

# BERESHITH

## "IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter  
for Beginners,  
by Beginners

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# בראשית

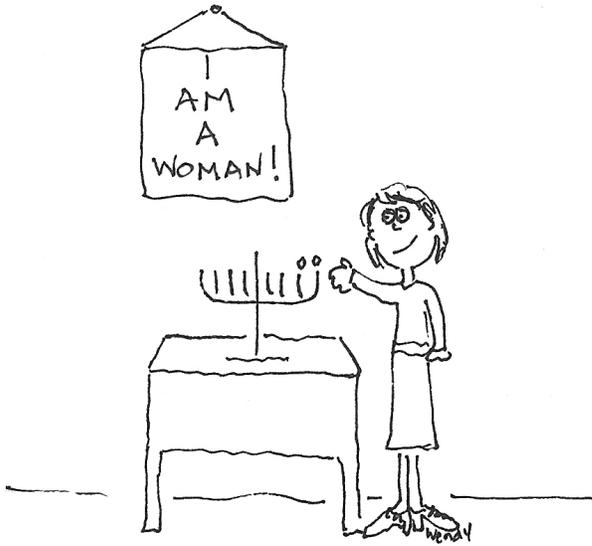
## SUFFRAGETTES AND SUFGANIYOT

Michelle Melov Schiffman

In university, I had a sepia print of a vintage suffragette poster from 1914. I had enlarged and mounted it to hold a place of honor on my bedroom wall. It was a fifteen cent photocopy *pièce de résistance*, proudly communicating my enlightened coming-of-age to the world, my avant-garde catchphrase of who I quintessentially was, what I quintessentially believed in. *I am Woman*. Hear me vote. See me unshackle my bonds of long endured submission, and those of my fellow sisters, and hereby enjoy rights of unapologetic and unencumbered freedom.

After decades of failed attempts to change laws through indirect, "lady-like" means, the patience of women had run dry. Women realized that the only way to be heard, to be treated with dignity and to create positive social change was to take public matters into their own hands. The suffragettes organized, strategized and resorted to militant (and often violent) means to ensure that their demands were finally sanctioned. In the merit of our beloved suffragette mothers, we women now enjoy the right to be free, the right to be safe and the right to have an autonomous hand in the matters that directly affect and shape our lives.

And yet, as impassioned as I was with my newfound feminist identity and ideals, there still remained inside me an enigmatic longing, (cont. on p. 2)



THE FEMININE SIDE OF CHANUKAH

## NOW FOR THE NEXT BIG JEWISH HOLIDAY...

F. Penina Hoffnung

Now for the next big Jewish holiday, Christmas!

I've been thinking a lot about a saying that I once heard that goes something like, "Manners are how you behave when someone is watching. Character is how you behave when no one is watching." I was thinking about that today as I *shlepped* the folding table back to the garage.

Let me explain. That folding table sees the light of day mainly at holiday times. We haul it out to use it in the sukkah. It comes back out to hold our *chanukiyot* and *draydle* collection in front of the bay window at Chanukah. And, if this year is like years before, the table will next make its appearance at our Passover Seder to hold the extra guests. Lately, it occurs to me that a lot of Judaism is like that folding table--something to be taken out for special occasions and holidays. And lately, I've just been wondering if that's enough.

Don't get me wrong, I am not against the celebration of Jewish holidays. I adore them and, as my family will attest, personally go overboard on all of them. Heck, as (cont. on p. 3)

## OLIVES OR POTATOES

Rabbi Yisrael Rice

I've been asked to explain the inner meaning of many Jewish observances, but eating potato latkes on Chanukah was never one of them.

After all, what is there not to understand? You take a bite, chew and swallow. Repeat this several times until your final latke is six latkes past the saturation point.

Let's face it, latkes are an essential part of Jewish life! If one were to question the connection of latkes to Chanukah it would be deemed blasphemous. Thus, few have ventured into the deep mystical symbolism of the latke. But let me break with that tradition...

I don't want to upset any Jews in Idaho, but the operative ingredient in the potato latke is not the potato, it's the oil. (Proof: Israelis celebrate Chanukah with *sufganiyot* - oil filled donuts - and there is still no potato lobby in Israel.)

To make a long story short, after years of Greek oppression the Jews emerged miraculously victorious. When the Maccabees and their followers entered our Holy Temple they (cont. on p. 3)

*SUFFRAGETTES* (cont. from p. 1)...obscure but still annoyingly palpable. It took some time for me to disentangle these inner feelings. I had a boyfriend, a cause and a sensational suffragettes wall poster--what else could a university student want? But I still couldn't kick this longing for...for something. Something more. A longing for a bigger cause. A better cause. A *true* cause. A way to genuinely improve the world, and everyone in it, permanently and ultimately making the world a better place. A way to genuinely, permanently and ultimately improve myself. Omniscient and omnipresent justice. Peace and goodness for all.

It was the desire for spirituality that was nagging at me. But not just any old generic spiritual pick-me-up would do. Though I did try, no meditation, mantra or daring feat of physical flexibility sufficed to give me that ever-sought-after sense of inward peaceful tidiness when the world around me still remained so messy. What I needed was a *practical* spirituality, one that benefited the physical world, that worked hand-in-hand with it to yield tangible, transformative results.

And so, like any good secular Jew, I began my spiritual search at my local neighborhood Buddhist monastery. I read books about Hinduism and Chinese religions. I sat in on lectures on Islam and Christianity. I even attended a meeting for those interested in learning about the ancient traditions of Wicca.

The thought of looking deeper into my own Jewish roots was out of the question. How could I - a proud, self-proclaimed feminist with such fantastic suffragette wall paraphernalia - even consider finding spiritual fulfillment in a religion that was stereotyped as patriarchal? How could I find identity with a group of women who were restricted from participation in the communal sphere, occupied solely with matronly child-rearing duties, invisible, voices unheard? And yet I was born to Judaism. And I was secretly drawn to it. Indeed, many unlikely circumstances and people soon started to pull me closer to it, whether I liked it or not, eventually challenging me to open my stubbornly clenched eyelids to see the truth that lay right in front of my unmistakably *yiddisha shnoz* all along.

I started to meet more and more intelligent, educated, upright, awe-inspiring religious Jewish women, whose inward beauty, self-worth and social-worth beamed brightly through their outwardly unostentatious clothing (a feat that, I couldn't help but note, their secular sisters are still floundering with, despite years of anti-objectification "beauty-is-only-skin-deep" campaigns). I began to learn. I began to participate. Chanukah rolled around. And to my absolute delight, I learned of a beautiful tradition involving a woman abstaining from performing any work for at least thirty minutes after the menorah candles are lit. Naturally, as any owner of a highly-coveted vintage suffragettes poster would, my ears perked up, and I inquired as to where this tradition came from.

The answer riveted me. The story of *Yehudit* (Judith) brought tears to my eyes, understanding to my heart and peace to any remaining spiritual dissonance that remained within me. A woman of unbelievable strength and will, bent on making change for her Jewish sisters, at all cost to herself. A beautiful feminist who would not allow her sisters to be taken advantage of any longer.

During the horrible time that the Syrian-Greeks occupied the land of Israel, they were determined to assimilate the Jews.

Their goal then changed to wanting to desecrate and finally eliminate Judaism from the face of the planet. Staples of Jewish observance, such as Shabbat, maintaining the Jewish calendar, circumcision and keeping kosher, were outlawed, and Jews were forced to prostrate themselves to idols and publically break Torah laws for fear of death. However, despite such threats, the Jews defiantly held on to their practices and suffered unspeakable tortures and even death. Syrian-Greek terrorism aimed to obliterate the very soul of our people. Embodied in their final despoilment of our Holy Temple and their pollution of our sacred burning oil was their sole aim: to violate the purest, most fundamental aspects of who we are as a people. To this aim, the law of "*prima nostra*" was passed, requiring brides to be subjected to molestation by Greek generals, on the night before their wedding.

And then, the patience of one woman ran dry.

Yehudit, daughter of the *Kohen Gadol* (High Priest), finally realized that the only way to be heard, to be treated with dignity and to create positive social change was to take public matters into her own hands. Our heroine decided to resort to whatever means necessary to ensure salvation for her people, who now faced starvation and genocide. Formulating a plan that involved utter peril to herself, she snuck out of the city gates, finagled herself past the Greek soldiers and marched straight through the enemy camp to stand face-to-face with the Syrian-Greek commander, Holofernes. Cleverly spinning a false tale of treason, she devised a way of gaining free access to the Syrian-Greek camp by day and to her Jewish city by night, and then single-handedly played the final card that earned the Jewish army the element of victorious surprise over their enemy. Incapacitating Holofernes with copious amounts of salty cheeses and unfiltered wine, Yehudit quietly beheaded him in the night and escaped back to her city by dawn. In the morning, the Syrian-Greek soldiers were utterly befuddled at the discovery of their commander's headless body. Shocked, they were unprepared for the Jewish attack upon them soon thereafter.

It didn't take long for me to learn that Yehudit was but one of many Jewish matriarchs who faced - and overcame - perilous circumstances, thus saving the Jewish people from yet another brush with extinction. Our Torah and scriptures are full of such events, all of which transpired centuries before our suffering suffragettes burned their first bras. Hmm. And we continue to fight our matriarchs' brave battle for freedom and dignity every time we light a set of Shabbat candles, go to the mikvah or perform any of the mitzvot that are our right, that are our responsibility. For it is in *these* things, in the things that they fought to the death for, that we can see a hint as to what we are meant to live for--our Jewish way of life. Our inner, pure and inextinguishable communal soul.

Today, a peacefully serene oil painting of an Israeli vineyard graces my bedroom wall, next to some lovingly framed photographs of the two loves of my life, my wonderful husband and my gentle little baby boy, Aaron Emmanuel. I like this painting. I like to fancy that its aura of tranquility somehow speaks to my inner contentment with who I am, and who I continue to become. And yet, at the same time, it's just a painting. And a wall decoration can't really embody all of the

(cont. on p. 3)

**OLIVES OR POTATOES** (cont. from p. 1)...found that everything had been defiled. The Temple services could not be performed until ritually fit materials were procured. One jug of oil was found still with the seal of the High Priest, confirming its ritual purity. However, there was only enough oil to light the Menorah for one day, but a miracle occurred and it lasted for eight days.

So, in addition to lighting the Menorah for eight days, we indulge in potato latkes, in the hope that the calories of eight days will count for only one (reverse miracle?).

But on the more serious side, olive oil symbolically expresses the secret of Jewish survival. We take a perfectly good fruit like the olive and crush it to produce the oil. Even squeezing is not sufficient, as this would produce mere olive juice. However, when the olive is crushed, the essential substance that floats on top is obtained.

*Kabbalistically*, this oil is a symbol of the essence of the Jewish soul. It may not be evident at all times, but it is always there. This internal spiritual "oil" fuels the flame of our soul. It is the essential substance of a Jewish soul, it is our immutable connection with G-d.

There are times in our lives that our "olive" is crushed. We are placed under immense pressure from within and without that challenge our Judaism. This was the story of Chanukah. A small courageous band of Jews took on the powerful Greek army who wished to obliterate our identity.

The Jewish rebellion did not make any sense. Compromise would have seemed a more effective route. We were vastly outnumbered and had an inferior war apparatus. Instead of a full-fledged rebellion, the Jews could have simply hidden those Jewish activities that offended the Greeks.

What made us think we could pull this off? Nothing! It was an irrational decision.

Often, we live our lives without taking into account what we really are. However, when someone challenges our very existence, it forces us to really take a serious look at our very essence, at what we really are deep inside.

We often compromise what we do, and how we express ourselves. But we cannot compromise or change our very core, what we really are. When our basic values are shaken, we dig deep to discover our true selves.

**SUFFRAGETTES** (cont. from p. 2)...continual personal growth that comes from the ever new and delightful evolutions of my Jewish femininity, as a Jewish woman, as a Jewish wife, as a Jewish mother, etc. I eagerly await the time when I'll be able to replace this painting with a framed copy of my son's first Crayola abstract *masterpiece d'art*. And I await, with giddy excitement, the opportunity to celebrate his first Chanukah together with him.

Let us all light our menorahs in the merit of our beloved Jewish mothers, because of whom we women now enjoy the right to be free, the right to be safe, and the right to kick up our feet, lean back our chairs, and close our eyes with a guiltless smile for no less - and hopefully more - than thirty minutes, reveling in the miraculous victories of faith that are our proud Jewish legacy.

*Michelle Melov Schiffman lives in Montreal, Quebec, with her wonderful husband and son. She is a post-graduate student of Nutrition and Naturopathy.*

This is the oil that hides itself and is almost invisible inside the fruit. But when push comes to shove, when the olive is broken and crushed, the essence comes out, and it floats on top of all else.

Going through life, we often get caught up in external trappings. Our intellect often inhibits our true self that is necessary to grow and advance.

That is why we must always take time to return to our true selves. If we do not, someone else will bring us back by questioning and challenging our existence.

In the Chanukah story, all superficial aspects of Judaism seemed bleak.

Unfortunately, a good number of our people actually assimilated into the Greek culture. (Sadly, the descendants of those who did are not reading this article.) The Greeks instituted stifling decrees upon religious observance. If we had given up who we were, the Greeks would have allowed the bodies to continue to live. If we would only hand over the oil...

This ultimate challenge to our very essence brought out the most inward core spark of the Jewish people. Present in the depth of every Jewish soul is the '*Pintele Yid*'--the Essential Jewish Self.

Jewish life prevailed, and corresponding to this essential self, we were granted a miracle of oil. The Holy Temple was eventually destroyed, together with the seven branched Menorah. But the Chanukah Menorah of eight branches has continued to illuminate the darkness through the long exile.

Now, finish eating that latke before it gets cold!

*Rabbi Yisrael Rice is the Executive Director of Chabad of Marin, Marin County, CA, and Chairman of the Editorial Board of the Jewish Learning Institute. Olives or Potatoes was originally presented on jewish-holidays.com.*

**BIG JEWISH HOLIDAY** (cont. from p. 1)...a Jewish family educator I make my living promoting Jewish holidays. I still believe in them as lifelong memory-makers.

But lately I've been thinking that holidays are only part of the puzzle of Jewish identity.

What about the non-holiday days? What's Jewish about my home when that folding table is in the garage? What's Jewish about me when there's no holiday to celebrate? How am I Jewish when no one is watching? Okay, I admit. I'm a professional Jew. My answers are easier than most. But for a lot of us, Christmas seems a great opportunity to test these questions.

Talk about no one watching! We are the farthest things from most Christians' minds on Christmas day. We're free to do whatever we want--how much more Jewish a day for us can there be? This can be viewed as the purest Jewish time that our demographic circumstances hands us. There are no halachic or traditional holiday customs or restrictions to

(cont. on p. 4)



I'M WATCHING You!



**BIG JEWISH HOLIDAY**  
*(cont. from p. 3)*...contend with. (On that last note, I know that some will disagree so I checked--there's no Talmudic edict that says you have to eat Chinese and see a movie on December 25!) What will we do with this gift? How will we be Jewish on December 25 when no one is watching and no one will care?

If we choose to ignore

the holiday and treat the day as just any other day off--what does that say about us? And just what would be a "Jewish" way to spend the day? There are answers out there, people are finding them every day: Relieving Christian colleagues, when possible, so they can have the day off, is one possibility. Renting Jewish-themed movies for a family film fest might be another. But where's the guidebook or even the visibility of the discussion? Once we have affirmed our distinction by publicizing a rather minor miracle...we're almost silent about how to capitalize on our own distinctiveness in the face of this annual occasion.

Every year there is a smattering of Jewish programs that I hear about along the Jewish network. On the whole, however, I'm struck by the lack of more such programs in the Jewish community, of more variety, and of more...Jewishness to them.

It's also important, I think, to note that many Jews have family members who are not Jewish, whether through marriage or conversion or something else. How that often delicate, loaded situation is approached, in my opinion, is not handled visibly enough in our community. Where are the programs to help our people cope with these issues for a growing part of our population?

There's also not much visible help offered to Jews by Choice to navigate these issues with their families of origin. I've witnessed this too; watching someone close to you navigate between the commandment to honor parents and honoring their religious convictions can be painful. A little coaching, a few support options might be helpful to an awful lot of people.

And it would say a lot about our collective character. Because, ultimately, I think the saying at the top of this piece is wrong. At the end of the day, any day, even December 25, someone is always watching: our children, those new to our community, those on the fringes, those who are related to or love them.

Let's face it, what we do or don't do with all these opportunities informs our future.

*E Penina Hoffnung is the Director of the Department of Jewish Education & Continuity, Jewish Federation of Southern New Jersey.*

**Rabbi Buchwald's  
Weekly  
Torah  
Message**



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