

בראשית

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BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

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TRANSFORMED BY A LATKE

Risa Lischkoff Goldstein

When my friend Carlyn and I started discussing the idea of hosting a Chanukah party, I thought we had hit upon a splendid idea. I pictured an evening of shmoozing with friends, Carlyn showing off her latest find at the local antique fair, playing a few board games, and of course, eating plenty of crispy hot latkes.

Woo hoo -- a party! I had made a bit of a shift in my life over the past couple of years, and had traded in Friday Night Martinis at the Museum for Friday Night saying Kiddush and Motzi. Not that I had taken the total plunge, mind you, but my weekends had been devoted more to personal growth than to partying. Now was a chance to merge universes -- secular friends from work and friends from Rabbi Silverman's Beginners' Service. We wanted a fun social atmosphere structured around a holiday, so everyone was invited to bring their menorah and a game.

As we were busy inviting everyone and their brother to the event (especially if the brother was cute and single!), our attention turned to planning the menu and other requisite details of the evening. At first we considered catering the affair -- at least the latkes. After inquiries into cost and quality, we decided that we were much better off (*cont. on p. 2*)



THE OIL BURNS BRIGHTLY

OF CHANUKAH AND THE LIGHT

Georgina Kerr-Jarrett

When my 18 year old son wrote an article for his high school paper on religion, his premise was that it does not really matter to what religion one belongs, that while each religion claims they have the 'right' way to worship, the bottom line is that they believe in G-d. He used me to launch his thesis, claiming that the extent of my religious faith was "the consumption of matzo ball soup and numerous references to 'Our People.'" I did not feel it was very flattering, but I was glad that at least he demonstrated some degree of belief in a higher authority. It was a good start; the fact that he did not seem to grasp many basic precepts of Judaism was my problem, my problem as his mother! (By the way, I rarely eat matzo ball soup.)

Two years ago, when he wrote that article, he was not far from the truth. I did not have a grasp of my religion. My upbringing had been devoid of any Jewish learning -- in spite of the fact that both my parents were Jewish. In fact, I recall as a child asking my mother why we did not have a Christmas tree, to which she replied that *she* never had one when she was growing up. What did I know? I certainly did not understand that Christmas was not a (*cont. on p. 4*)

CHANUKAH...IN THOSE DAYS, IN THESE TIMES

by Rabbi Michael Taubes

If one should tune in to a news program on television or radio during the few days prior to Chanukah, one will most likely hear, at some point during the broadcast, a greeting to "our Jewish friends in the listening audience" wishing us a Happy Chanukah. This well-intended recognition that this time of year is also a holiday season for Jews is sometimes accompanied, however, by a very brief but erroneous description of what the celebration of Chanukah is all about. The holiday is often described as an observance commemorating victory in an ancient battle and the rededication of the Temple. This is indeed the view which many Jews today, whether they hear it on the radio or not, subscribe to as well.

A closer examination of the real meaning of Chanukah, however, reveals that this explanation is inaccurate and incomplete. To be sure, Chanukah does, on a simple level, mark the victory of the Maccabees over the Syrian-Greek armies which resulted in a measure of autonomy for the Jews and enabled the Holy Temple to be purified and put back into operation. But that is not the total and true significance of this holiday. There were, after all, (*cont. on p. 3*)

TRANSFORMED (cont. from p. 1)...whipping up the food ourselves. Fueled by my memories of making latkes with my mom at home, and further bolstered by a new latke-making 'tip' I had seen on Martha Stewart, I was more than happy to volunteer to be the official "Latke Fryer" for the evening.

Always the overshopper when it comes to planning parties, I purchased the latke ingredients at the nearby wholesale club, reasoning that any leftovers would not go to waste. I peeled what I thought would be plenty of potatoes the night before. Boy, was I naïve!

I started frying the first batch of latkes -- you know, the guinea pigs, where you figure out whether your oil is hot enough, whether there is enough flour to make them stick together, etc. As we fine-tuned the oil temperature, the other party planners all managed to sneak by for a taste. Yum! Delicious latkes. About this time, a few guests started to drop by. I was in the kitchen, where I expected to be for about another hour, frying latkes for our pals. Here's where the naivete became apparent. Carlyn popped into the kitchen to tell me that our friends were bringing friends! And they were hungry! In other words, she was telling me to fry faster!!!

The throngs of people kept coming and I was thrust into latke high gear -- it was not an option to let another "Yid" go without his or her anticipated Chanukah treat.

For the next three hours, I didn't leave the kitchen! Of course, I was not alone the whole time. Various friends and grateful strangers would drop into the kitchen to lend a hand for a minute or just keep me company as the main event continued in the rest of the house. I refused to stop as long as people were still enjoying the latkes. Nevertheless, I was getting tired! I was covered in the musky aroma of 'fry,' and no longer looked primed for a party. I made only one request -- that someone give me a 'heads up' when it was time to light menorahs.

When I finally received word that it was, in fact, lighting time, I took it as my cue that my time as chef had come to an end. Through the crowd, I worked my way to the win-

dow I had staked out for my menorah hours earlier. While not everyone had brought one, I did see at least fifteen or more menorahs around the room. This being one of the last nights of Chanukah, I lined up my many candles and began to light. I could hear the *bracha* (blessing) being whispered, recited, and sung behind me from various quadrants of the room. When I had completed lighting my own menorah, I spun around to see ...

Lights everywhere! It seemed that every space on every windowsill, mantle, and buffet table had been taken over by flickering candles. I was amazed. The light was bursting forth and lighting each face, each shadow in the room with shimmering warmth. As a few of the people started to sing *Ma'oz Tsur*, others began to hum or sway as they took in the majesty of a moment transformed. It lasted for more than a moment -- a few minutes, I'd say, until the songs eventually drifted back to 'Dreidel, Dreidel, Dreidel' and the like. But for me, and maybe for others in the room, it was not just our candles that had been lit -- it was a special place in our *neshamot* (souls) -- the place reserved for *Abavat Yisrael* (love of all fellow Jews).

I was amazed that by creating a space for people to be together to celebrate the holiday, my friends and I had accomplished something that was not quite tangible. When those menorahs were lit, we had magnified our own light by encouraging others to light their own candles. Somehow, when the Chanukah lights were lit that night, I felt that we saw each other better -- saw the sparks of holiness in each other.

Afterwards, several people commented that it was too bad I had missed most of the party. Each time I would just smile, and tell them that it had been a perfect night. I couldn't have imagined a better Chanukah party. Surprisingly, I even meant it!

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CHANUKAH SONG SHEET



CHANUKAH CANDLE LIGHTING

סדר הדלקת נרות לחנכה

On lighting the candles, say:

Blessed are You L-rd, our G-d, Ruler of the world, Who sanctified us through His commandments and commanded us, to kindle the lights of Chanukah.

ברוך אתה ה', אלהינו מלך העולם, אשר קדשנו
במצותיו וצונו להדליק נר של חנכה.

Blessed are You L-rd, our G-d, Ruler of the world, Who wrought miracles for our ancestors in those days at this season.

ברוך אתה ה', אלהינו מלך העולם, שעשה
נסים לאבותינו, בימים ההם בזמן הזה.

The following blessing is said on the first evening only:

Blessed are You L-rd, our G-d, Ruler of the world, Who has kept us alive, sustained us, and brought us to this season.

ברוך אתה ה', אלהינו מלך העולם, שהחיינו וקיימנו
והגיענו לזמן הזה.

ROCK OF AGES

Rock of ages, let our song, Praise Thy saving power;
Thou amidst the raging foes, Wast our shelt'ring tower.
Furious they assailed us, But Thine arm availed us.
And Thy word broke their sword, When our own strength failed us.

מעוז צור

מעוז צור ישועתי, לך נאה לשבת,
תכון בית תפילתי, ושם תודה נגבת,
לעת תכין מטבת, מצר המנבת,
או אגמור בשיר מזמור, חנכת המזבת.

IN THOSE DAYS (cont. from p. 1)...other battles and wars waged in our long history, some of which were extremely important for the future of our nation, and yet none of those victories are remembered with a special eight day holiday to be observed forever. Likewise, it is not only the famous miracle of the oil flask which, containing enough oil for just one day's requirement for kindling the Temple's Menorah, sufficed instead for 8 days, that is commemorated by this special holiday. The Talmud tells us that there were many miracles which took place in the Temple on a daily basis, but none of them are recalled by observing a holiday. What was it about the events of Chanukah, then, that warranted the establishment of this holiday that has become so important and famous a part of the Jewish calendar year?

The key to understanding the answer lies, I believe, in the recognition of what actually was the true threat and danger at that period in our history. Unlike the so many other occasions in Jewish history, the enemy of the Jews at the time of Chanukah was not one who wanted to obliterate the Jewish nation, destroy their people physically, or wipe out their country off the face of the map. The Syrian-Greeks of that time sought rather to attract the Jewish people to their culture and their system of beliefs and values, known as Hellenism. They were ready to welcome the Jews into their ranks with open arms, provided that the Jews would agree to give up their ancient traditions and observances, and accept the modern culture and lifestyle of the Hellenists. "Why continue to observe these old fashion practices of your archaic religion?" the Hellenists said to the Jews. "The world has progressed; man no longer needs G-d and religious rituals to find fulfillment. A human being can become complete by himself through perfecting his body physically, and by mentally enjoying the beauty of art, drama and poetry. Why remain committed to G-d and His Torah, which is so out-dated?"

Needless to say, this approach appealed to many Jews. And so, in large numbers, many Jews became Hellenized and sought to assimilate into that modern culture that surrounded them. They abandoned the study of Torah as well as the basic ritual observances that had characterized the Jewish people for generations. They pursued the pleasures and rewards of the modern Hellenistic world at the expense of commitment to the values and beliefs that their parents and grandparents had sought to instill within them. It was against this backdrop that the story of Chanukah took place. The threat against the Jews, therefore, was not physical, but spiritual. There was no movement to wipe out the Jews as a people, but rather, Judaism as a religion was attacked. As more and more people assimilated, the future of Torah adherence looked very bleak.

Only a small band of Jews recognized that this was all wrong. Only a few people realized that the Torah is not at all old-fashioned and archaic, but is timeless, and can and must be understood and observed in all societies and under all conditions. These people, whose numbers gradually grew, realized that although some of the beliefs espoused by the Hellenists may have some value and worth, but when put into the proper context, they are in many ways fleeting and transient, and are certainly not a replacement for the laws



and rituals handed down by G-d Himself. The ultimate victory of this small group of Maccabees, then, was not just a political or military triumph, but a triumph over a serious challenge to the very core of the Jewish religion: the suggestion that G-d and the Torah are no longer relevant. The purification and rededication of the Temple symbolized the victory of Judaism as a religion, with its unbending commitment to the word of G-d that is in vogue at all times.

It should be quite obvious that we today face many of the same challenges and threats from modern civilization that our ancestors in Israel faced from the Hellenists so many years ago. We hear that the Torah and observant Judaism is old-fashioned and silly, and that those who stubbornly cling to it are close-minded fanatics. In that sense, when we observe Chanukah, we are not merely recalling some ancient battle, because the battle is still taking place today. The question is whether or not we will be victorious again.

The *Bnai Yissoschor*, a great Chassidic leader, once pointed out that according to the Talmud's account of the story, the Sages waited for a year after the events took place before proclaiming Chanukah as a national holiday. He suggests that this was because the military victory and the miracle of the oil were not enough on their own to warrant the establishment of a holiday. The rabbis had to first wait and see what impact those happenings would have on the religious commitment of the people. Only after a year, once they saw that many Jews were inspired by those events to return to G-d and the Torah, did they feel justified in proclaiming a holiday.

Today as well, we see a religious reawakening of many "Hellenized" Jews. But we all have to go still further. We have to make sure that this feeling spreads to, and impacts upon, many more people. The word Chanukah itself, in Hebrew, is related grammatically to the word "*chinuch*" meaning education. If we use Chanukah as a time to not only celebrate, but to commit ourselves to continuing our Jewish education, then we will be playing an ongoing role in the battle against assimilation and we will help bring about, in the near future, a dedication of the Holy Temple once again.

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*OF CHANUKAH (cont. from p. 1)...*part of our religion. And yet after the Six day War in 1967, something awoke in me and I remember wanting to join the army in Israel and later to live on a Kibbutz. (I did neither.)

For many years, I tried to discover and learn more about being Jewish, but I met with little success. Even my understanding of the holiday of Chanukah, one of the most readily comprehensible festivals and therefore one of the most approachable, was not particularly deep. My simple understanding was that one lit the menorah for 8 days and children played with the dreidel. I think I assumed it had something to do with a light that should not go out, but that was the extent of my understanding.

Then I found the Boca Raton Community Kollel and, in the past 2 years, I have come a long way on the lengthy road of learning. One of the first traditions that I learned through the Community Kollel was that Hashem instructs the angels to teach the Torah to each of us when we are first conceived in the womb, but that at the time of our actual birth, the angels, putting their finger to our lips, tell us to forget everything that we have learned. Our task is therefore to rediscover the Torah. This was my epiphany. I felt that; I felt the Torah inside of me; I felt that light, and as I learn more, I feel the light growing.

There are so many traditions, so many mitzvot, so much to learn, it can be overwhelming. Does it matter if one does not understand everything about Chanukah? Perhaps not, especially in the beginning. But one thing that can and should be understood is that Judaism is certainly enduring;

it has endured for all these thousands of years. In spite of the persecutions we have faced throughout the ages, we remain strong, and we share the same traditions and morals as our ancestors, an extraordinary feat!

Once again, this Chanukah, I have the opportunity to light the candles and remember the Jews who fought to keep our traditions and our faith, I have the opportunity to give thanks to Hashem for awakening the light in me and I have the opportunity to discuss the miracle of the lights with my sons. Perhaps this year, they too will see the light!

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"THE EPIPHANY"



Illustrations by Wendy Dunn



Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Sarah Rochel Reid, Rabbi Yitzchak Rosenbaum, and Beryl Levenson of the National Jewish Outreach Program, Inc. 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 write or call: 989 Sixth Avenue, 10th Floor, New York, NY 10018, (646) 871-4444, e-mail info@njop.org.

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