

## modeh ani

Tuesday, 17 October 2006

By Leah Sherman

"I offer thanks to You, living and eternal King, for You have restored my soul within me; Your faithfulness is great."

There are things that we do because we have an innate sense that they are the right things to do. Then there are things that we do because we are taught them. Only after we have learned do we know they are right.

The phone started ringing, and upon waking I began to recite the Modeh Ani prayer. Initially, after I left Minnesota and returned home from my week's learning at Bais Chana, it took some time to make the recitation a habit, to make it less of an effort to remember. Gradually, with time, it became an automatic response to wake up with the words issuing from my lips. The phone's ringing brought me out of sleep, its persistent sound jarring me toward wakefulness. Before even the rooster could crow, my humanness received its daily reminder, its daily wake-up call, through the words of the Modeh Ani prayer. Remember in whose presence this phone rings.

The phone pealed one more time, then shut off as I leaned out of the side of my bed to wash my hands. The "unknown number" on the Caller ID hinted of an overseas call. No message. Immediately, it rang again. I answered it. My father's authoritative voice, measured with care, "You are booked out of Miami on today's flight to London." My mother had passed away.

An ordinary day, transformed like no other. As the impact penetrated my consciousness, I steadied myself with gratitude, in the knowledge that G-d was with me in that moment - not because of my innate sense of G-d, nor because it offered something to cling to. Through my lips, and with my voice, I had just acknowledged Him. The words, if we could see them, might still have been lingering in the air, "I offer thanks to You, living and eternal King, for You have restored my soul within me; Your faithfulness is great." An only daughter, 5,000 miles from my mother when she passed on, I was carried in those pre-dawn words that acknowledged my life, and with them her death. Thank G-d, He had seen fit for me to live, and pray for the soul of my beloved mother as she transitioned to the next world.

At the airport, I handed the reservation agent my passport. Meticulously, my father had attended to each minute detail to ensure that I would be in England the next day for my mother's burial. A pre-paid one-way ticket awaited me at the airline counter, alleviating any pressure that I should have to decide when I would return.

For 40-plus years, I was their daughter Lesley. The ticket was registered in my Hebrew name, Leah, that I had legally changed just three years prior. In the most stringent moments of his personal loss, there was nothing that my father did not think of, attending to each aspect of the arrangements with great care.

Time froze as I saw the reservation agent avert her eyes back and forth, from her computer screen to the name on my passport. Dread hovered at the edges of my senses. She couldn't match the reservation to the name Lesley on my passport, which I had yet to change.

My eyes implored the agent. "Don't make me say it. Let's not acknowledge this just yet, the reason I'm standing here.

"My mother died," I told her.

"I'm so sorry," she said, "but your passport identification must match the name on the ticket."

A security gridlock - computer incompatibility. She couldn't do anything, she said. Briefly, I glanced around the airport, assimilating the images that came to mind. My heart full to breaking point, I took a step closer to the counter, my Modeh Ani prayer continuing to root me to the ground with its insistence that a merciful G-d is in every moment.

The flight was full. The supervisor wouldn't let me buy another ticket in the name of Lesley, to match my passport. Please let this be smooth, I beseeched G-d. Maybe there was another airline going out that day, or maybe not. Did I really want to start traipsing around the airport, with my emotions trapped in a lost-in-space bewilderment, detached from

what I knew was right for me to do?

Calling on the name of my mother, Yocheved, mother of Moses who brought our great nation the Torah, I smiled. "Leah is my Hebrew name," I said. "I am Jewish, and I must arrive in England tomorrow morning to be at my mother's burial." Another exchange or two with the supervisor, and then a few minutes later I was heading for the gate.

At Bais Chana, I learned to say Modeh Ani to kick-start the day. I learned the words, how to punctuate them, and what they mean. "Your faithfulness is great." Faith in me, that is. G-d has faith enough in me that today I will make my life worth His while, that I will cleave to Him today, that I will do His will, that I will keep His laws, and that I will be where I need to be. G-d has faith enough in me to give me life today. Rabbi Friedman taught it so thoroughly that a day does not begin without its short recitation. It became part of me, or maybe it just returned to me.

G-d's presence was visible to me in every instant, at the most heart-wrenching, devastating time. Modeh Ani brought G-d into the moment in which I woke to the news of my mother's passing; it stayed with me in each part of the journey that landed me on English soil, and in every moment since then. Modeh Ani changed the way I live and the way I see life. It is the bridge between living and being alive.

Written in memory of Joyce Foster, Yocheved bas R' Yakov, of blessed memory, who passed away on October 11, 2004, the 26th of Tishrei 5765. My mother leaned out of her bedroom window at 6:00 am on a cold English winter morning in 1984, and waved as I set off for America. She told me what to do, where to go, what to look for.