

BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

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by Beginners

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בראשית

YOU'VE GOT TO GIVE A LITTLE...

Sarah Rochel Hewitt

When I was five or six years old, my parents gave me a scarf for the eighth night of Chanukah. I can picture all of the candles alight on the kitchen table as my dad and brother went to the basement to shoot a game of pool and my mom followed shortly thereafter. Left alone in the kitchen, I sulked over the lousy final present. After all, shouldn't the last night of Chanukah be the night reserved for the best present? I can honestly say, I don't know exactly what I was thinking, but I do know that when my mom came upstairs a few minutes later she found me holding the box over the flames. Thank G-d, no damage was done to anything but the box (not even to the ugly scarf).

In our family, Chanukah was definitely about the presents. Blessed with generous parents, my brother and I received something on all eight nights. We waited anxiously for my father to return home from work so we could quickly eat dinner and begin our "Hot and Cold" search.

In hindsight, perhaps the best part of the Chanukah gift giving custom was the many lessons I learned from it.

Anticipation is often the best part of exchanging gifts -- something I discovered the hard way when I was probably around 10 *(cont. on p. 3)*



"CHANUKAH IS UNFAIR!"

CHANUKAH - THE JEWISH VERSION

Rabbi Kenneth Brodtkin

Last winter, just a few days before Chanukah, I received a call from a local television station. They were looking for a rabbi to comment on the fact that the start of Chanukah coincided with the 25th day of December. Although the station did not reach me in time, I have to admit that the question bothered me. As the question itself suggests, we in the United States have a tendency to view Chanukah as our version of a non-Jewish holiday, our opportunity for end-of-the-year consumerism, with a Jewish twist. I know that for me, personally, growing up in a secular culture, this was the pervasive view of Chanukah.

Because of this viewpoint, there were many years during which Chanukah was not a source of Jewish pride and identity for me -- it was simply our version of something which is really not ours. And so this question of Chanukah coinciding with a gentile holiday really troubled me -- because it forced me to rethink Chanukah. Where is my source of Jewish identity within this holiday? *(cont. on p. 3)*

THE JOURNEY HOME

Bracha Nitzberg

When people ask how I came to embrace Judaism, many are surprised that my journey began with my father and my paternal grandmother both of whom were Chinese. Each played an invaluable and distinctive role in my spiritual development.

My father, of blessed memory, immigrated to New York City as a teenager from mainland China and spent more than 45 years working as a waiter in a Chinese restaurant. He died unexpectedly in 1988. Despite the long hours, and backbreaking work in a profession that garnered little respect, my father soldiered on every day. His goal -- like millions of immigrants before him -- was to ensure that his four children had the chance for a better life than he had in mainland China.

It was my father's Wednesday night tradition of preparing the family meal and celebrating it as an event -- a feast -- that prepared me for the Shabbat meal that I now look forward to every week.

Like many people who work in the restaurant business, my father never had weekends off. Instead, he had *(cont. on p. 2)*

THE JOURNEY HOME (cont. from p. 1)...the “luxury” of a single weekday to rest from his 10 hour days. For us, that meant the Wednesday night dinner was *the* special meal.

My father was not a chef by profession, but he was one by talent and intuition. Every week, my father took care to cook a meal that was special, a showcase for what a person can do when guided by love, warmth, and a strong sense of family.

My father prepared the classic Cantonese dishes of seaweed soup, steamed flounder, bitter melon “canoes” with ground pork, and steamed codfish. The dining table was so laden with food that you could barely see the table. On occasion, American dishes such as steak and onions, spare ribs, and stewed tomatoes with beef also appeared. Amid this bounty of food, we talked, laughed and strengthened our family ties...*just like Jewish families do on Shabbat.*

Whatever he cooked, my father showed us that food was not just a mundane exercise. He showed us that preparing a meal and dining with one’s loved ones was very important. He was making an offering to an altar -- his family.

The second pillar of my spiritual foundation was my beloved grandmother, of blessed memory. She was an even-tempered woman who was beloved by all -- her children, her grandchildren, extended family, and friends. I first met her when she immigrated to New York City the year I turned seven -- and she turned 71!

The moment Grandma moved in with us, my life changed. This patient, calm and loving woman showed me that strength comes not from the person who speaks the loudest, but the one who is wise enough to know when to speak and what to say.

In her quiet, unassuming way, Grandma showed me that it was also important to believe in something “larger than you.” For her, that meant honoring our ancestors on Buddhist religious holidays by lighting incense and making food offerings. Grandma was not what we would call a devout Buddhist but a cultural one. This is similar to being a cultural Jew rather than a religious one.

Grandma showed me that having a spiritual foundation was essential to living a good life. That spirituality may not have been expressed by going to regular religious services. However, it was something that needed to exist somewhere in a person’s life.

Six months before we married in 2002, my husband and I decided to start exploring Judaism. My husband, raised in a

secular Jewish family, had many negative experiences with Judaism. I, on the other hand, had explored a number of religions since 1995, and was eager to give Judaism a serious look. (It was inevitable that my father and grandmother would influence my religious journey.)

New Yorkers are blessed with a plethora of options to explore this wonderful religion. From classes, workshops, and ski weekends, to cultural events, literary readings, and Shabbat dinners, there are many ways to learn about Judaism -- at a place and speed that’s comfortable for each person.

Step one for us meant reading...everything. We started reading *The Jewish Week*, *The Forward*, *The Jewish Press* and *Lilith* regularly to get a broad spectrum of the community. At first, much of the editorial content seemed strange and unusual. We soon realized that this was due to our lack of knowledge about the most common principles of Jewish living. (Eventually, the editorial content didn’t seem so foreign to us. Now, we “get it” right away.)

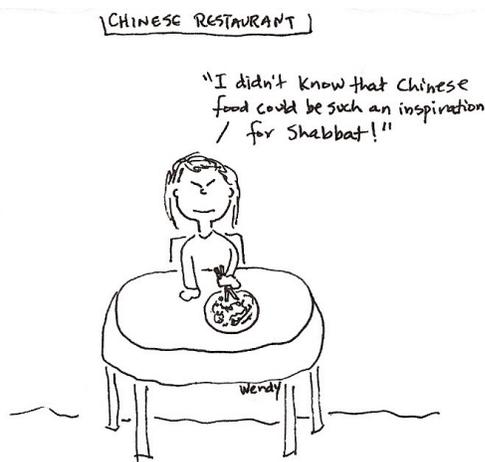
Then we moved on to books -- dozens of them at last count. Some of the best books we’ve read are: *How to live a Jewish Life* by Anita Diamant, *My Sister, The Jew* by Ahuvah Gray, and *How to Run a Jewish Household* by Blu Greenberg. Each book provided a unique perspective on the Jewish experience and added to our growing appetite for Yiddishkeit.

Step two was taking a Judaism course. We looked around and found some interesting courses at the Skirball Center affiliated with Temple Emanuel in Manhattan. We signed up for separate courses: my husband chose Torah study and I a course entitled “Who is a Jew?” The experience strengthened our appetite to increase knowledge of Judaism across the denominational spectrum.

Step three was welcoming the Sabbath Queen. Although my husband’s family celebrated the High Holidays, they rarely marked Shabbat with a festive meal and *zemirot* (Sabbath songs). We decided that it was time to experience that as well and turned to the Manhattan Jewish Experience. They were our entry point into one of Judaism’s most endearing traditions. After a lively *Kabbalat Shabbat* service, we dined on a multi-course kosher meal. I don’t recall who we met or what we discussed, but it gave us an appreciation for marking Shabbat on a weekly basis.

We have had many positive Jewish experiences since that Shabbat dinner nearly five years ago. I officially converted in June 2006. We were blessed to find a spiritual home at Congregation Anshe Sholom in New Rochelle, where we continue to learn about and practice Judaism. *It’s never too late to re-connect with your Jewish roots.*

Bracha J. Nitzberg is an award-winning marketing communications executive. She is an alumna of Cornell University and resides in the greater New York area with her family.



YOU'VE GOT TO GIVE (cont. from p. 1)...years old. A few weeks before Chanukah, I stumbled across the place in the basement where my mother would stash the gifts. I knew what I had asked for and was delighted to see a wrapped box of just about the right size. Lo and behold, just my luck, a corner of the wrapping had come loose. Now what would you do? Of course I peeked. It was the Barbie Dream Van for which I had so fervently hoped. I was so happy, but I had no one with whom to share my excitement because no one could know that I knew. I certainly had great expectations of playing with it, but when I brought the large box to the table from its hiding spot that Chanukah, I felt something missing inside. There was no curiosity, no anticipation, no need to shake it to try and guess what was inside. I had spent my excitement before I even had the gift, and I am certain that my parents were well aware of my dampened level of excitement. I can honestly say that never again did I wish to peek at the presents ahead of time.

As we grew older, the family rules of Chanukah changed. Once we were in college, the "rule" became two presents for each person. And when my brother married, his wife was incorporated into the two-gift custom. Alas, I wish I could say that I was not, deep down, still that spoiled little girl who tried to burn her scarf. Truth be told, however, I was resentful of the fact that I now had to give gifts to four people, but was not receiving back as many as I gave. Married couples, of course, were allowed to give as one unit. So while I was buying two each for mom, dad, brother and sister-in-law, I was only receiving four, two from mom and dad and two from my brother and sister-in-law. (Now you do the math and tell me how that was fair!) Every year it was a struggle not to announce how cheated I felt on this deal.

By the time I graduated college, I had become more observant and had spent a year in Israel immersed in Jewish studies. Through my studies, I gained a new appreciation for the holiday of Chanukah. The word Chanukah shares the same root as the Hebrew word *chinuch*, education. The main mitzvah of Chanukah is to publicize the miracle. This is accomplished by lighting a menorah in a public area where others will see it. While I was not yet ready to forego exchanging gifts (Hey, I was a poor graduate student at the time!), I needed to incorporate

my new understanding of Chanukah into the gift exchange. I therefore started my own personal custom of buying each person one book of Jewish content. Not only did giving Jewish books tie in to the real "theme" of Chanukah, but I also found myself excited at the prospect of choosing these presents.

It was only with the birth of my first niece that I can truly say that my inner gift giving spirit fully changed. There is nothing comparable to having a small child to spoil, especially when the toys then stay at someone else's house. This change, however, was all encompassing. I began to thoroughly enjoy finding and giving gifts...and I worked at it. I tried to think about what each person would really want, not just what was cute or easy to find. On a highly limited budget, this was no easy task!

Judaism teaches us that if we wish to truly love someone, we must learn to give to them. This doesn't mean that we should just bring them a cake or a bouquet of flowers, or do some random act of giving. In order to truly give to a person, you must really look at them and see what their needs and wants are. You need to try to understand them, an action that really connects you to them. Of course I already loved my family, but now I really feel in sync with them when I give them something I think they want.

Now I too am married and have my own children. My oldest child is 2 1/2 and quite old enough to be aware of receiving gifts. My husband and I are at a point in our lives where we must choose to establish our own family customs. Certainly we will continue the extended family gift exchange (which has now been modified to giving gifts just to the children). But what will we do in our own home? A gift each night? Probably not. But to take away all giving seems to me to be sacrificing a crucial element of childhood.

During my lifetime of Chanukahs, I have experienced a journey from selfish receiver to joyful giver. Indeed, now, I am often more excited to watch everyone else open their gifts than to open the gifts that I receive. And, because of that, I can now honestly apologize to my parents for ruining the surprise of my Barbie Dream Van.

Sarah Rochel Hewitt is the Publications Coordinator for the National Jewish Outreach Program and is the editor of Bereshith.

THE JEWISH VERSION (cont. from p. 1)...

As I began to rethink Chanukah, I discovered a certain level of confusion over the meaning of Chanukah itself. On the one hand, it seems that the real purpose is to commemorate the historical struggle between Greece and Israel, exile and Jewish victory. This understanding can be seen clearly in our liturgy, which focuses on the military victory of the Hasmoneans (Maccabees). And yet, the festival of Chanukah is clearly built around another story that took place after the war -- the miraculous burning of the flask of oil for eight days. The eight days for which we celebrate this holiday, as well as the central symbol, the Menorah, both underscore this theme.

Our tradition forces us to confront the concept that Chanukah was not only a physical struggle, but an ideological battle as well. This struggle was raging between Greece and Israel at the time that the Chanukah story unfolded. Whereas the Torah believes that all of physical reality is a means to know G-d, Greece placed man, not G-d, in the center of his own world.

We are all familiar with Greek culture -- the art and sculptures, the gymnasium and its glorification of the human body. In the Greek mind, the human body was not a tool to serve the Al-mighty, but a source of human pride. How far the philosophy of Greece was from the words of King David who wrote, "Through my flesh I perceive G-d." Greece and Israel were both aware of the majesty of the human body -- only for one nation the body itself was the source of pride and for the other it was the vehicle through which to know the Creator of all flesh.

(cont. on p. 4)

THE JEWISH VERSION (cont. from p. 3)...

The holiday of Chanukah focuses our attention on a time period that our sages refer to as an "exile." The Greek exile, however, was unique because it took place in the land of Israel. Furthermore, the Greeks did not seek our physical destruction, they merely sought our complete assimilation. The Greek opposition to Israel was expressed in several pointed decrees against certain mitzvot, including circumcision, Shabbat and the Temple service, to name just a few. It seems significant that they did not oppose all mitzvot. Why were these mitzvot singled out and not others?

The mitzvot that the Greeks opposed focused on sanctifying the basic aspects of our physical lives -- our bodies, our time and our space. *Brit Mila* (circumcision) reminds us that the purpose of our body is to serve G-d. Shabbat teaches that the real purpose of time is to develop our relationship with G-d. The Temple service is a statement that a physical location can be devoted to acquiring knowledge of G-d.

The Greeks opposed these mitzvot because of the profound message they sent -- namely that we live in a G-d-centered world. They were not opposed, like other oppressors, to our existence. Jews who ate gefilte fish and sang Jewish folk songs were acceptable. What they could not tolerate was our insistence that the very purpose of life is connection to the Al-mighty.

When we think back to the main story of Chanukah, it almost



IS CHANUKAH THE JEWISH VERSION OF X-MAS?

seems nonsensical that the Hasmoneans - small bands of soldiers - would choose to fight against the Greek superpower. What was their source of inspiration? They certainly understood that Jewish continuity is only meaningful when Jewish life can be devoted to the principles of Torah. On a deeper level, however, the very issue over which they struggled, whether we are living in a G-d-centered or human-centered universe, truly gave them courage to fight. This has always been the guiding principle for the Jewish people in times of battle.

The Maccabees' realization of this principle was the merit they needed to win the war. But they were also rewarded with an open and obvious miracle: they witnessed the unprecedented burning of the oil for eight days. This miracle was by no means a side show in the Chanukah story. Rather, it was part-in-parcel of the essence of the festival -- the realization that the Al-mighty is directly involved, guides and controls our physical reality. That is why the holiday is built around the miracle of the oil.

Both of the aspects of Chanukah, the military victory as well as the miracle of the oil, emerge as a great source of inspiration. Indeed, this unique inspiration profoundly transcends the culture of consumerism which impacts our traditional view of the holiday. This is an inspiration for us today as Jews, for as we continue to observe the mitzvot of Chanukah, we affirm that we, the Jewish people, like our ancestors, are truly rooted in a G-d-centered world.

Rabbi Kenneth Brodtkin is the rabbi of Congregation Kesser Israel in Portland, OR.

Illustrations by Wendy Dunn



*Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Sarah Rochel Hewitt of the **National Jewish Outreach Program**. 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 or visit www.njop.org.*

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