buy that."

"Then how can you, an imperfect person, come into my world? Take a can of pure white paint. That represents heaven and me. Now imagine you're a white dot of paint that has a little gray in it. If you put yourself into my paint can, is it still pure white?"

"No, because I'm not perfect."

"Then how can I allow you into my perfect world? You're going to mess it up." (continued on page 8)

ISSUES

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When it comes to personal prayer, Tevye the Milkman broke the mold. Shalom Aleichem's beloved protagonist, best known through the musical adaptation, *Fiddler on the Roof*, spoke with God very plainly and directly. Perhaps in the synagogue, Tevye faithfully recited from the Siddur (tradition!), but he also had an ongoing personal dialogue with the Almighty. When his horse went lame, Tevye moaned:

Dear God. Was that necessary? Did you have to make him lame just before the Sabbath? That wasn't nice. It's enough you pick on me. Bless me with five daughters, a life of poverty, that's all right. But what have you got against my horse? Really, sometimes I think, when things are too quiet up there, you say to yourself, "Let's see. What kind of mischief can I play on my friend, Tevye?"

We probably all feel that way at times. But we may not feel we can—or should—address God in that familiar way. After all, in the synagogue, prayers are corporate. Even those who wrap *tefillin* generally do so in preparation for the weekday morning services, where they will recite the prayers corporately. In the Talmud, Abba Binyamin declared, "A man's prayer is heard [by God] only in the synagogue."¹ Rashi said that a person is *obligated* to pray with a *minyan*.² Moses Maimonides expressed a slightly less strict view, "A person should include himself in the community and should not pray alone whenever he is able to pray with the community."³ Nachmanides agreed with Maimonides.⁴

What do the rabbis say today? In Chabad's "Ask the Rabbi" web column, a reader asks:

Due to my work schedule, it is impossible for me to attend morning prayer services in the synagogue, so I plan on praying at home. However, I'm somewhat confused as to which specific prayers I should recite. I understand that some require a *minyan* while others do not. I was hoping to attain further guidance on these matters. Thank you.

After the rabbi details which prayers should not be recited alone, he concludes, "Other than the above-mentioned prayers, you can recite everything which is recited when praying as part

of a congregation."⁵ Even when praying alone, the expectation of the inquirer and the rabbi seems to be that the prayers will be recited from the Siddur.

But for many, those prayers have become rote. In the introduction to *The Daily Prayer Book*, Philip Birnbaum notes, "It is regrettable that the Siddur, over which many generations have brooded and wept, has never been sufficiently appreciated as a vehicle of Jewish knowledge. People have learned to recite it by heart without giving adequate attention to its fine beauty and deep significance."⁶

Certainly, reading the Siddur thoughtfully is not just a matter of appreciating Jewish knowledge; it can be a deeply meaningful way to approach God. The Siddur contains half the book of Psalms. Although most of the included Psalms are best suited for congregational reading, some are quite personal. In Psalm 6, King David cries out: "Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am languishing; heal me, O LORD, for my bones are troubled. My soul also is greatly troubled. But you, O LORD—how long?" (Psalm 6:2–3). The writer of Psalm 94 says, "If the LORD had not been my help, my soul would soon have lived in the land of silence. When I thought, 'My foot slips,' your steadfast love, O LORD, held me up. When the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer my soul" (Psalm 94:17–19).

If the Psalmists speak to God in such an intimate manner, why don't we?

Perhaps we feel it is the rabbi's job to pray. Or that God listens to the rabbi, but not to us. But King David wrote:

O LORD, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether. (Psalm 139:1–4)

Tevye may have been puzzled by tradition:

Here in Anatevka we have traditions for everything. . . . For instance, we always keep our heads covered, and always wear a little prayer shawl. This shows our constant devotion to God. You may ask, how did this tradition get started? I'll tell you . . . I don't know.

But he knew how to talk to God.

So did people whose stories are told in the Hebrew Scriptures.

King David was in regular communication with God, especially in times of trouble: "Evening and morning and at noon I utter my complaint and moan, and he hears my voice" (Psalm 55:17).

When Jonah was swallowed up, he ". . . prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish, saying, 'I called out to the LORD, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice'" (Jonah 2:1–2). God heard his prayer: "And the LORD spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land" (Jonah 2:10).

Does God still respond to desperate cries for help? Consider Holocaust survivor David Bako (1913–2005). In 1943, Bako, a Jewish resistance fighter in Czechoslovakia,

"Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know." (Jeremiah 33:3)

ran for his life, just minutes ahead of his Nazi pursuers. He found a farmhouse, protected by a fierce German Shepherd. Bako eyed the doghouse as a hiding place, but the Shepherd, barking loudly, blocked his path. Bako put his finger to his mouth and the dog, as if sensing Bako's distress, softened and stepped away, allowing Bako to enter the doghouse. Bako sat in the corner and silently, fervently prayed to God for protection. When the Nazis arrived, the Shepherd again turned ferocious. When they tried to approach the doghouse, he got so aggressive they turned away. The dog then curled up with Bako in the dog house! Later, the farmer who owned the property went to check on his dog and discovered Bako. The farmer, who was German, and his Czech wife fed Bako and helped him escape.⁷

Prayer is talking to God, but it also involves listening to him. Sometimes God may communicate directly with us. God's interaction with Moses is probably the most prominent example of this in the Scriptures. But even today, God seeks to get through to us, and sometimes he seems to do so in ways that are unique to the particular individual, as in Edward Brown's "burning bush" story on page 1. Or in the case of Oded Cohen, born and raised in Israel on a secular kibbutz. Like Edward,

Oded wanted to know the truth about a very specific issue. And, like Edward, he asked God for a sign. Here is his story:

After serving in the Israeli army, I came to America and later married my wife, Bimini. A few years later, she wanted to convert to Judaism. She began reading the Torah and this inspired me to read the Bible also—I didn't want her to know more about my Bible than I did! However, to my dismay, she "turned Christian" on me.

I vigorously opposed all Bimini's attempts to share Jesus with me. Eventually, she flagged down a Jew for Jesus missionary handing out tracts on Market Street in San Francisco. She said we needed help.

I didn't think that I needed any help, but since it was so important to my wife, I eventually allowed a Jew for Jesus missionary to visit. When he came, I asked him to show me in "my Bible" where it says that Jesus is the Messiah. To my surprise, he showed me many Messianic prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures and pointed out how Jesus fulfilled them.

After several meetings, he told me to ask the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to reveal to me who Jesus is. And I did. I prayed.

Amazing things began to happen. Our pet bunny was paralyzed in her rear legs and had been for nearly a year. One evening, I laid my hand on her and said, 'Jesus, if you are who they say you are, let's see you heal her!' Before I even finished, she began hopping around the room on all four legs! ⁸

After other answers to his prayer for God to show him who Yeshua (Jesus) is, Oded received Yeshua as his atonement for sins and his Messiah.

The ways that God chooses to communicate his reality can touch on deeply personal issues. Karol Joseph was in her early thirties, self-disciplined and competent in most areas of her life—except for food. She had been on the weight loss/gain roller coaster for years, sometimes *(continued bottom of page 6)*

IN THE LITTLE SHTETL OF VAYSECHVOOS

Leah, the wife of Mendel and eldest daughter of the Sage, was known in Vaysechvoos as a very pious and wise woman. She was also very accurate in predicting things. And her insight seemed to come from dreams. Leah didn't remember every dream, but those she did portended events that would happen. No one could recall one of her dreams that hadn't become a real event.

When she dreamed of a "flood," it rained for twenty consecutive days, and the only ones in Vaysechvoos who came away unscathed were the *katchkas*. When she dreamed of a plague, the *Malach Ha-Moves* was not far behind. Thirteen souls kept the Angel of Death company when he left. It was a very dark season for the *shtetl*. Then there was the time that she had a dream that one of the daughters of Vaysechvoos ran



Vaysechvoos illustrations by Warren Dayton

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borderline anorexic, but mostly overeating. At an Overeaters Anonymous meeting, one of the steps was to turn her will and life over to the care of God, as she understood him. Karol, raised in a Conservative Jewish home, knew that God existed, but she wasn't sure that he would help her. She had recently been talking with a fellow student in her Ph.D. program at Brandeis who believed in Jesus. Karol continues the story:

The next day I asked God for his help. The people at the program said that I'd need to abstain from sugar and flour to break the eating cycle. So that is what I asked

away with a goy, and sure enough, a week later, Chana and Gregor, the Russian peasant who helped with the harvest, were not to be found. A silly note talked about their love for each other.

Not all of Leah's dreams were of impending calamities. When Leah dreamed of a bountiful harvest, everyone in the *shtetl* had a big crop that year, the biggest they ever had. Ah, that was a time of great rejoicing.

On another occasion Leah had a dream that the king was coming to visit, and sure enough, the butcher's cousin from Chicago arrived and gave enough *tzedakah* to buy land for the cemetery, repair the *shul* and sponsor two young men in yeshiva. How could a king do any better?

The news was now circulating around Vaysechvoos that Leah had a dream that there would be a pogrom in a week's time. In her dream she saw gentiles coming with staves and torches to beat the townspeople and burn down the village. Knowing that Leah's dreams were not to be ignored, her father, the Sage, called a town meeting.

"What's to do?" cried Shimmon the Butcher.

"We're all doomed!!" Mendel the Dyer shouted in despair.

"God help us!!" the others implored.

The Sage spoke in quiet tones so as to lessen the frantic mood that bordered on hysteria. "God help us indeed. Is this not a good time for us to pray? We must pray and we must work if we are to survive this attack on our home. We must get ready for the pogrom," reasoned the Sage.

God to help me do: abstain from eating sugar or flour for one day, just one day. At the end of the day, God had answered my prayer—talk about a miracle! Day after day God continued to answer my prayer and help me do what I could not do for myself. I soon realized that God could and would restore me completely, if I would turn my will and life over to him. I began to pray every morning, "God, show me your will for me and I promise I'll do it—no questions asked." It was during one such prayer that I felt a tug on my heart: "What are you going to do about Jesus?"⁹

A course of action was discussed and agreed upon, and for the next several days, the people spent their time pouring water on the thatched roofs so that they would not easily catch fire. They buried their few pieces of silver and wedding rings and any other items of value to hide them from the coming plunderers.

Right after the Shabbos service, they removed the Torah scrolls and hid them away as well. They also took away the livestock and quartered them with fodder in fields many kilometers from the town, so that there was nothing worth stealing and nothing dry enough to burn. They even sealed the well and created a false one. They had heard of how in a mass pogrom the *goyim* slaughtered a pig and threw it into the well, thus defiling all the water of the village. This would not happen to them. They were prepared. They were ready.

Oh, for the women and children, they constructed special hiding places, again a distance from the village.

They even took an hour a day to teach one another how to swing staves and how to use their spades and hoes as weapons. While they recognized that they were no formidable force, still they weren't going to make it easy for the invaders. They were going to defend their village!

So the people of Vaysechvoos, reluctant but ready defenders, waited and watched the horizon. And they waited



some more and nothing came down the road except a breeze chasing some loose leaves. And as they waited, they prayed the holy prayers of deliverance as they had all week. Every man, woman and child in Vaysechvoos prayed as they had never prayed before. They prayed an astronomical deposit into heaven's bank.

And as they waited, it became apparent that Leah's dream was not as powerful as the prayers of the people. They could barely believe it. But yes, they did believe it. They had to believe it. Their prayers were answered.

Even the Sage commented, "Prayer is a more formidable weapon than staves and spades."

Glossary: *katchkas*: ducks
tzedakah: alms
Malach Ha-Moves: angel of death

There are less dramatic ways that we can hear from God. The most common is by reading his Word and letting him "speak" to you through it. The Psalms say, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105).

If, like Edward, Oded and Karol and countless others, you

are ready to try personal prayer—talking to God—you are ready to hear from him. Be assured of the promise found in Psalm 145:18: "The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth." We can ask God to show us the truth, and we can trust that he will. ■

1. Babylonian Talmud, Berakoth 6a
2. Alfred J. Kolatch, *The Second Jewish Book of Why* (Middle Village, New York: Jonathan David Publishers, Inc., 1985), p. 217
3. *Mishneh Torah*, Tefilah and Birkat Kohanim (sometimes cited as Hilchot Tefilah) 8:1
4. Kolatch, loc. cit.
5. http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/541770/jewish/Which-prayers-are-omitted-when-praying-alone.htm

6. Philip Birnbaum, translator and annotator, *Daily Prayer Book* [Ha-Siddur Ha-Shalem], (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1949), p. x.
7. <http://www.kqed.org/arts/programs/imagemakers/episode.jsp?epid=272479>
8. <http://www.jewsforjesus.org/publications/havurah/v08-n01/twosides>
9. <http://www.jewsforjesus.org/files/pdf/ebooks/joseph.pdf>

(continued from page 3)

“Wow! Then I can’t do it.”

“That’s right. That’s why I had Jesus come. He can make you a pure white dot so you can come into my paint can.”

“But I’m not pure white.”

“Jesus died for you to make you pure white. It’s a gift. You didn’t earn it.”

That night, I received that gift. God had given me the logical explanation I needed. Now the Bible made sense. I broke down in tears, understanding how much God loved me and wanted to bring me into his kingdom.

I haven’t often had those “real dream” encounters with God. But since Eva and I were married in 1989, he has led us in many big decisions. When we wanted to start a family, we looked at 30 homes, but none seemed right. Then, while we were looking at another one, God told me, “This is the house.” When we got into the car, I told Eva what God had said. She said, “He told me that, too!” And we got the house, after some seemingly impossible obstacles.

God has also guided me in my career since I started my own business at age 23. I am now the CEO of Equity Bancorp, previously one of the leading private money lenders in California. God has spoken to me and Eva (in her case, usually through dreams), especially in tough times, like the Great Recession of 2008–2009.

Other doors have opened. Since August 2010 I have hosted a weekly radio show, *The Best of Investing* on a San Francisco station. In May 2013 I began co-hosting another weekly radio show, through Sports Byline USA, called *Sports Econ 101*. We discuss sports from a business



Edward Brown

perspective, and many stations around the country broadcast the show.

Eva and I have been married for 25 years and have two great kids.

I have tried to follow Jesus these past 30 years, though I often miss the mark. That’s why I don’t have one of those Jesus fish on my car. I feel as though I’m not always the best representative. But I know that in God’s eyes, I am still that tiny dot of pure white paint! ■



Watch the amazing true story of the dog that rescued David Bako from the Nazis at <http://j.mp/DavidGoliath205>
You can also see Oded Cohen’s story at <http://j.mp/OdedCohen>
and Karol Joseph’s at <http://j.mp/KarolJoseph>.

What do a devout Orthodox Jew, a drug dealer, and a female cantor all have in common? Check out Shout Out to find out. Jewish journeys of faith, streaming now at jewsforjesus.org/shoutout