

BERESHITH
"IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter
for Beginners,
by Beginners

Vol. XXVII No. 2
Kislev 5774/November 2013



בראשית

THE MESSAGE IN THE MUSIC

Rivki Silver

There are lots of lovable moments during Chanukah. For some people, it's the food (latkes! donuts!), for others it's the games (dreidel! gelt!). And, of course, there's lighting the menorah, filling the home with the light of tradition. My personal favorite aspect of the holiday is the music. For those of you scratching your head, trying to find a reason why "Dreidel, Dreidel, Dreidel, I made you out of clay," might be considered a moving melody, let me clarify.

It's not all the Chanukah songs that move me (a lot of them seem to be about dreidels, now that I think about it). Mainly, it's *Ma'oz Tzur*. Part of its impact is its timing, as the custom is to sing it right after candle lighting. This really sets the scene and the ambiance for a touching moment.

Picture it: Everyone from my husband down to my three-year-old has lit his or her menorah, and our living room is flickering with the lights of wicks burning in oil. The smell of latkes wafts in from the kitchen, and dreidels are strewn around the floor. After we recite the blessings over the menorah and recite the text of "*Hanerot Halalu*," I head to the piano and play through the classic

(cont. on p. 2)



THANKSGIVUKKAH 5774

Rabbi Ira Ebbin

This year, for the first and only time in our lives, we will be celebrating the unique holiday of "Thanksgivukkah," also known as "Chanksgiving." As Thanksgiving and Chanukah coincide, Jews throughout the US will have to decide what to eat first, turkey or latkes.

There is, of course, no conflict. Many proud American Jews will pass the cranberries and pumpkin pie, while the candles are burning and the dreidels are spinning. What better way to celebrate the "Festival of Lights" than with a festive family meal that centers around being thankful and appreciative for all the gifts with which we are blessed? In fact, the message of giving thanks is part and parcel of the holiday of Chanukah, and can be seen even within the details of the laws of the lights themselves.

I've always been intrigued by what appears to be a unique paradox of the holiday of Chanukah. (cont. on p. 3)

THERE'S ALWAYS HOPE

Laura Wagensberg

For me, Chanukah is truly a holiday of light and hope, and I'll tell you why. The fifth night of Chanukah is my wedding anniversary. It is a date that symbolizes more than just my marriage, it represents the culmination of the long path that brought me to the Chuppa. You see, after I became observant in my early twenties, I remained single for about twenty years. I dated so much that I began to wonder if I would ever get married. I worked, had friends, and kept myself busy, but deep inside I was really alone.

Finally I began dating this guy, and I really liked him. Things were going so well that I called it off out of fear that I would be rejected by him. Well, thank G-d my husband-to-be would not let me go. We got engaged and, as I said, our wedding took place on the fifth day of Chanukah!

Deep inside, I have always felt that there was a special significance to the fact that we were married (cont. on p. 3)

MESSAGE IN THE MUSIC (cont. from p. 1)... choral-like version of *Ma'oz Tzur* as my husband sings the words of the traditional text.

That's a nice image, right? Of course, half the time when I'm trying to play piano I have some little "helpers" making it a bit "extra musical," or we end up lighting after my kids have fallen asleep, or the latkes have been forgotten on the stove for a few minutes too long and the aroma is more charred than yummy (just hypothetically, of course). But, when it does all come together, it's so touching.

And what are we singing about during this supremely moving moment? Oh, just about some of the many, many times that different despots have tried to annihilate us, and how, time and time again, G-d saved us. There's a quite serious message embedded within a rather light-hearted holiday.

According to some historians, the text to *Ma'oz Tzur* was written in the 13th century by a man named Mordechai (you can tell that his name was Mordechai because the song was composed as an acrostic with the first letters of each stanza spelling out his name in Hebrew). The 13th century was during the crusades, so it's understandable that the tone of the text is on the serious side.

Of the six stanzas in this poem, the middle four are dedicated to detailing some of the better-known villains in Jewish history: Pharaoh (Passover), Nebuchadnezzar (destruction of the First Temple), Haman (Purim) and Antiochus (Finally! Chanukah!). The first and final stanzas talk of our constant yearning for salvation and for the ultimate end to oppression and threats to Jewish existence.

I find it interesting that we sing *Ma'oz Tzur* on Chanukah only. Why not on Passover and Purim? The bad guys from those holidays are also mentioned in the verses, but we don't have a custom to sing this song on those days. What could be the possible reason for that?

On Passover and Purim, we were faced with an immediate physical threat to our existence. The villains wanted to kill us all, and fast. On Chanukah, there was a much more subtle slide toward extinction. At the outset of the story we have Alexander the Great conquering the land of Israel. Alexander was really pretty open-minded, as conquerors go. He had a policy of "you can totally do your own religious thing," and so the Jews of his empire were able to continue practicing their religion.

That seems great, right? Well, the Greeks also moved into our land, and so Jews ended up living surrounded by the very interesting and progressive Greek culture. This was the culture that dominated the world at the time, bringing philosophy, political ideas, art, drama and more to the world. Their Greek culture was, understandably, very appealing.

After about a century of Jews slowly but steadily assimilating into Greek culture, Antiochus came along to place some serious restrictions on our religious practices - - no *brit milah* (circumcision), no Rosh Chodesh (new month), no Shabbat, no learning Torah. In short, no Judaism.

Suddenly, things were not looking so great anymore. You probably know the rest of the story about the heroic Maccabees standing up to the great Greek army and the miracle of the oil that burned for eight days. That part is famous, but the war against assimilation and spiritual extinction is somewhat less well-known.

It wasn't just Antiochus who was trying to extinguish Torah learning, it was also the Jews who had absorbed much of the Greek culture. It was a civil war among Jews regarding spirituality.

Perhaps *Ma'oz Tzur* is sung on Chanukah because a reminder is needed more on this holiday than any other. We don't really need a reminder about how a physical threat of extinction is problematic; it's pretty obvious on its own. But when it's the slow and sometimes hard-to-recognize threat of spiritual extinction, that's when a reminder becomes very useful.

Music is a very powerful vehicle for delivering any message. While we sit in our warm homes, able to practice our religion in peace and tranquillity, we are presented with this musical reminder that the villains in our history do not always come with a sword. Sometimes they come with a smile.

Right now, my kids are at the stage where they will gleefully sing, "I have a little dreidel" and "Oh Chanukah." They're not thinking about being enticed by an outside culture. But by continuing to observe our traditions and bringing the light of Chanukah into our home, we are doing our part to instill in them a strong Jewish identity.

I hope that with the memories that we are creating for our children, even if their favorite parts of Chanukah happen to be the dreidel and the gelt, they will absorb the meaning of the *Ma'oz Tzur* song that we sing every night. Despite the many times we have been faced with extinction, we are still here, still transmitting our traditions, and ready to face any future challenges, no matter which form they may take.

Rivki Silver has enjoyed writing and music for most of her life, and looks for ways to incorporate both elements into her current occupation of keeping house and raising her children. She also enjoys blogging about married life, parenthood and religion on her blog, www.lifeinthemarriedlane.com.

THERE'S ALWAYS HOPE (cont. from p. 1)...on Chanukah. It was at the times when I have felt low, like I was truly alone in this huge world, that the Chanukah candles were a great comfort to me.

The comforting nature of the Chanukah candles almost seems a part of the nature of the mitzvah of lighting candles itself. Generally we think of looking at Chanukah candles at eye level. But minimally, Chanukah candles may be placed approximately twelve inches off of the floor. When you think of it, that's pretty low. This comes to teach us that G-d's light reaches all people, even those who have fallen to the lowest of places. Twelve inches from the floor is also an effective height to illuminate the surrounding area, which symbolically shows us that this light can shine on all people, even those who have drifted and now wander the world (outside). Additionally, while it is not ideal, it is permissible for the wicks and oil to be made of inferior quality, which conveys to us the message that even if we feel a bit inferior about ourselves, nevertheless, G-d's light will rest upon us.

Twenty years is a long time to search for one's soulmate. Thank G-d, I am happily married today. I still have challenges in my life, of course, but I try to remind myself that there is always a Divine plan. Sometimes we see it, and at other times we don't. But, just knowing that G-d is with us even when we drift away to the furthest of places is a huge source of comfort to me.

Over the years, I have spent many holiday nights gazing intently at the Chanukah lights. They have always seemed to me as if they are G-d's Chanukah gift to us! And then I discovered a beautiful insight into the lights that demonstrates how they really are G-d's gift: When G-d created Adam and Eve, there was a very holy, primordial and supernal light that filled the world. With it, one could see from one end of the universe to the other. That special spiritual light existed for only 36 hours; 12 hours Friday during the day, 12 hours Friday during the night, and 12 hours on Shabbat day. This was the first weekend. (It was also Adam and Eve's honeymoon!)



On that very first Saturday night, G-d hid that special light, and we are left with only the physical light that we experience today. Where did God hide that spiritual light? Well, some sages suggest that G-d hid it in the Chanukah candles. It is interesting to note that there is even a hint to this in the fact that when all the candles that we light over the entire Chanukah holiday (excluding the Shammash candles) are added up, the total is 36.

The 36 candles tell us that buried deep within these Chanukah lights is the holy supernal light enjoyed by the first couple in history on the very first Shabbat. By staring into the Chanukah lights, we are connecting with something beyond, with something greater and bigger than us. Personally, I feel that the holy glow of the Chanukah lights surrounds us in a cocoon of spirituality. G-d is hugging, cuddling, and protecting us!

My prayer is that my little story will somehow give others who struggle a little hope and ray of light. May we all be blessed to experience Chanukah miracles in our own lives.

Happy Chanukah!

Laura (Frayman) Wagensberg was born in Cleveland, Ohio, and studied at Neve Yerushalayim and various other seminaries. She received her Master's Degree in Reading and Literacy from Walden University, and has taught in Hebrew Day Schools and public schools in the US. This past March, Laura made Aliyah to Israel with her husband and lives in Ma'ale Adumim.

THANKSGIVUKKAH (cont. from p. 1)... On the one hand, lighting the Chanukah menorah fulfills the important mitzvah of *Pirumei Nisah*, publicizing the miracle of the holiday. This mitzvah is fulfilled not just by kindling the lights, but by placing the *chanukiah* (personal menorah) in a location where it will be visible to others outside to remind all who see the lights, of the incredible tale of a small group of religiously committed Jews who successfully repelled the religious persecution and attempts at forced assimilation in their homeland. On Chanukah, we have the opportunity to share the beauty of the light of the Chanukah menorah with the rest of the world, as well as reaffirm our commitment to the Maccabees' battle against assimilation.

On the other hand, within the commandment of kindling the lights of Chanukah, there is also the idea of *Ner Ish U'beito*, a light for each individual and his home. It is the responsibility of each household to light a Chanukah menorah in its dwelling. In other words, those traveling through the night need not pull over, light the menorah (cont. on p. 4)



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THANKSGIVUKKAH (cont. from p. 3)... before continuing their journey. The mitzvah is not just about lighting the *chanukiah*, it is about lighting in one's home (place where one is staying). This is why one may kindle the lights at any time during the night (after they have returned to the place where they will be spending the night), although it is ideal to light them at nightfall.

This is, to me, an intriguing paradox: We have a responsibility to share the lights of Chanukah with the outside world, but the lighting itself is supposed to take place in a residential space. Despite the need to publicize the miracle of the menorah, the lighting needs to take place not in the market, not in the public square, not at the neighbors, not at a restaurant, and not even in the synagogue, but in the privacy of the place where one calls home (even for just one night).

So how does this relate to the coincidence of Chanukah and Thanksgiving? I believe that the unique parameters of the mitzvot of Chanukah teach us that how we publicize, observe, and celebrate our Judaism must originate from within what we call home. As lofty as our goals might be to share the light of Chanukah with the rest of the world, our spiritual goals must still begin locally, with ourselves



and our families (*Ner Ish U'beito*).

The first step of enhancing the spiritual qualities of one's home is the simple but extremely important act of appreciating and being thankful for what we have. After all, if we can't appreciate the gifts of our families, loved ones and personal possessions, how can we convey the benevolence of G-d to everyone else? Expressing our gratitude to our families and friends is the true spirit of the Thanksgiving holiday. Expanding that to being able to share the thanks we feel to

G-d with the world around us, is the essence of Chanukah.

And so, the combined celebration of "Thankgivukkah" teaches us that by first focusing on, and appreciating, our most beautiful and stunning lights from within, we can then show the rest of the world why the lights of our Jewish traditions seem to shine a bit brighter every single day.

Wishing everyone a very happy "Chanksgiving."
Rabbi Ira Ebbin is the spiritual leader of Congregation Ohav Sholom in Merrick, NY. He welcomes comments and questions at rabbiebbin@ohav.org

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Illustrations by Wendy Dunn