

בראשית

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BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

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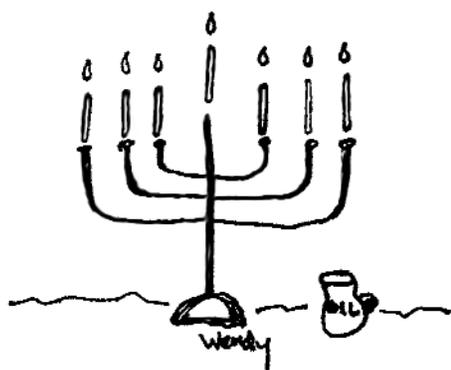
THE POWER OF LITTLE THINGS

Shmuel Plotsker

In the perspective of the Jewish calendar, Chanukah is actually a rather minor holiday. It is not listed in the Torah, and has no special book of its own. It doesn't even rate its own tractate in the Talmud, as does Purim (Tractate Megillah). And while it may be long in span (8 days), aside from the candles, there are really relatively few intrinsic rituals and customs. No special meal and no day of rest mark the holiday. Why then, is it such an essential holiday to Jews everywhere?

Perhaps, it is because Chanukah demonstrates that little gestures, little things, can mean a lot – a whole lot.

The other day, I went to the New York Blood Center (NYBC) to donate platelets. While donating blood takes only 15 minutes or so, this particular kind of blood donation takes about an hour and a half. (Platelets are necessary for Leukemia patients whose blood has difficulty clotting, due to chemotherapy). I cleared my schedule for the necessary time, went to the center, and began the process. The needle went in (thank G-d the NYBC has modern, one-arm machines) and I got comfortable for the long haul of sitting quietly. About ten or fifteen minutes into the process, I moved my arm slightly to the right or left, and it wasn't long before I started feeling some pain. When I asked the nurse on duty (*cont. on p. 2*)



"IT'S THE LITTLE THINGS THAT COUNT!"

REFLECTIONS IN THE LIGHT

Risa Steinmen

I was sitting at my kitchen table, listening to the sound of the wind outside, and flipping through a "Chanukah Discussion Guide" that my daughter had written and sent to me. She'd called in advance, of course, and told me she was sending it, excited to give me something to enhance the holiday. It was quite interesting, and I did learn a great deal. One thought, however, struck me as funny...she pointed out that Chanukah was all about the "*chinuch*," the education of children and, yet, here she was educating me!

It's interesting to think back to the years that have passed and to realize how much has changed in my relationship with my daughter. It's fascinating to see how much I have learned. It seems like only yesterday that she advised us that she wanted to go to Israel to "learn." What did this mean? Learn what? She was done with college and now, rightfully, it was time for her to go to grad school or find a job and settle down. Why wasn't our daughter doing what we felt was normal?

Actually, I've jumped ahead of myself. Perhaps I should explain some things. My husband and I were both brought up with minimal-to-no Jewish education. Yes, we knew we were Jews. No, we didn't celebrate X-mas. (*cont. on p. 2*)

IT SHOULD ONCE AGAIN SEE LIGHT

by Blair P. Grubb, M.D.

Several years ago, a physician from southern France contacted me. His granddaughter had taken ill with a disease that baffled the physicians there. He called after reading several of my articles on disorders of the autonomic nervous system. His granddaughter's symptoms seemed to match those I had described, and he asked me if I could help. I readily agreed, and for many months, I collaborated with the child's French physicians by telephone and by fax, directing their diagnostic testing. At last we came to a diagnosis, and I prescribed a course of therapy. During the next several weeks, the child seemingly made a miraculous recovery. Her grandparents expressed their heartfelt thanks and told me to let them know should I ever come to France.

In the summer of 1996, I was invited to speak at a large scientific meeting that was held in Nice, France. I sent word to the physician I had helped years before. Upon my arrival at the hotel, I received a message to contact him. I called him, and we arranged a night to meet for dinner.

On the appointed day we met and then drove north to his home in the beautiful southern countryside. It was humbling to learn that his home was older than the United States. During the drive he told me that his (*cont. on p. 3*)

LITTLE THINGS (cont. from p. 1)...for help, however, I was informed that she would have to terminate the donation because I had moved the needle! While I was only mildly annoyed about this development, can you imagine the disappointment of the NYBC and the hospital, and the patient, and his or her family? I moved only a little, but because of that, there would be no platelets from me or for the patient in need that night.

So it seems clear that little things can mean a great deal. How though, can we know which little things are important? For instance, when I wiggled my arm, I had no idea that it would ruin the donation process.

The truth is that we can not know. One of the great lessons of life is that all little things must be taken seriously, and only time will tell what is vital and what is not. In other words, patience is the key.

Allow me to share with you how over the past few years, volunteering for the National Jewish Outreach Program, I have come to understand the importance of patience. This is my third year teaching the Hebrew Reading Crash Course, and at each class, after the introductions, we begin with the letter "alef" and the *patach* sound ("aah"). It isn't much, but then we add another letter, then another and another, and then some new vowels. Before you know it, by the fourth meeting, the students are already *davening* (praying) and saying *brachot* (blessings). Not only that, they're doing it pretty fluently, if you ask me! It's pretty amazing, that with a little bit of patience, despite small steps forward, we really get somewhere. From a single "alef," the students are now nearly ready for serious prayer. They're on their way, and all because they were patient. They did it a little at a time.

I've seen it too, in our Beginners Service. This is the second year that I am leading a Beginners Service. Every week we start with *Adon Olam* and *Yigdal*, two prayers that speak of the power and kingship of G-d. They are basic prayers. Each week we try to use a different tune if possible. We build from there. Next we recite *brachot* (blessings), then a little more *tefilla* (prayer), and finally review the *parasha* (the

weekly Torah portion). As the leader, I have had the honor of watching different people come into our Service, and "graduate" from it. They all start small...perhaps just following the words or humming along to a familiar tune or listening attentively to the *parasha*. It takes a few months, sometimes a year or even more, but eventually, they are no longer Beginners. They recognize the different tunes and are comfortable with both the Shabbat prayers of our Beginners Service and some basic concepts in Judaism. Both the students of the Hebrew Reading Crash Course and the participants in the Beginners Service have taught me that success is built on patience and doing things a little bit at a time.

When I went to donate my platelets, I upset the process by not keeping still, by changing my course of action. I didn't have patience. Patience is not just being able to wait calmly. Patience is saying to yourself, I can keep doing what I need to do now, because I know that when all is said and done, G-d runs the world and the outcome will be as He desires. It means recognizing that if G-d wants me to be a Moses, to change the world with earth-shaking miracles, then G-d will make me a Moses. For now, we must just recognize the power of the little miracles that occur every day.

And that's the lesson and the miracle of Chanukah. On Chanukah, the Jews reclaimed the Temple and only a tiny flask of oil was found with which to light the menorah. It didn't look like much. It clearly wasn't going to last long, but at least it was something. The Jews stayed still and had patience enough to wait and see what would happen to their holy light as they waited for more oil to be produced. And that tiny, little, inconsequential-looking flask of oil, coupled with rock solid faith, determination and patience, lasted for eight days and yielded one of the most beloved and joyous of all the holidays of the Jewish calendar.

Little things, tiny gestures, small lessons, mean a whole lot. Won't you do one today?

Shmuel Plotsker is a Staff Attorney with the New York City Commission on Human Rights but gets naches in life from his nephews, nieces, and students in NJOP's Beginner's Minyan and Hebrew Reading Crash classes.

REFLECTIONS (cont. from p. 1)...Yes, we drove to synagogue on the High Holidays.

When my daughter was five, we moved to Central Pennsylvania and decided that if our children were ever going to learn about Judaism, we would need a better resource than ourselves to teach them. Luckily, there was the Yeshiva Academy Day School in town, and we enrolled both our children. Although the school was quite small, I felt that our children were receiving a good secular education as well as being exposed to more Jewish background. It seemed the perfect solution. Over the course of the years they attended the school, we did change our lifestyles somewhat to accommodate the things they were learning, but not in any major way. As was expected in the community, they continued on to be Bar and Bat Mitzvahed and went on to Hebrew High School, participated at Jewish Community Center functions and joined Jewish Youth Organizations.

When our daughter went to college, she grew more



HAVE I LOST MY DAUGHTER?
HAVE I LOST MY DAUGHTER?

involved in Judaism. Gradually, she started changing the way she did certain things, like what she chose to eat or how she spent her Friday evenings. Nothing drastic, just little changes. In her junior year of college, she went to Israel and, looking back, this seems to be when I realized just how extensive her being "frum" (religious) had become. We went to visit her in Israel and met a group of friends that, as I recollect, were far different from what we had anticipated. Some of the women covered their hair, the men wore black hats and had beards, they were all observant of Shabbat, kept kosher homes...a multitude of differences

from our point of view.

Had I lost my daughter? Was she turning away from the lifestyle that she knew and, therefore, turning away from us? Would she ever come to our home again? Would I ever again know my daughter as a companion and friend? Would these new friends turn her away from her family? Could we retain the close relationship that I felt we had (cont. on p. 3)

ONCE AGAIN (cont. from p. 1)...wife had metastatic breast cancer and was not well, but she insisted upon meeting me. When introduced to her, I saw that despite her severe illness, she was still a beautiful woman with a noble bearing.

After dinner, we sat in a 17th century salon, sipping cognac and chatting. Our conversation must have seemed odd to the young man and woman who served us because it came out in a free flowing mixture of English, French and Spanish. After a time the woman asked, "My husband tells me you are Jewish, no?" "Yes," I said, "I am a Jew." They asked me to tell them about Judaism, especially the holidays. I did my best to explain and was astounded by how little they knew of Judaism. She seemed to be particularly interested in Chanukah. Once I had finished answering her questions, she suddenly looked me in the eye and said, "I have something I want to give you." She disappeared and returned several moments later with a package wrapped in cloth. She sat, her tired eyes slowly looking into mine, and she began to speak slowly.

"When I was a little girl of eight years, during the Second World War, the authorities came to our village to round up all the Jews. My best friend at the time was a girl of my age named Jeanette. One morning when I came to play, I saw her family being forced at gunpoint into a truck. I ran home and told my mother what had happened and asked where Jeanette was going. 'Don't worry,' she said, 'Jeanette will be back soon.' I ran back to Jeanette's house only to find that she was gone and that the other villagers were looting her home of valuables, except for the Judaic items, which were thrown into the street. As I approached, I saw an item from her house lying in the dirt. I picked it up and recognized it as an object that Jeanette and her family would light around Christmas time. In my little girl's mind I said 'I will take this home and keep it for Jeanette, till she comes back,' but she and her family never returned."

She paused and took a slow sip of brandy. "Since that time I have kept it. I hid it from my parents and didn't tell a soul of its existence. Indeed, over the last 50 years the only person who knew of it was my husband. When I found out what really happened to the Jews, and how many of the people had collaborated with the Nazis, I could not bear to

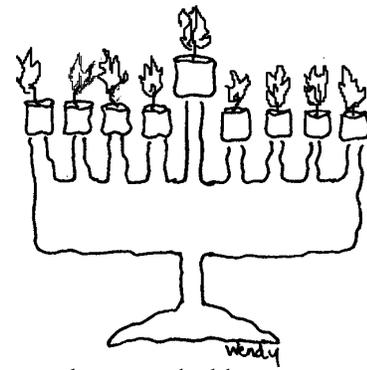
REFLECTIONS (cont. from p. 2)...enjoyed until she changed? All these questions stormed quietly within me.

Reading the questions now, nearly a decade later, I am horrified by my reaction then. But, sadly, those were my feelings. My husband felt that she was over the top and would eventually find her way through this to a more moderate lifestyle that we could all be comfortable with. After she put off graduate school to go "learn," we realized this was more than just a phase.

I wish I could say that we recognized how happy our daughter was during that early phase, and that we were immediately supportive. I wish that had been the case, but, unfortunately, we worried about her and resisted her move away from what we understood. Admittedly, I can now see that this was our own bias.

It took some time, but I realized that not only did I not lose my daughter, but I found that my daughter had grown to be an independent woman with values and virtues of which I am very proud. We have a much deeper and more positive relationship than I could have ever hoped for.

"IL FAUDRA VOIR LA LUMIERE ENCORE UNE FOIS"



look at it. Yet I kept it, hidden, waiting for something, although I wasn't sure what. Now I know what I was waiting for. It was you, a Jew, who helped cure our granddaughter, and it is to you I entrust this."

Her trembling hands set the package on my lap. I slowly unwrapped the cloth from around it. Inside was a menorah, but unlike any I had ever seen before. Made of solid brass, it had eight cups for holding oil and wicks and a ninth cup centered above the others. It had a ring attached to the top, and the woman mentioned that she remembered that Jeanette's family would hang it in the hallway of their home. It looked quite old to me; later, several people told me that it is probably at least 100 years old. As I held it and thought about what it represented, I began to cry. All I could manage to say was a garbled "merci." As I left, her last words to me were "Il faudra voir la lumiere encore une fois" - it should once again see light.

I later learned that she died less than one month after our meeting. This Chanukah, the menorah will once again see light. And as I and my family light it, we will say a special prayer in honor of those of those whose memories it represents. We will not let its lights go out again.

Blair P. Grubb, MD is a professor of pediatrics at the Medical College of Ohio. Reprinted from Bereishith Vol XI #2, Dec. 1997. Reproduced with the permission of the Annals of Internal Medicine.

My daughter has natural teaching abilities, a great deal of patience, and a tremendous amount of love for us and for her chosen way of life. Largely because of her understanding nature, we have turned the corner and now find ourselves in a new and better place. Several years ago, we even kashered our kitchen, and I have been learning to read Hebrew. It took a while, but I even agreed to join her at an educational seminar - and I loved it. I've now attended several such programs and I think I now have a better understanding of her decision to follow this path. This past fall I attended another seminar and I can honestly say that, as a result, I have a much deeper understanding of the High Holidays.

I don't anticipate becoming "frum" at this point in my life, but I certainly have a stronger belief and better understanding of G-d and Judaism. And only G-d knows what opportunities will avail themselves to me in the future.

Once I resisted her desire to change so completely. Now, she has opened my eyes to a world of new thoughts and ideas.

Risa Steinman, formerly the "mother of a beginner," is now a beginner herself.

"MERRY CHANUKAH?"

by Lloyd Epstein

I was about to enter the kitchen when I overheard a debate between our housekeeper and her friend, who is employed by a non-observant Jewish family.

Wilma: I think Yom Kippur is the most important. They fast, they go to synagogue all day. It is so holy they even give me the day off.

Wendy: No Wilma, it has to be Chanukah.

Wilma: Chanukah? All they do is light candles, and spin those crazy dreidels. How can you say it's Chanukah?

Wendy: They give presents every night! It's the Jewish Christmas!

I came away bewildered. To a *frum* (observant) Jew, the idea of Chanukah being so important is absurd. It's the most minor of rabbinic celebrations. There's no prohibition against work. Kids go to school. Although we've all learned that Chanukah was initiated to symbolize the fight against assimilation, now the effect seems to be almost the opposite. It's all about presents. People think that Chanukah is just our version of the big non-Jewish holiday.

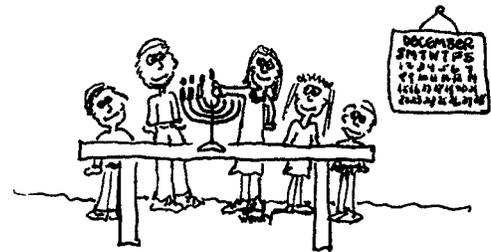
It dawned on me: Chanukah had become counterproductive. But what should we do? Call the ritual committee and demand that Chanukah be abolished?

The phone rang. It was my cousin Betty. Betty was raised to eat on Yom Kippur, and buy a tree on December 24th after 5:00 p.m. because that is when the prices go down. She is inter-married and living her American dream in the Southwest. She was in a panic.

"My daughter Annie's second grade teacher found out that Annie's grandparents were born Jewish. The teacher is teaching a class on holidays of the world. She wants me to do a show and tell about Chanukah. What am I going to do? Could you send me a dreidel?"

What a miracle! We sent her a sackful of dreidels, and a story about the letters on the dreidel.

Chanukah is certainly no Yom Kippur, or even Purim for that matter. But as *frum* Jews, I wonder if we tend to overlook the staying power of its miracles. The Rabbis instituted Chanukah to commemorate the great miracle: religious Jews triumphing over the overwhelming forces of Syrian-Greek assimilation. In our day and age, isn't it almost as miraculous that Chanukah happens to appear during the season when many Jews need it most?



THE GREATEST MIRACLE OF CHANUKAH IS THAT IT ALWAYS FALLS OUT AROUND DECEMBER 25th

Illustrations by Wendy Dunn



Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Sarah Rochel Reid, Rabbi Yitzhak 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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