



BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter
for Beginners,
by Beginners

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נס"ד

בראשית

ONE BIG FAMILY

Alan Magill

A number of years ago when I was taking significant steps in my Jewish religious observance, thanks in good part to attending the Beginners Service at Lincoln Square Synagogue, I found myself in a quandary.

There I was, on the Shabbat before Thanksgiving, spending a beautiful Shabbat with a perfect stranger who was my host for meals and lodging on the Upper West Side. By the end of this Day of Rest he didn't feel like a stranger anymore as we had shared words of Torah and words of friendship throughout the time I was with him. Which led to my dilemma ("quandary"). Arrangements had been made for me to stay with him by the Lincoln Square Hospitality Committee. I didn't know anyone well enough to ask for such hospitality, so I was glad that this Committee existed. But I had a strong need for hospitality for the following Shabbat as I would be out of town with family for Thanksgiving and my Friday train back wouldn't arrive at Penn Station until about 3:00 p.m. It was not enough time to get back to Queens for the around 4:10 p.m. candle lighting, but certainly enough time to get to the *(cont. on p. 4)*



LOOK FORWARD AND SHINE YOUR LIGHT

Dr. Kerry Bar-Cohn

Apart from their role in publicizing the miracle of the oil, the Chanukah lights can be thought of as a metaphor for something else that is no less precious, no less miraculous -- the "light" that shines within each and every one of us.

When we look at the flickering flames of the Chanukah candles, we can see in them a reflection of our own inner light -- our uniqueness, our very essence. We can also recognize that when the individual lights are brought together, there is an even greater glow, and that no one's light takes away from anyone else's. As more flames are kindled throughout the festival, the light in the room increases. The more of us who shine, the more brilliant the light we radiate out to the world.

Critical to the menorah is the *shamash*, the candle that lights the others, that "serves" them. We are not in this world alone, nor are we expected to generate everything by ourselves. It is our contact with others, the *(cont. on p. 2)*

TINY MIRACLES

Kendra Meinhard

A repeating theme of Chanukah is miracles. We play the game of dreidel with tops whose letters represent the sentence "A miracle happened there," and we insert a section into our daily Chanukah prayers and blessings called "*Al Hanissim*," which praises G-d for the miracles He has performed for our ancestors. Of course, we also perform the central ritual of the holiday, lighting the Chanukah menorah, to honor these miracles. But what miracles are we actually celebrating?

According to the popular story of Chanukah, we light eight candles on the menorah and celebrate the holiday for eight days to commemorate that the oil the Maccabees found to rededicate the Temple after its destruction lasted for eight nights, when the oil was really only enough to last for one day.

It was this reason for lighting the menorah that I was told growing up, and I can barely remember *(cont. on p. 3)*

LOOK FORWARD (cont. from p. 1)... inspiration that we derive from people around us, that helps to ignite the “flame” within. And we, in turn, go on to kindle other people’s inner flames, to inspire them -- which is one of the greatest satisfactions in life!

Like the *shamash* whose flame does not diminish or go out when it lights other candles, what we give and share with other people never diminishes our “selves.” Just the opposite -- by giving, we become fuller, burn brighter, knowing that we’ve contributed to the lives of others and helped make the world a better place, one small flame at a time.

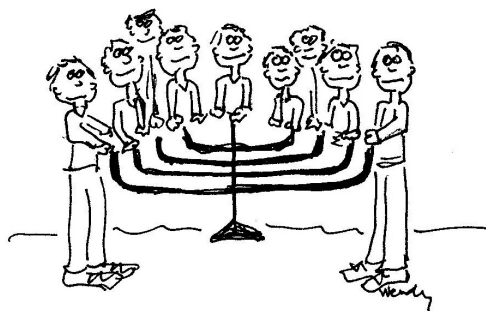
Sometimes, sharing our light is natural and obvious, as in giving to our own children. I would never feel that giving to any of my sons could possibly “take away” from me. When I see them lit up, full of joy and self-confidence, ready to learn and to give, I cannot think of anything that gives me greater “*nachas*” (joy and pleasure). And when I reflect on the fact that all my love and hard work had a part in making that happen, I feel a sense of completeness. It is precisely that feeling of having used my own flame to help ignite another -- in this case, one of my beautiful children -- that helps my own flame glow brighter.

Another organic type of giving is what I do with the students with whom I interact on a weekly basis. When a girl I have mentored starts to flourish, I get the great pleasure of seeing her light grow stronger each day. I feel incredible joy and satisfaction knowing that, in my small way, I have contributed to her positive growth.

Once we start to look outside of our “inner circle,” however, even toward those we consider our “peers,” this positive feeling can become harder to channel. Sometimes feelings of competitiveness, jealousy and inferiority can creep into our thoughts. This is when the real emotional work and growth must begin.

Witnessing other people’s success can occasionally cause us to feel diminished -- as if our light is not as bright as we once thought, as if it is not as brilliant as theirs. But this is far from the truth. We live in a world that overly values money, fame, physical beauty -- “external” markers of success. In Judaism, however, true success, success that really counts, is measured by a different set of values. *Chesed* (kindness), *tzedakah* (charity) and personal, spiritual growth -- these are currencies of infinitely higher value. Once we place outward success in its proper perspective, knowing that it is no “threat” whatsoever to our own spiritual and interpersonal success, we can greet the success of others with a full heart. We can feel joy in the happiness of those around us, knowing that it is only more “light” in the world.

Another important thing to remember when confronted



“LIGHT ONE CANDLE AND CHANGE THE WORLD”

with negative feelings is that we are all connected. If we feel discomfort from the accomplishments of others, it is actually an opportunity to look for our inner connection, to actually feel what it means to love our neighbor “as (y)ourself.” We can focus on the connection between the many, as part of a unified mission to illuminate the world and to know that their success is our success, and share that joy -- celebrate our triumph!

Lastly, each of us has a distinct *neshamah*, personality and history that combines to make our life experience -- and our “light” -- qualitatively different and completely unique. Each of us has an individual destiny. As I was growing up, my mother told me, “Don’t look to the right or left. Look straight ahead and do your thing.” Not that she meant to ignore those around me -- she simply wanted me to look forward, to find my own mission and my own joy, and to shine in my own unique way.

It’s so easy to be distracted and intimidated by what other people are doing, to look at their success and cause it to color our mission in life. Now, there may be cases where the success relates to something that resonates within us as individuals, and it may “ignite” our passions, cause us to alter our vision and our mission. But also keep in mind that each life is its own. They have their lights, and you have yours. For each person, it is your light, and your light only, that you have the duty, and the great opportunity, to shine.

It’s the same on the national level. On Chanukah, we testify to the miracle of Jewish survival and destiny. The candles of the Menorah remind us of our mission to be a “light unto the nations.” The candles serve as a statement that there is something special that the Jewish people bring to humanity, a distinct brand of “light” that we offer, which helps to nourish the world. That light combines our desire for compassion and justice, the willingness to stand up for the oppressed, to do the right thing -- even when it’s unpopular, to strive to be a holy people, one of righteousness and decency. Every nation has its own specific light, which helps to fill out the global “spectrum.” And we Jews have ours. When we look at the Chanukah candles, it’s a chance to focus on our own special mission -- to take pride in it, cherish it, “de-light” in it.

So this Chanukah, radiate *your* special brand of illumination, help others to kindle theirs, and feel connected -- bonded to one another -- in our calling as a Jewish nation. Together, we can light up the world! *Chanukah Sameach!*

Kerry Bar-Cohn is a doctor of chiropractic. She and her husband Rabbi David Bar-Cohn have four sons and live in Ramat Beit Shemesh, Israel. Kerry is also a tap dance teacher and is known by her alter ego, “Rebbetzin Tap,” star of the musical DVD series for children. You can reach her at www.rebbetzintap.com.

TINY MIRACLES (cont. from p. 1)...a time in my life when I didn't know this story. But as many commentators point out, this explanation actually raises many questions. For instance, if oil sufficient to last for one day actually lasted for eight days, then the first day that the oil burned was normal use of the oil. Only the last seven were miraculous. So why do we celebrate Chanukah for eight days with eight candles rather than seven?

Some explain that the first day actually had its own miracle with respect to the oil. Some suggest that only an eighth of the oil burned on the first day, and yet it burned for an entire day. Others suggest that after pouring out the flask of oil for use in the menorah each day, the priests found that it miraculously refilled.

These answers respond to the question of why we celebrate Chanukah for eight days by focusing on supernatural and extraordinary events. Other answers focus on miracles that appear to follow the laws of nature but are just as important. One such idea is that the first day of Chanukah celebrates the miracle that a flask of oil was found in the first place, and another is that it commemorates the "impossible" victory of the Jews over the Assyrian Greeks.

By contrasting these two categories of explanations, it becomes apparent that there are two different approaches to the idea of miracles. One focuses on the events that defy the laws of nature, while the other focuses on events that are extraordinary, but fit into our conception of what is possible in the natural world.

In Judaism, we celebrate both types of miracles, but it often seems that the seemingly supernatural miracles receive more attention. One example of this is the focus on the exodus from Egypt, which was filled with many miracles, such as the parting of the Red Sea.

Every supernatural miracle, however, also has a natural side - even the parting of the Red Sea. Some scientists calculate that, given the right conditions, it is possible that a strong wind could have parted the Red Sea naturally. A strong wind is actually cited in the Biblical text as coming and parting the sea, and there are some seas in the world that actually do "part" on a regular basis, such as the South China Sea. The odds of the Red Sea splitting at the very moment that the Israelites were crossing would be very slim, thus the timing of its parting certainly makes this event a miracle. A similar argument can be made to explain the manna that the Israelites consumed when they were wandering in the wilderness. A number of natural sources of a substance similar to manna have been suggested, such as certain types of fungi that live in the desert. Once again, the fact that the manna appeared as the Israelites were in need of food and was available in sufficient quantities to sustain such a large group of people would also be a miracle.

This conclusion follows from the supposition that since G-d created the world and has control over it, it would



certainly be within G-d's power to make sure that the rhythms of the ordinary world serve the Jewish people as needed. Furthermore, since every natural process is the result of one that came before it, one can even assume that such "naturalistic miracles" were planned from the beginning of time and were created with the earth itself.

Personally, I find the naturalistic miracles, although they do not receive as much attention, to be more meaningful, as I can relate to them more easily. When I think about supernatural events, such as oil miraculously multiplying, or an invisible, magical force parting the Red Sea, it is difficult for me to feel as though I have experienced something similar. Naturalistic miracles also fit in more logically with the scientific education I have received, which taught me that the world is governed by a consistent set of natural rules. And even within the category of naturalistic miracles, I often find that small events are more meaningful. For example, I appreciate all the small joys of Shabbat, including spending time with my friends and curling up with a book on a comfortable couch.

The eight nights of Chanukah provide me with a special opportunity to appreciate miracles. The light from each of the candles is actually a tiny demonstration of the everyday "miraculous" process of combustion, and yet it is so beautiful. Even as the Chanukah menorah reminds us of miracles supernatural and naturalistic so many years ago, it also represents the ordinary wonders that allow us to constantly behold the Divine, even in the most mundane moments of our daily experiences.

Kendra Meinhard is originally from New Jersey and now lives in New York City. A recent graduate of Barnard College, she works at NJOP and is pursuing a Masters Degree in Public Administration.



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DATED MATERIAL

ONE BIG FAMILY (cont. from p. 1)... Upper West Side for Shabbat. So I was torn. Do I just ask the Hospitality Committee again for next week or should I ask this nice man if I could stay with him on the following Shabbat?

I decided to ask him. "I'm coming in late next Friday afternoon from out of town," I began. "Could I possibly stay with you again next Shabbat?" He frowned, and I thought I had pushed the limits and had asked for too much. Then he said, "I won't be here next Shabbat. I'm going out of town."

"That's okay," I said, and was about to add that I would call the Hospitality Committee but I never got to finish my sentence. That's because he spoke over me and said, "But you could stay here on your own."

I was stunned. Flabbergasted. Here was a man who lived in a stylish, Manhattan apartment, who barely knew me. And he was giving me use of his apartment for an entire Shabbat. In all my life up to then, I had never been the recipient of such a generous act of giving me the use of someone's domicile. I thanked him profusely and he told

me that he would make arrangements with the front desk to leave me a key for the following Friday.

The next week as my train traveled north to Manhattan and as the hour was getting later, I was calm in the knowledge that I did not have to rush back to Queens to make Shabbat. I made it to his apartment with a half hour to spare and spent a beautiful Shabbat there. I also was hosted for my Shabbat meals at people with whom I was set up and attended the inspiring Beginners Service. After Shabbat, on my subway ride back to Queens I was still amazed at how my host could "lend" his apartment to someone he barely knew.

Then it hit me. On a superficial level we had just met the week before, but our connection went back much, much longer, when our ancestors were gathered at Mount Sinai.

Alan Magill is a produced playwright and columnist for "The Jewish Press." Although he attended the Beginners Service at Lincoln Square for a significant chunk of time, he does not consider himself a graduate as he is aware there is still so much more to learn.

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בראשית

Bereishith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Sarah Rochel Hewitt of NJOP. Special Beginners Services are conducted at synagogues throughout the United States to introduce those with limited backgrounds to the beauty of the traditional Hebrew service. For more information regarding the Beginners Service closest to your home, to establish a local Beginners Service, or to learn more about NJOP programs, please contact us: 989 Sixth Avenue, 10th Floor, New York, NY 10018, 646-871-4444, e-mail info@njop.org or visit www.njop.org.

Readers: This is your newsletter and we'd like to hear from you. Article contributions are always welcome.

Illustrations by Wendy Dunn

REKINDLED BY LIGHTS

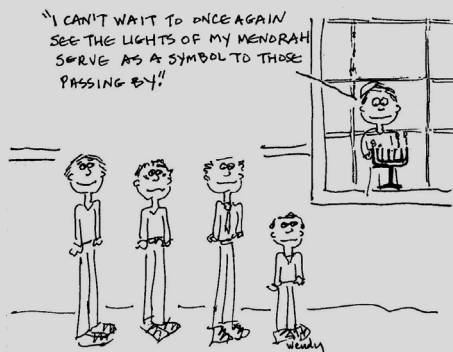
Emanuel Zareh

Chanukah has always been a holiday of mixed emotions for me. Growing up as an only child, I remember playing dreidel by myself during afternoons after school on the floor of my tiny bedroom in my grandfather's house. You see, I grew up in a household of modest means and spent most of my childhood alone, as my mom, a single parent, worked while my grandparents raised me. The feelings I felt during the evenings of Chanukah were also mixed. I enjoyed singing songs while lighting the menorah with my grandfather, but I often felt frustrated by the gifts, or lack thereof, as we concluded the evening rituals. I am sure that I am not alone in having had these feelings as a child. In hindsight, however, I am now grateful for whatever my family could scrape together. But as a child, Chanukah meant loneliness, and reinforced my financial insecurities, especially when compared to my more affluent peers at the private Jewish school that I attended.

As a teenager and during my college years, my religious association drifted. While I held leadership positions in the Jewish community at my college, that was more of a social experience. On my own, Chanukah lost its importance. I was the typical wandering Jew, struggling with religious meaning, especially after my grandfather passed away during my junior year. The connection weakened further after I returned to New York City following my graduation, when I focussed on my social life more than anything else. It was time wasted for sure, but it was actually part of a maturation process.

My religious experience, especially the celebration of Chanukah, took on new and more significant meaning when I entered Lincoln Square Synagogue and met Rabbi Buchwald and Rabbi Robinson. Encouraged by a dear cousin of mine to come and wrap *teffilin* every Thursday morning, I felt reinvigorated and sought to learn more and be more present in religious life. Interestingly, Chanukah took on new meaning before any other holiday.

It was my first year after business school. My job at a hedge fund evaporated (the hedge fund closed). It was during the teeth of the "Great Recession," and job prospects looked very dim. At the



same time, I exited a long-term relationship. All this occurred in the weeks just before Chanukah. Talk about making things worse between me and a holiday!

Interestingly, it was at this time that I decided to return "home." In what might have appeared a random chance, I noticed a quote from the book of Isaiah - "Return to Me for I will redeem you." Feeling in need of redemption, I went back to Lincoln Square Synagogue.

As I entered Lincoln Square Synagogue one evening, I saw the Chanukah lights. I had not even known that it was Chanukah! Seeing the lights, I remembered my childhood - but the good parts, the parts where my grandfather and I would light and sing songs. I no longer felt sorry for myself for being alone and not getting presents. Instead, I realized that I had denied myself the many joys of Chanukah for years. Soon after, I ran to a local store, bought my first Menorah and lit it for the first time. As I viewed the lights glowing in my window overlooking Columbus Avenue, my soul had a sense of redemption.

This Chanukah season, I once again find myself at an interesting turning point in life. I have many unanswered feelings, emotions, and questions about the direction I need to go. My faith, however, although being tested time and again, is not wavering. I now realize that the path to Providence is uneven. There have been, to be honest, many missteps along my path to living a life guided by Torah principles - especially in personal relationships with people I love. Nevertheless, I can't wait until Chanukah - to once again see the lights of my menorah light up my apartment and serve as a symbol to those passing by on Columbus Avenue that here lives a proud Jew.

These lights will also remind me of what it means to live as a Jew. I may stumble, but I am aided by my hope in G-d to make this holiday, and every day, a positive turning point in life - for I seek to be redeemed by returning to Him.

Emanuel Zareh grew up in an Iranian family from the town of Shushan (from the holiday of Purim) and now lives on the Upper West Side. He attended Colgate University and Harvard Business School, and currently works at a hedge fund.

CONGRATULATIONS AND MAZAL TOV

ENGAGEMENTS

Lana Kalickstein and Steven Friedman
Megan Quattlebaum and Ben Klein
Julia Vosler and Robert Rossy
Henny Zaretzky and Abraham Gilman
Mazal Tov to mother, Chana Gilman



MARRIAGES

Sarit Ickovics and Yonatan Tannenbaum
Mazal Tov to parents, Karen and Alain Ickovics

BIRTHS

Rivka and David Gorin, on the birth of a daughter,
Chana Bracha
Chava and Yosef Maccaba, on the birth of a daughter,
Sara
Linda and Joshua Reich, on the birth of a son,
Noam Joseph Zev
Mazal Tov to grandparents, Joan and Stephen Reich

BAR/BAT MITZVAH

Moshe Wolff
Mazal Tov to parents, Laurie and Richard Wolff

CONDOLENCES

Yehudis and Moshe Ashin, on the loss of their granddaughter,
Yael Bracha Guttman, daughter of Basya Chaya and
Yair Dovid Guttman
Ari, Gabriel and Diana Bousbib, on the loss of their father,
Moshe Bousbib
Ahuva Jackie Gross, on the loss of her father, Dagvadorj Auysh
Ellen and Mark Newman, on the loss of their son,
Ariel Yitzchak Newman

SPEEDY RECOVERY/REFUAH SH'LAIMA

Regina Ullendorff, Rachel bat Feige

CONGRATULATIONS

Dr. Lynn Davidman, on her new book, *Becoming Un-Orthodox: Stories of ex-Hasidic Jews*

TODAH RABBAH

Tovah and Assaf Alster, Robin and Neil Goldberg, Michelle and Eli Salig and Manny Zareh for making possible the participation of Rabbi Mordechai Reich & family in the

LSS High Holiday Beginners Services. Thanks also to the management of the Beacon Hotel
Deborah Bendheim, for helping with the various Beginners mailings

Break Fast Sponsors following Yom Kippur Services:
The Adler-Landau Family and Ellen and Mordecai Lipkis
The Gibber Family for the flowers at the High Holidays at the Lincoln Square Synagogue Beginners Service
Kiddush Sponsors on the High Holidays: Tovah and Assaf Alster and Susan Hecht and David Cohen and parents, Dr. Sandra and Michael Hecht
Roberto Novig for his "inspiring" ushering during the High Holiday Beginners Services
Chaviva Warner and Naomi Ferrando for helping with the Beginners High Holiday set up

