

BERESHITH
"IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter
for Beginners,
by Beginners

Vol. XXI No. 2
Kislev 5768/December 2007



בראשית

CELEBRATING MAN'S PARTNERSHIP WITH G-D

Rabbi Yonah Gross

The festival of Chanukah is often seen as a celebration of two distinct events. The first was the Israelites' victory over the powerful Syrian-Greek army that was suppressing religious freedom. The second cause for celebration was the miracle of the oil: Upon expelling the Syrian-Greeks from the Holy Temple, the Israelites were only able to recover enough pure oil to light the Menorah for one day. G-d miraculously made the oil last for eight full days, the requisite time to manufacture additional quantities of pure oil.

While these two events are often perceived as distinct entities, perhaps we can explore their inherent connection.

The Syrian-Greeks sought to suppress Judaism in its entirety. However, the process began by outlawing only three areas of Jewish observance: the celebration of Shabbat, circumcision of infant boys, and the sanctification of the new moon.

What was it about these particular practices that so irritated the Syrian-Greeks? Why did they not choose to prohibit ritual slaughter or religious burial? One common thread that runs through the three forbidden rituals is that they all demonstrate our partnership with G-d in this world. *(cont. on p. 2)*



THE NACHAS OF A BT PARENT

Esti Graham

As a *Baalat Teshuva* (BT -- one who has returned to Jewish observance), and a BT woman who always liked to sing, I've always been a bit frustrated by the requirement to not sing in front of men for the sake of modesty. The outlets for women singers for "women only" audiences are few and far between. (Not that I was ever a professional, but I've been told I have a perfectly trainable voice.) So I've resigned myself to singing in my home, for my children.

I sing some nice tunes I've heard for *Modeh Ani* ("Thank you G-d for restoring my soul...") and make up new words for popular songs to motivate my kids to get out of bed, get dressed, hold my hand while crossing the street, bring me something on the other side of the room, and various other daily living activities. My 5 year old is frequently amazed by the fact that I know so many different songs. I'm sure my old friends would be cringing at the latest household lyrics I've written to various Beatles tunes, etc., *(cont. on p. 3)*

BUILDING UP

Rachel Wormeli

Why is it that we begin the first night of Chanukah with one candle and, as each new night begins, we add a candle? To answer this question we must first look into the Talmud where a discussion is recorded between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel. Beit Shammai said that on the first night of Chanukah, eight candles should be lit and, with each successive night, one candle should be removed as we "count down" the days of the miracle. Beit Hillel asserted that we should begin with one candle on the first night and add a new candle each night. Our custom is to follow the practice of Beit Hillel. Why? Because Beit Hillel said "*Ma'alim baKodesh, v'ein moh're'din,*" in matters of holiness we increase and do not diminish.

Every day, in every generation, we are challenged as a nation. Our beliefs, our sanctity, our lifestyle and our unity are challenged. Assimilation and the driving forces that led to the Jewish rebellion and subsequent victory *(cont. on p. 4)*

CELEBRATING (cont. from p. 1)...

In the Friday night Kiddush, as well as in other sources, we read that Shabbat is a remembrance of the creation of the world. How so? G-d created the world in six days and then rested on Shabbat. We, too, spend our week immersed in creative activities, trying to improve the world in which we live. In this way, we partner with G-d in the creation and sustenance of our beautiful world. On Shabbat, we pause from our creative activities to enjoy what we have accomplished, just as G-d did so many years ago.

The second enactment was against circumcision. The Syrian-Greeks perceived it as an act of mutilation and wondered, "Why must the Jewish people tamper with the natural order?" The Jewish belief, however, is that circumcision is not an interference with G-d's creation but rather an enhancement of it. G-d purposely left the human body incomplete to give man the opportunity to perfect himself. Thus circumcision, too, is an act of partnering with G-d.

Finally, what is it about the Jewish lunar calendar that troubled the Syrian-Greeks? The Jewish calendar is based on the monthly appearance of witnesses who testify to the fact that the moon has been reborn. During Temple times, a new month could be declared and the holidays of the year set into motion, only with a formal declaration by the High Court in Jerusalem that the moon had been sighted by two witnesses. Even though any rational person gazing into the sky could see that the moon had become visible, if two witnesses had not appeared before the High Court and a formal declaration had not been made, the month would not change. As a partner of G-d, humankind even plays an active role in allowing for the forward progress of time!

Through these three mitzvot, G-d gives the Jewish people the opportunity to partner with Him in perfecting the world, in perfecting our physical bodies and even in perfecting time. The Syrian-Greeks failed to understand how humanity could possibly partner with G-d, and were adamant that it was unattainable.

There is a fundamental question concerning the miracle of the Chanukah oil that is rarely asked. We are taught to

assume that the great miracle was that the Maccabees found enough pure oil in the Temple to last for one day and instead it lasted for eight days. But if G-d was so intent on performing a miracle for the Israelites, why did the pure oil need to be found in the first place? Could G-d not have simply lit the fire himself? After all, He IS G-d, right? Why involve mortals in the process at all?

What we have discussed earlier sheds light on the answer to this quandary. Humanity was created to partner with G-d in what happens in this world. Just as we assist G-d in perfecting the world, our human bodies and the progression of time, G-d has created a situation in which we are also essential in starting the process of a miracle. Surely, G-d could have created a fire from nothing and made it last for eight days, or ten days, or even eternally, but humankind would not have been part of that and would not have been empowered by G-d's act. G-d gave people the ability to partner with Him, to light the flame on that small bit of oil and to get the ball rolling. It is inspiring to be a partner with G-d.

So what does the miracle of the military victory have to do with the miracle of the oil in the Menorah? The two are intertwined. The three prohibitions that the Syrian-Greeks imposed on the Jewish people were born out of their conviction that it was impossible for humankind to partner with G-d. The Greek philosophy maintained that once created, the world is complete and there is nothing more for humankind to contribute. The Jewish response is that, on the contrary, it is our job, and even our divine mission, to partner with G-d to make this world a more perfect place.

The miracles therefore serve to remind us of this partnership. Miracles force our consciousness to acknowledge that everything really is from G-d. No creation exists in this world without Him, and yet, the fact that we had to light the candle reminds us that it is still *our* mission to perfect those creations.

Rabbi Yonah Gross is the rabbi of the Young Israel of Phoenix, AZ.

Ma'oz Tzur ("Rock of Ages"): The words of the first stanza:

Mighty Rock of my Salvation

Ma'oz tzur yeshu'ati

מְעוֹז צוּר יִשׁוּעָתִי

To praise You is a delight.

Lecha na'eh leshabe'ach.

לְךָ נֵאֵה לְשַׁבַּח.

Restore my House of Prayer,

Tikon bet tefilati,

תִּכּוֹן בַּיִת תְּפִלָּתִי,

And there'll be a thanksgiving offering.

Vesham todah nezabe'ach.

וְשָׁם תוֹדָה נִזְבַּח.

When you prepare the slaughter

Le'et tachin matbe'ach

לְעֵת תַּכִּין מַטְבֵּחַ

for the blaspheming foe,

Mitzar ham'nabe'ach,

מִצָּר הַמְּנַבֵּחַ,

I'll complete with a hymn

Az egmor beshir mizmor

אֲזֵ אֶגְמֹר בְּשִׁיר מִזְמוֹר

the dedication of the altar.

Chanukat hamizbe'ach.

תְּנַבֵּחַ הַמִּזְבֵּחַ.

NACHAS OF A BT PARENT (cont. from p. 1)...and my daughter always wants to know where I learned the “latest” song. “I heard it as a kid,” I just tell her, knowing that someday it will become obvious to her that I didn’t grow up like her, listening to the best of Uncle Moishe and Mordechai Ben David.

My daughter’s music teacher just called to thank me and my daughter for providing her with the funniest teaching moment of her 2007-08 school year. Morah Miri is always trying to teach the kindergarten children all about various holidays, seasons, etc., through some new songs she’s written, often to old tunes we might recognize. She says to the group, “I’m going to play a tune on the piano, and if you know the tune, tell me what it is.” She begins to play, “Take Me Out to the Ballgame.” My daughter raises her hand. “You know this tune?”

Shira Leah nods.

Miri: “What tune is it?”

Shira Leah: “Take Me Out of the Bathtub.”

Miri: “Take Me Out of the Bathtub?!? Who sings that?”

Shira Leah: “My mother!”

Now, I’m sure I’m not the only mother who sings funny songs to get their kids moving when they need to. I think it’s a much more effective and fun method for everyone, as opposed to screaming. (Although I admit that I’ve done my share of that too.) I also do my 5 minute increment countdown to carpool, starting from when they wake up, encouraging them to be dressed and downstairs in plenty of time so they can “Have Breakfast Like a Mensch.” There is nothing more rewarding to a mom than to have kids whining “*Imma* (Mommy), I need your help getting dressed because I want to have breakfast like a mensch!” They know this means sitting at the table properly having their cereal and milk and warm or cold drink. And, of course, fighting over who got more wheat germ on their cereal.

During the “winter holiday” season (which now starts in the early fall), it is a particular challenge not to pick up on the holiday music that is constantly being “musaked” in every store. After all, my childhood was surrounded by X-mas carols, even growing up in Jewish Long Island. My children, on the other hand, are growing up immersed in a

much more intense Jewish environment. The songs we choose to play on our stereo, and the ones they learn at school, are focused on the beauty of the Torah and the wonderful things G-d does in our world. The musaked carols are bare noise to them because they have no familiarity.

So what do I tell my child when she hears me humming along in the supermarket and asks: “What is this newest song?” I can explain to her that this is the music we hope she doesn’t grow up knowing because it isn’t a part of our world and who we are. But then, I am sure she will ask, “Why does *Imma* know the song?”

And just as my old friends would cringe at the damage I’ve done to many a classic rock song, my observant friends would probably wince at the many explanations that I could devise. However, I need only look at the story of Chanukah to know what my explanation must be. The Jews of the time of the Maccabees were ruled by a nation that lured them away from traditional Jewish life and pressured them toward assimilation. This too, was the world in which I grew up. But I fought back, just like the courageous Maccabees, and the little Jewish spark inside (the *pintele Yid*, as they call it) grew into a beautiful flame that I now have the privilege of passing on to my own children.

Knowing my bright kindergartner, she’ll probably want me to sing a song about it.

Esti Graham is a “beginner” for over 16 years, a not-at-the-moment-practicing attorney, wife to a new US citizen and full-time mother to 3 small adorable children. She finds mothering to be more challenging and time-consuming than multi-million dollar federal and state litigation.



About *Ma'oz Tzur*

The words “*Maaz Tzur*” meaning “Fortress, Rock [of my salvation]” are the opening words of the ever popular song sung by Ashkenazim after the lighting of the Chanukah lights.

This popular song is thought to have originated in Germany in the 13th century. It was written by an unknown author named Mordechai, according to the acrostic of the first five stanzas. The famous melody has been traced back to a manuscript of a certain Judas Alias of Hanover (1744) and some scholars claim a correspondence to tunes found in Bohemian-Silesian manuscripts of the 15th century.

In the hymn, the poet recalls the various exiles endured by the Jewish people and praises G-d for redeeming the Jews from each of them. The central motifs are the desire to return to the glorious days of the Temple and the anticipation of the dawn of Messianic Redemption--may it happen speedily in our days, Amen.

BUILDING UP (cont. from p. 1)...in the times of Judah the Maccabee are as prevalent today as they were then. We are no less assimilated into our present culture than the Jews of Hellenist times, and, indeed, we thrive in today's "open society." In a time when a person's identity can be reduced to a series of numbers, it is easy for Jews to lose their spiritual identity.

"In matters of holiness we increase and do not diminish." Newton's Law states that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Therefore, if I can rise, then the possibility of falling (coming down) is equal to the distance that I have risen. The story of Chanukah teaches us that this is not so! That is why we light a new candle each night and sanctify the newest candle first. We are the living miracle of Chanukah. The spirit (*nefesh*) of our lives is the lit flame.

The root of the Hebrew word *nefesh* (soul) is נ-פ-ש. The *nuhn* (נ) stands for *ner* (candle), the *phey* (פ) stands for *ptil* (wick) and the *shin* (ש) represents *shemen* (oil). Just as a flame needs a candle, wick and oil to burn, so too do our living spirits. With each new Jewish experience we have, and every new commitment to Judaism we make, we are rekindling our spirit (*nefesh*).

The society around us is filled with pressures to conform, assimilate and be just like everyone else in the cultural

melting pot. Like the Maccabees, however, we must believe that our values are worth fighting for, that our unity and beliefs are worth the sacrifice. On Chanukah, we begin by lighting one candle and add to it -- so too, our strength and resolve increases as we remember the miracle of Chanukah. Our Jewish joy and pride grows stronger with each passing day of the holiday.

"In matters of holiness we increase," and although we may stumble, we do not fall. Our spirits cannot be extinguished. We can only continue to build the candles and feed the flames.

May this Chanukah enlighten our souls and feed our futures.

Rachel Wormeli lives with her husband and two children in Montreal, Quebec, where she is involved in many aspects of the community.



The Chanukah Dilemma

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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DATED MATTER

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