

# BERESHITH

## "IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter  
for Beginners,  
by Beginners

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# בראשית

## MAKING MIRACLES

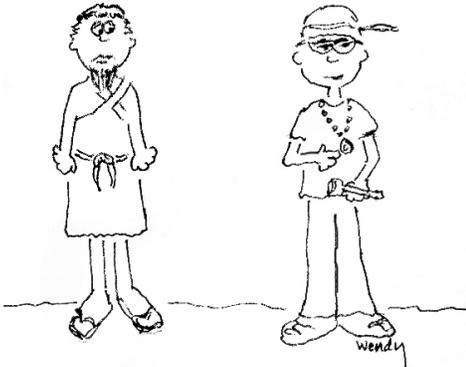
*Chaplain, Captain Michael Bram*

The most well-known aspect of Chanukah is that one day's worth of oil burned in the Menorah for eight days. In commemoration of that miracle, we light a Menorah in our homes for eight nights. But is that all? Jewish holidays are not mere commemorations of past events, they are messages carried down through history for us to learn and from which to grow. There are many miracles in Jewish history that have no holiday associated with them. What is so special about the miracle of Chanukah, which isn't even found in the Jewish Bible (amazingly enough, it is mentioned in the Christian Canon)? What message are we being sent through Chanukah? How can Chanukah be relevant to us today?

To understand the "true meaning of Chanukah," we need to know the whole story. In the second century BCE, the land of Israel was under the control of the Hellenistic Greeks. Greek culture and the Jewish world-view are polar opposites. The Greeks had no problems with the Jewish people, and therefore there was no attempt to exterminate us (as opposed to the Purim story). Their problem was with Judaism, and the Jewish view of the world. In an attempt to eradicate Judaism, the Greeks issued a number of decrees against specific Jewish practices.

They outlawed the study of Torah and the observance of *Rosh Chodesh*, the new moon. Judaism cannot survive without a functioning *(cont. on p. 2)*

WHO NEEDS THOSE  
"BACKWARD" JEWS WHO  
NEEDED TO CLING TO THEIR  
"ARCHAIC BELIEFS"?



## CHANUKAH IN IOWA

*Miriam Myers*

My younger sister and I were the only Jewish children attending Monroe Elementary School in Davenport, Iowa, in the sixties. In most ways, I was just like any other little girl in the Midwest. I went sledding in the winter and caught fireflies in the summer. Only a few symbols formed my Jewish identity. For instance, the *mezuzah* on our front door was my daily reminder that I was part of a Jewish family.

Like most red-blooded Americans enjoying the freedom of living in the melting pot, the extended family gathered to celebrate Thanksgiving with all the trimmings. (Our stuffing actually had farfel, which was purchased across the river in Rock Island, Illinois from the kosher deli). However, this attitude of "when in Rome" did not extend to the next holiday. As the orange, yellow and brown displays in the supermarkets were replaced by green and red, a voice from within said, "This is not mine."

Each year, I would have to break in a new teacher. This happened in the fall. I was just an ordinary student, maybe a bit more gabby than the rest, until Rosh *(cont. on p. 2)*

## THE GIFT OF THE GIFTS

*SR Hewitt*

The other night, a friend of mine told me how incredulous she was about how strongly her husband's family focussed on the gift-giving aspect of Chanukah. In her own traditional childhood, her family had only given children Chanukah gelt, a few pennies or coins. Her husband's family, on the other hand, celebrates Chanukah with a large party and lots of gifts. The Chanukah menorah was lit, but that appears, in her opinion, to be the extent of tradition.

As I listened to my friend's insights I noticed that I felt mildly uncomfortable. From a strictly traditional opinion, she was right: There is no historic tradition of gifts associated with Chanukah. On the other hand, my own memories are filled with warm recollections of my parents giving my brother and me little presents each night (and one or two big ones). Those long ago evenings, when my brother and I would ask over and over if my father would soon be home so we could light the menorah, as we tried to pretend that we weren't really asking how soon until we could get presents, built a *(cont. on p. 3)*

MAKING MIRACLES (cont. from p. 1)...Jewish calendar (knowledge of the exact day of the month) or Torah. Next, they outlawed the observance of the Sabbath. The idea of taking a day of rest to acknowledge our Creator and His control over the world stood in direct contrast to the Greek view of the power of humanity over existence.

Finally, they outlawed circumcision. While it is obvious that this is a fundamental mitzvah that plays a prime role in Jewish life, it is not immediately clear how or why this decree was necessary to wipe out Judaism. The Greeks revered physical perfection over all else, while Jews are concerned with spiritual pursuits. In the Greek view, the pursuit of physical pleasure and athletic prowess was the highest level of human achievement. The Jewish view, that our physical urges are something to be controlled (not necessarily restrained) and used in a constructive and spiritual manner--a belief represented by circumcision--was totally alien and abhorrent to the Greeks. The idea that we would, in their eyes, mutilate our 'perfect' bodies to remind us to use our physical side to serve the spiritual, was a dangerous idea that needed to be destroyed, at any cost.

These two views are still in conflict today. Never has this dichotomy been more apparent than just last summer when the Jewish world celebrated the completion of the *Daf Yomi* (page-a-day) cycle of Talmud study at the exact same time as the rest of the world celebrated the Olympics.

As a result of these ancient decrees, the Jews, led by Judah Maccabee, revolted against the Greeks, and a war ensued. The real miracle of Chanukah is that the Jews won the battle for Jerusalem. Contrary to their depiction in popular Jewish culture, the Maccabees were not highly trained and skilled warriors--they were rabbis, scholars, people devoted to serving God and protecting Judaism. As the Chanukah addition to our prayers says, God delivered the "strong into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, the impure into the hands of the pure, the wicked into the hands of the righteous, and the wanton into the hands of the diligent students of Your Torah" (*The Complete Artscroll Siddur*). Imagine a band of Talmudic scholars defeating the US military. Only after the

battle was won could we re-enter the Temple and light the Menorah. The prime miracle is the miraculous victory over the Greeks (this is one of the suggested reasons why Chanukah is eight days long. If one day's oil burned for eight days then the miracle lasted for only seven days. There are many answers to this question, but one is that the 'extra' day is for the miracle of the victory against the Greeks).

There is, however, one more aspect of the conflict that is not as well known, but should be. In my opinion, this particular aspect is at the core of the real meaning of Chanukah and the lesson that is needed in our time more than ever. The common belief is that the conflict was only one of Jews versus Greeks. In fact, the conflict was also a civil war. Many Jews were enticed by the Greek Hellenistic perspective and abandoned traditional Jewish faith in favor of the more 'modern' Greek culture. Some even went so far as to have their circumcisions surgically reversed. The ones who remained faithful to the Torah and its values were in the minority and were persecuted not just by the Greeks, but by the Jews who had assimilated into Greek life and felt threatened by these "backward" Jews who needed to cling to their "archaic beliefs." The real conflict was within the Jewish community itself: assimilated, Hellenized Jews, with the assistance and support of the Greek army, against faithful, traditional Jews.

I cannot think of a message that is more relevant to us today than this one. We live in a generation of Jews that is, at the same time, one of the most educated and one of the most assimilated. More Jews, both men and women, are learning Torah and performing mitzvot than perhaps at any time in our history. At the same time, so many of our brothers and sisters are being lost to the allures of non-Jewish culture and practice. The word Chanukah means "dedication." Not just the rededication of the Temple, but our rededication to Jewish values. The message of Chanukah is that we need to be true to our beliefs, to hold fast to our culture even when we are up against seemingly overwhelming odds. When we do, God performs miracles for us.

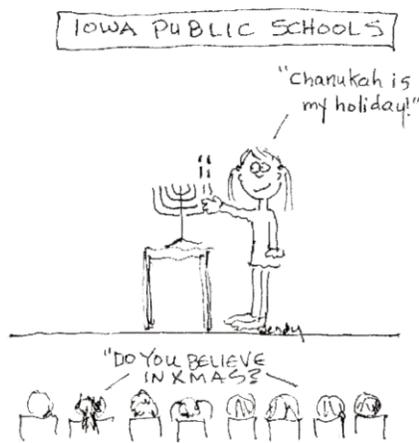
*Chaplain, Captain Michael Bram has served in the Air Force for eight and a half years. He is currently the Jewish Chaplain at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas.*

CHANUKAH IN IOWA (cont. from p. 1)...Hashana approached and I would quietly inform the teacher that I'd be missing school.

"Oh, you're Jewish?" was the usual response.

Once through the Jewish holiday season, my Jewishness was forgotten until the X-mas recital. Suddenly, my Jewish roots were recalled and considered of great educational importance. For this glorious gathering, the entire school body was squeezed into the auditorium to hear speeches, a few carols, and view the lighting of my Chanukah candles.

This practice, year after year, tended to



be the show stopper. The night before, I would carefully choose the nine candles according to some color pattern that I felt would make the best impression. These candles were promoting the entire Jewish religion and culture, competing with large evergreen trees covered with tinsel, lights and ornaments. As I took center stage and set my menorah onto a tabletop, I was amazed by the total silence around me. It was a silence that impressed upon me--more than the gratuitous applause that would follow--that I was doing something important...that being a Jew was important.

(cont. on p. 3)

GIFT OF GIFTS (cont. from p. 1)...  
foundation for the Judaism that I knew I  
wanted to give to my own children.

Even before I chose a more traditional  
lifestyle than the one in which I had been  
raised, my excitement for the Chanukah  
holiday had refocused on the act of lighting  
candles, rather than the gifts (not that I didn't  
appreciate them as a teen as well).

In my early twenties, I began to take a  
deeper interest in Jewish life and Jewish law. I  
spent a year in Israel studying Judaism in  
depth. The more I have studied, the fewer  
halachic (Jewish legal) connections I have  
found for the giving of gifts, while, at the same time, the more I  
have noticed what an important role they play in modern Jewish  
life.

My friend felt that this tradition of giving gifts was a  
reflection of Christmas and Jewish assimilation. Sadly, this is  
probably true in many North American homes. It's even true  
that when I was a kid, I felt that there was a competition—and  
often that I had the better end of the deal.

On the other hand, one can, and many have, traced the root  
of gift-giving back to a custom of Chanukah gelt. Gelt itself is a  
Yiddish word that might lead one to perceive an Eastern  
European origin to this tradition.

It is a tradition, however, that has its roots in two Talmudic  
discussions: One stating that lighting the Chanukah menorah is  
so important that one who cannot afford oil (or candles) should  
beg in order to purchase oil, and the second, expressing a  
correlation between lighting the Chanukah menorah and having  
intelligent children. From these two concepts, the custom  
developed to reward children for their studies with a little bit of  
money. This is Gelt. In time, a penny turned into a small token,  
which, probably in competition with Christmas, became a  
bundle of presents.

Let's face it, most American Jews can recall being asked at  
least once if they really receive a present on each night of

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CHANUKAH IN IOWA (cont. from p. 2)...Lighting the  
shamash with a match was not a particularly religious aspect of  
the menorah lighting, but being nine years old and allowed to  
use fire added an air of authority to the ceremony. In a loud,  
clear voice I would recite the blessings according to the tune my  
father taught me. Then, one by one I would light all eight  
candles. It was usually not the last day of Chanukah when I  
made this presentation, but I felt it was important for everyone  
there to know that Chanukah was celebrated for eight days.

After the menorah was lit, my teacher would ask if there were  
any questions about Chanukah. Inevitably, some "Doubting  
Thomas" would ask, "Is it true that you get a present each  
night?" Believing this to be one of the foundations of my  
holiday, I would announce, "That is correct!" which always got a  
few oohs and ahhs.



Chanukah. Indeed, most of us can also recall  
being asked whether Chanukah is "the Jewish  
Christmas." This second question is quite  
ironic, given that the holiday of Chanukah is  
actually a celebration of a victorious battle  
against assimilation. At the time of the  
Maccabees, many Jews found it more  
comfortable to Hellenize their lives rather than  
fight to maintain a traditional Jewish lifestyle.

When I was a child, I rarely associated  
Chanukah with Christmas. We had our holiday  
and they had theirs. But I can, of course, be  
honest enough to admit that if I had not  
received Chanukah presents, I probably would

have been jealous of, and desirous for, Christmas.

As a small child, the presents were a major focus, but,  
because of that, I developed a love for this holiday. As I grew  
older, my brother and I received fewer presents, but that did not  
diminish my connection to the holiday.

As a teenager, the societal pressure to celebrate Christmas  
bothered me tremendously. I was the outspoken choir member  
who insisted on adding Chanukah songs to the holiday concert  
and the high schooler who made certain a menorah was also  
part of the holiday display. My actions were driven by my  
Jewish pride, not by my desire to compare Chanukah to  
Christmas. I wanted the Jewish students who were less  
connected than I was to have a reason to be excited about their  
own heritage.

Listening to my friend's dismay at the customs of her  
husband's family, I felt, at first, embarrassed that this was the  
type of home in which I had been raised. The more I thought  
about it, however, the more I realized that because my parents  
had never mixed our Chanukah presents with even the slightest  
hint of that other holiday--there was no Chanukah bush or  
tinselly decorations--the gifts had been just one more aspect in  
developing my proud Jewish identity.

As a parent living a traditional Jewish lifestyle, I have not  
cast away this seeming remnant of assimilation. Instead, my  
husband and I have incorporated the important Chanukah  
lesson of *Chinuch* (education, a word that shares the same  
Hebrew root as Chanukah). On the nights when our children  
receive Chanukah presents, each child must answer a question  
about either Chanukah or the weekly Torah portion. Likewise,  
when there are gifts to be exchanged between my husband and  
myself (or the kids and one of us), we must also answer a  
question.

The other night, I did not say any of this to my friend. I  
smiled and listened and gave sympathetic answers of tacit  
agreement. Perhaps I should have said that the end result of the  
Chanukah presents my parents gave me was the greatest gift of  
all--my strong sense of my Jewish self.

*SR Hewitt is the Publications Director for NJOP and the author of Jewish  
Treats (www.JewishTreats.org). She was raised in Harrisburg,  
Pennsylvania, and currently resides in Montreal, Quebec.*

(cont. on p. 4)

## CHANUKAH IN IOWA (cont. from p. 3)...

Once in a while a question would be considered out of line, asking if I “believed in” Christmas. My teacher would intervene, explaining that all questions should be about Chanukah. I had no problem announcing that I did not “believe in” Christmas. It was foreign to me. It was them, not me. I knew I was the only Jewish child in the auditorium, and sometimes felt I was the only Jewish girl in the entire world. And yet, like Judah Maccabee, I had no sense of weakness or lack of importance. As I stared at the small dancing flames, I thought of the children’s poem, “Twinkle, twinkle little star” and I felt like a small, but precious diamond connected to an eternal People throughout time and space.

Today I no longer live in Iowa. And I am definitely not the only Jew around. My husband and I raised our children - ranging in age from five to late 20s - in the vicinity of Jerusalem. Our three oldest are married, and we have “second generation Jerusalemite” grandchildren. The small twinkling light of Chanukah that built the strong Jewish identity within me in my childhood is the core of my present Torah observance that permeates my consciousness and every action.

I would never recommend anyone to raise their Jewish

children in an environment void of the basic Jewish vibrancy that guides a child from his “*Modeh Ani*” in the morning until his “*Shema Yisrael*”<sup>\*</sup> at bedtime. But any parent who has felt the power of the small flame of Judaism from within the darkness of Jewish ignorance has a grand opportunity approaching.

As the Chanukah lights are burning, take the time to tell your story. From a place of safety and light, we can help our children appreciate “*Ba’yamim Ha’haim, Ba’zman Ha’zeh*” -- Just as it was in those days, at this time.

*\*Modeh Ani* (Translation of full verse: “I gratefully thank you, O living and eternal King, for You have returned my soul within me with compassion - abundant is Your faithfulness!”) is the prayer traditionally recited upon arising in the morning. *Shema Yisrael* (Translation of full verse: “Hear O Israel the Lord our God, the Lord is One.”) is a verse from the Torah that is a statement of faith. It is traditional to recite this verse before going to bed.

*Miriam Meyers is currently living in Seattle, Washington where her husband is the Rabbi of Congregation Ezra Bessaroth, a synagogue following the Jewish customs of Rhodes. She is able to teach Torah worldwide on TorahTutors.org through the "magic" of modern technology (and able to read bedtime stories to her grandchildren in Israel using this same technology!) This article was originally published on aish.com.*



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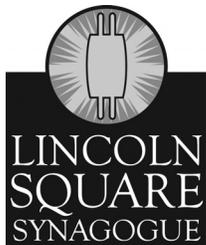
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*Illustrations by Wendy Dunn*



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