

BERESHITH

"IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter
for Beginners,
by Beginners

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בראשית

NEIS GADOL HAYA POH?

Leat Kuzniar

As a child, one of my favorite parts of Chanukah was playing Dreidel. Since my parents are Israeli, we used dreidels with the traditional letters *nun*, *gimmel*, *hay*, and *pay* to represent the phrase "*Neis Gadol Haya Poh*" ("a great miracle occurred *here*"), referring to the miracle which occurred during the times of Judah the Maccabee in Biblical Israel in the year 165 BCE. It was not until I started Hebrew School that I discovered that in the Diaspora, Jews have the tradition of playing the dreidel with the substitution of the word "*Sham*" ("there") for the old "*Poh*" (here). But, as my Chanukah story reveals, no matter where one is, Chanukah can also be a time of appreciation of the light of miracles that occur "*Poh*" - here in our lives every day!

The story begins on the road to Montreal in a bus full of college students on their way to a ski trip. This was one of those trips you couldn't pass up; 200 bucks for a week of skiing in one of Eastern Canada's best resorts. Our trip was sponsored by a Jewish organization for college students and was lead by an unassuming man named Benjie, whom I later learned was actually the un-bearded, unassuming Rabbi Benjie Jacoby.

(cont. on p. 2)



LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

Rabbi Hanoch Teller

Not long ago, the entire Soviet Union was one huge prison. Its citizens were deprived of many freedoms we take for granted, including the right to practice our religion and live anywhere we choose, or even to emigrate to another country if we so desire. Any Russian citizen who wanted to leave the Soviet Union was considered a traitor to his country.

Many Russians would have preferred to live elsewhere, anywhere, just to be free of oppression, but few were willing to risk being branded disloyal and made to suffer all sorts of demoralizing punishments. One group of Soviet citizens, however, was prepared to take that risk: the Jews. In increasing numbers, the Jews of Russia began to openly declare their desire to leave Mother Russia and resettle in the Land of Israel. These fearless Jews were called "prisoners of Zion."

(cont. on p. 3)

THE LURE OF THE TREE

Michael Harshaw

"Daddy, I want a tree, too. PLEASE daddy?!
Everybody else has one!"

Until I was seven we lived in Culver City, California, which is now more commonly known as Beverly Hills Adjacent. And while Culver City was physically close (5 miles or so) to a vibrant Jewish community, it was, spiritually, quite far. In fact, there were no other Jewish kids in my neighborhood, and most of my friends were Hispanic and African American.

Living in Culver City was fun. My friends would come over to my house and play, and I'd go to theirs and play. I fondly remember playing "Three Fly's Up" in the Culver City streets. When winter came, it wasn't unusual for me to be at my friends' homes when they got their Xmas trees. I even helped them decorate the trees. Not only did they have trees for the holiday, but the trees

(cont. on p. 2)

NEIS GADOL (cont. from p. 1)... It was a long trip and the excitement of the morning was beginning to wear off as we got back on the road after another stop at a service station. People resumed their seats, talking quietly or dozing off to the sound of the bus motor struggling to merge with the speeding traffic all around us...

The next I knew, our bus screeched to a startling halt about half a foot from a sheer rock cliff on the side of the highway! As we came out of our stupor, people began moving about the bus in half-hysteria trying to find out what had happened. Our bus driver had a seizure behind the wheel. By the grace of G-d, one of the guys on the bus, Shai, had been near the front of the bus throwing away a banana peel, when he glanced over at the unconscious bus driver. Shai acted instinctively and lifted the emergency-break, bringing the bus to a terrifying stop just inches away from disaster.

After calling for emergency assistance, we all managed to squeeze out of the small space between the bus door and the rock cliff. We walked back to the service station and settled in to wait. As night approached, Rabbi Jacoby gathered all the students for the lighting of the Chanukah candles. Right there in "Hicksville" surrounded by truck drivers, mounds of super-sized McDonald's fries, and tacky Xmas decorations, we lit our candles and sang the traditional Hebrew songs unencumbered by the many enquiring eyes staring our way. And, as our candles burned, I turned to a friend and remarked "*Neis Gadol Haya Poh!*"

Beyond the gifts, the latkes, and the lights, there is a deeper meaning to this holiday. Chanukah tells the story of Jews fighting to remain Jews and to have the right to practice their religion without persecution—to remain distinct from the dominant Hellenistic culture which espoused hedonism above all else. Judah and his small army fought tirelessly to free the Jews from the clutches of this "enlightened" culture of Alexander the Great. And the small army of Jews prevailed, both militarily and culturally.

G-d performed countless miracles for the Jews during this period of history. The *Megillat Ta'anit*, thought to be the original work on Chanukah (predating the Talmud),

THE LURE OF THE TREE (cont. from p. 1)...stayed in their living rooms for a good month, while our menorah was only out for 8 days. I'd go to my friends' houses day after day, and each day they would show me all the new presents addressed to them! Wow! In fact, the number of presents under the tree seemed to be constantly growing. No doubt about it, I thought, this is the way to go!

Growing up in that environment, it is not surprising that, when I was 5 years old or so, I asked my father for a tree of my own. I wanted one just like all my friends had. I wanted to hang ornaments and string lights and wake up

recounts the central miracle of Chanukah as the military victory of the Jews who were outnumbered one hundred to one and still triumphed. The Talmud, however, makes mention only of the miracle of the oil used for lighting the Menorah in the Beit Hamikdash (the Holy Temple) lasting eight days—the miracle with which we are all familiar and that we commemorate through the lighting of Chanukah candles. A beautiful explanation is offered for this incongruity: Our sages tell us that the oil used for lighting the Menorah in the Beit Hamikdash is an allusion to the light that burns within each of us: "the light of the wisdom of the heart and thoughts of the mind." The true miracle of Chanukah is the fact that a group of Jews, no matter that they were small in number, allowed their inner light to shine outwardly and refused to be engulfed by the encroaching darkness of the surrounding culture. The light of these Jews inspired those who were unable to withstand the pleasure of the hedonistic world around them to return to their traditions.

This brings me back to my story: In that service station, on the side of the road, surrounded by our "dominant culture," our small group made a statement; we allowed our inner light to shine, unhindered by the questioning glances from those around us.

The culture of the Western world is one in which Chanukah is often celebrated as a way to placate Jewish children who look on their Christian friends with envy during the Xmas season. It is a culture that has allowed the French government to outlaw public expression of Judaism (through the wearing of a yarmulke) in public schools. It is a culture in which many Jews hide their Judaism from their friends and co-workers. It is precisely the miracle of Chanukah that allows us to pronounce clearly that we are proud Jews- whether in Jerusalem or "Hicksville," Ontario!

I wish you all a Happy Chanukah- a time filled with the light of our tradition and culture.

Leat Kuzniar, a Naturopathic Doctor from Toronto, currently resides in Passaic, New Jersey.

to a tree full of presents. That's what happens when you are the only Jewish kid in the neighborhood. Hey, you can't blame a kid for trying! I mean everyone else's family had one, why not ours?

I don't know what my father (of blessed memory) really thought of my demand. Whether it bothered him or not, he handled it like a pro. With great patience, my father explained the winter holidays to me: Since we are Jewish, we don't have a tree. Instead, we have a menorah! He told me that Jews do not celebrate Xmas, Jews celebrate Chanukah. (I can't remember now if he tried to explain the significance of Chanukah, but I was only 5!) (cont. on p. 4)

LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS (cont. from p. 1)... Since the Bolshevik Revolution, hundreds of brave men and women courageous enough to stand up to a ruthless regime became prisoners of Zion. Among them was a young man named Yosef. Remarkably, not only did Yosef proclaim his intention to live in the Land of Israel, he tried to fulfill his dream in a bold, dramatic move that finally made the plight of Russian Jewry known to the whole world.

The day he attempted to escape to Israel in a stolen airplane, he was arrested by the infamous KGB--the Soviet secret police--and condemned to death. Due to pressure applied by free countries all over the world, his sentence was eventually commuted to a long and harsh prison term in Siberia's dreaded Vladimir Prison.

Vladimir was a terrifying institution devoted to the destruction of the human spirit. Inside the prison compound, the living conditions were appalling. Rations varied in caloric content from sub-average to starvation level, exercise and fresh air were minimal and contact with the outside was limited to several letters a year, with this privilege, too, often suspended. Technically, each prisoner was allowed two meetings a year with his family, but years could pass without any visits at all.

The KGB had an elaborate and remarkably pragmatic way of controlling an inmate's body and soul. Once prisoners recovered from the initial shock of life at Vladimir, a KGB representative would invite them in for a talk. They would be offered coffee, tea, meat, or a visit to a restaurant in civilian clothing. An officer from the secret police might even tempt them with a letter from their family, or a visit with a friend.

To earn these privileges, a prisoner merely had to be willing to inform on a cellmate, or confess to a crime he never committed. Naturally, Yosef refused to do either, so he was denied all religious articles, as well as permission to perform the mitzvahs. But for all its unspeakable terror, intimidation, demoralization, and frequent punishments, the KGB couldn't break Yosef's iron will to fulfill G-d's commandments.

Somehow he managed to observe, in the most primitive fashion imaginable, whatever mitzvot he could. He virtually risked his life by not working on Shabbat. He refused to eat non-kosher food and avoided *chametz* (leavened bread) on Passover. He made a *tallit* (prayer shawl) for himself, always kept his head covered, and even performed the mitzvah of searching for *chametz*.

One frigid winter, a single thought managed to warm Yosef's soul: Chanukah was approaching. Commemorating the victory of the pure and the weak over the evil and powerful, Chanukah celebrates the triumph of right over might, the triumph of the spirit over the forces of terror.

Yosef dreamed of lighting a Chanukah menorah, a virtual impossibility under the circumstances. Certainly the prison authorities would never permit the performance of this mitzvah and would react harshly to the very notion. Regardless, Yosef put his mind to the mission and developed a clever, viable scheme.

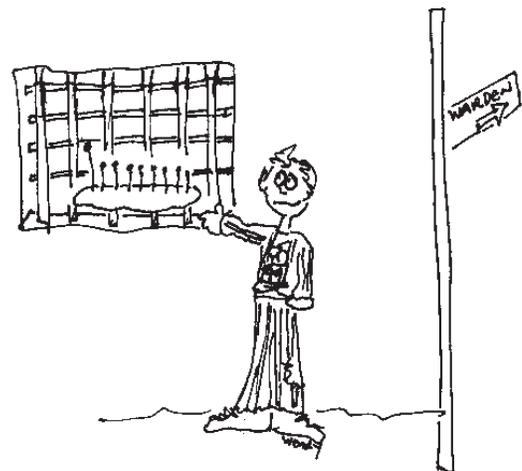
Every day he saved a little of his meager rations, even though this meant subsisting on a starvation diet. When no one was watching, he secretly slipped a crust of bread or a sliver of potato into his pocket. Later on, he carefully stashed these precious scraps on a small ledge in his cell, and prayed that no guard would notice his curious cache. Hoarding food was considered a criminal act, and if discovered, not only would the food be confiscated, but the perpetrator would suffer a cruel punishment as well. As with every other mitzvah he performed in Vladimir Prison, Yosef accepted the risk.

The day before Chanukah, Yosef could scarcely contain his excitement. So far his little collection had gone unnoticed. Now there was only one final, critical detail to be arranged. Trying to attract as little attention as possible, Yosef traded some of his rations to another prisoner for a pack of cigarettes and a box of matches. He had no use for the cigarettes, but the matches were the crucial missing ingredient for his plan.

Fingers trembling, Yosef opened the box of matches and found forty-four matches inside, exactly the number he needed, to serve as the Chanukah lights.

And so, late on the first night of Chanukah, when everyone was finally asleep and no guards were in sight, Yosef inserted the matches into his scraps of bread and potato and fashioned a secret Chanukah menorah! The matches burned for only a few seconds, but they provided endless light and inspiration for Yosef Mendeleovich in the depths of the Vladimir Prison in Siberia.

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THE LURE OF THE TREE (cont. from p. 2)...Of course, my father added what he probably saw as the greatest lure: We don't get presents on just one day, we get presents on all 8 days!

Well, presents or not, his explanations didn't fly with me because I wanted to be just like everyone else!

My father was not a religious man, but he had a lot of Jewish pride. He had survived the Holocaust and had fought in the Israeli Army during the War of Independence. After everything he had gone through (his story is for another time), he wasn't going to just flush his Judaism down the drain just because his son wanted a tree.

We didn't get a tree that year (but, as my father had promised, I did get a present every day for Chanukah).

I was only a few years older when we moved to Torrance, 20 miles south of Culver City. My new friends were a mixed bunch of Japanese, Chinese, and Korean. Once again, there were no other Jewish kids around.

That first Torrance winter, Chanukah arrived well before Xmas, and out came our beloved menorah. Each night, as my father lit the candles, all my friends would come by and listen to father say the blessings and, of course, watch as I opened my daily present. They were thoroughly intrigued by Chanukah. More surprising to me, however, was that they were envious that I received a new present each day for eight days. (Of course, I

wanted to argue that they received 25 presents on one day).

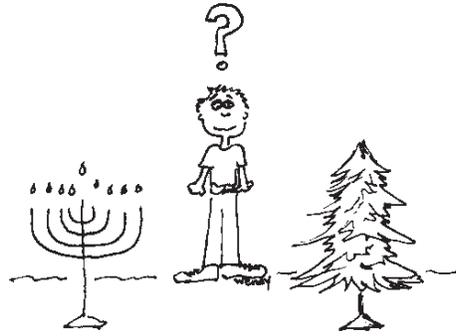
That first Chanukah in Torrance, something special happened. Maybe it was that the other children were envious that I had received so many gifts, or perhaps I liked being the center of attention and having my friends ask me questions. It doesn't matter what specifically lit that spark—what does matter is that the spark was lit. By seeing something beautiful in the Holiday of Lights, I began, slowly, to be proud of my being Jewish.

Years, well, really decades, went by before I fully acted on that pride and claimed my heritage. Today my children live in a community where, come Chanukah, we are surrounded by lit menorahs, and my family's joy at being Jewish is expressed in our everyday life.

I often think back to Culver City and Torrance, about being the only Jewish kid, and about how much I wanted that tree. Then I am struck by how interesting it is, maybe even how miraculous it is, that sometimes it is the outside variables that make us truly appreciate that which we have had all along, but have taken for granted.

Happy Chanukah.

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Illustrations by Wendy Dunn



*Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Sarah Rochel Hewitt, Rabbi Yitzchak Rosenbaum, and Beryl Levenson 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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