

BERESHITH
"IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter
for Beginners,
by Beginners

Vol. XXIII No. 2
Kislev 5770/December 2009



בראשית

OUR CHANUKAH MIRACLE

Hadassah Sabo Milner

This true story takes place on the first Chanukah that my four boys and I were on our own as a single-parent family. There was no gift I could give the children to make up for their recent pain and suffering. My love and a few small presents would have to suffice.

We lit the Chanukah candles together, with me saying the blessings for the family for the first time. I watched each of my four boys light their own menorah, tears rolling down my face as they sang the blessings in their sweet children's voices.

Memories of Chanukahs past, the parties we had thrown, and the joy of having the house filled with friends and family celebrating the holiday with us, played like a movie through my head.

We were invited to our cousins' house that night, to play dreidel and have some donuts and latkes, and, to tell you the truth, I was glad to be out of the house. I had been dreading the holiday for weeks. Chanukah had always been such a joyous time for us, and I knew that this year it would be hard, no matter how brave a face I put on it.

(cont. on p. 2)



THE CHANUKAH TRANSFORMATION

Alyssa Levi

Have you taken a Yoga class lately? My favorite part is when the instructor asks us to do the "corpse pose." You're supposed to lie on your back and breathe. (If you want you can cover yourself with a blanket. Extremely experienced yogis in this class even use a rolled one under their heads, knees, etc.) The challenge is not to snore! Others do it, and I'm sure I might be one of them if I don't stay mindful. It seems to me rather ironic that the "corpse pose" is a way to be mindful, especially in our "twitter/facebook/blackberry/text while you are in a meeting" kind of world.

After class, as I walk through my favorite retailers, I notice that the Halloween décor has changed, virtually overnight, to red and green. And if I'm lucky, in aisle 5 of Target...a few splashes of blue and white! Even though it is a good thing to beautify the mitzvot,

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THE CHANUKAH IRONY

Rabbi Pinchas Landis

Every year, as Chanukah approaches, I am baffled by a tremendous irony. As we drive through the streets and walk through stores, there is one thing that slaps everyone in the face: "Christmas is coming." The decorations are up long before Thanksgiving, the sales have already started, and the music is playing, and playing, and playing. You would have to be comatose to miss the fact that the biggest holiday on the Christian calendar is right around the corner. And, in truth, this modern version of Christmas has revolutionized Chanukah as well. The same stores that have all the Christmas decorations save a small space for their token Chanukah display, the mall has its token menorah right next to Santa, and, of course, the most PC person would never say anything short of "Happy Holidays." A few years ago, they were actually marketing Chanukah stockings!

(cont. on p. 2)

MIRACLE (cont. from p. 1)...

We drove over to our cousins and were instantly enveloped in hugs and warmth and love. At this point my cousins already had perhaps 5 or 6 children and there was another on the way. Their house was filled with love and laughter, and their joy in celebrating the holiday was palpable.

I sat back and watched my boys and their cousins play dreidel with a pile of nuts in the middle of the table. Their cousins were yelling in Yiddish, my boys were telling them to translate for the non-Yiddish speakers. There was so much giggling! The excitement mounting as the dreidel tottered and finally fell. Then followed frantic counting of who had more nuts than the others. I don't think they even remember who won, just how much fun they all had together.

It was an awesome evening. We left their house, uplifted and happy, the clouds vanished for the evening. During the drive home the kids chattered away, enjoying the small gifts that their cousins had given them, and reminiscing about the evening, about who spun the dreidel the best.

We walked into the house and I told the kids to start getting ready for bed. My eldest shouted from the living room. "Ima (Mom), come quick, there's something you need to see." Of course I ran in immediately to see what he was talking about. He was standing near the menorahs that we had lit hours before and pointed to the matchbox that was on the tray next to them.

Before I continue, I have to tell you that this matchbox was a special item. It wasn't your regular matchbox. It was produced in memory of a young man from our community who had passed away at a young age. It was in the shape of a pyramid and had the Friday night candle lighting blessing printed on it. Every time I struck a match from it, I remembered this young man and my heart ached for his family's loss.

The matchbox had caught fire while we were out. Perhaps a stray spark from one of the lit candles had ignited it. I had thought that I had put it out of harm's way. The flames had licked their way around the matchbox but had not touched one match within it. The box was all charred and burnt, but the fire had contained itself and had not spread any further.

"Ima," my son said. "How is it that the house didn't catch fire? How is it that the table the matchbox was on didn't burst into flames? How did this fire put itself out?" All the kids crowded around to have a look.

I was at a loss for words, just thinking about how calamitous this might have been. The idea of possibly losing our house to a fire was so overwhelming to me--we had already been through so much in the past few months--a fire would have been the final straw. We would have been more than devastated. We would have been homeless. It would have been the final blow. I sat and cried out of relief, out of sorrow, my eldest son's arm around me.

"But, Ima," he said, "God saved us. He knew that we needed the house. He knew that we needed somewhere to be safe, and He gave us a Chanukah miracle, making certain that the house did not catch fire. He wanted us to learn a lesson, Ima, to be thankful for what we have. He chose to send us a message through the matchbox. There is no other way that fire could have put itself out, other than it being God's doing."

The words of my eleven year old were so poignant. He, at his tender young age, could see the hand of God in what could have been perceived as a freak occurrence. Instead of trembling and thinking of what could have been, he helped me see the message behind our miracle. We can survive this holiday, we can survive this change in circumstance, and we can get through all that we need to endure because God is by our side, helping us navigate through life.

I still have that matchbox. It has a place of honor in our china cabinet. Every time I see it, I am reminded of that fateful night. I feel so grateful that the fire did not escalate. But more than that, I feel so blessed that my child enabled me to see the bigger picture. Maybe that was our Chanukah miracle.

Hadassah Sabo Milner is a full time mother, living with her boys in Montreal. She recently married the love of her life, and once she is granted a visa, she and her boys will be joining her husband in Monsey, NY. To read more of her work you can check out her blog <http://hadassahsabo.wordpress.com>

IRONY (cont. from p. 1)...But this phenomenon goes deeper. To where, you might ask? The presents. While I do not know the Christian source of gift giving at Christmas (since I'm not a Christian theologian, I have never done the research), as a Rabbi, I have spent many years engrossed in Judaic Studies, and can honestly say the same thing about Judaism. I have no knowledge of a Jewish source for giving gifts on Chanukah. The only conclusion that I can come to is that Jews give gifts on Chanukah because of Christmas.

What's the big deal? Giving holiday gifts in general is a Jewish concept, except that it applies to all major holidays. The *Code of Jewish Law* says clearly that a husband should give his wife new clothes or new jewelry for the holidays, parents should give their kids toys, and a wife should prepare tasty meats and wine for her husband. But I hardly think that this is the source of Chanukah presents. After all, you don't see Hallmark marketing "Passover Wrapping Paper" or a Jewelry Store having a Succot sale.

TRANSFORMATION (cont. from p. 1)...I try not to buy too much for Chanukah. I'm not competing with the red and green as part of my identity.

But when I was a child, growing up in a public school that was predominantly Jewish, it was, in a way, a competition. I received presents for eight nights. (Ok, so some were socks.) There were always points of contention at school or work, perhaps you shared the same ones: Were there enough Chanukah songs to balance the Christmas ones at the choir concert? Were the songs traditional for Chanukah or simply reworked tunes retrofitted with the dreidel and menorah (and nowadays perhaps there are Ramadan ones, sung to the tune of jingle bells...fast fast eat, fast fast eat, do for 30 days...oh what fun is Ramadan)? Did your parents allow you to sing the Christmas songs? Was the concert a "holiday" concert? and so on.

As a child, it was part of your developing identity--a Jew in a non-Jewish society. Now that I am a parent, however, I am grateful that my child can have a completely Jewish experience. In her day school, the songs are about the holiday or the parasha (the weekly Torah portion). The art is all about Chanukah. There is no comparison of holidays.

I remember when I was newly married and I started decorating my house with Chanukah decorations, humming "Oh dreidel, dreidel, dreidel." My husband, who grew up in Israel, was puzzled by my earnestness. He informed me that for his family (and for most families in Israel) Chanukah presents were really just a few toys for children, and not for the adults. My dream of eight pieces of jewelry awaiting successive unwrapping were shattered.

As I attended lectures and read websites like aish.com and chabad.org, I learned more of the interesting things you don't learn in Hebrew School (or you don't recall because you were fooling around with your friends at the time...). I began to replace the presents with new discoveries. I found renewed energy focusing on the food, like the feta and wine Yehudit (the Jewish heroine of Chanukah) used to her advantage to save the Jewish people. We also had vodka and latke parties with friends.

As I traveled with my husband around Jerusalem to the historical sites, I wondered out loud

how our ancestors could have resisted the attacking Syrian-Greeks for so long. How could those people survive the hills? I can hardly last one day of climbing steps (not cliffs) in the Old City and near the Kotel! I thought of the hope the light of the chanukiah brings to Jews in difficult situations. Watching, like some watch the World Series, wondering when and how it will end. . .

After our daughter was born, I seemed to strike a better balance between my former expectations of how to celebrate the holiday and my newly acquired ones. A sparkling chanukiah, now in the window, and a *sivivon* (*sov sov sov--* also known as a dreidel) were appropriate decorations. And my newborn or preschooler didn't require a gift--since no one had yet told her "that's how we celebrate." Besides, she was far more fascinated by the candles. Hearing her tiny voice sing *Maoz Tsur* with her *abba* (daddy) was my gift.

As my focus on consumerism, gifts and "the season" shifted to the spiritual side, I accepted the fact that it didn't need to involve material gifts. I thought about that jar of oil lasting, and how we, the Jewish people, have lasted longer than many nations thought we would. I also thought about how I lasted longer keeping a new mitzvah than others thought I would...

As Chanukah approaches, I reflect on the yoga class and how hard it is to just "be." When we light our candles, part of the mitzvah is to sit and enjoy the light of the candles. Not to wash dishes by the candle light. Not to start setting the table for the meal. Just to be! Remember the miracles that were and that you have sitting next to you now. Remember where you are in your observance now is right where you should be.

Alyssa Levi lives in Cleveland, OH, with her husband and daughter. She works full time and while not worrying if she's the one snoring during the relaxation part of the yoga class, she is fretting about planning a brit in March, as their next child is due Erev Pesach.



IRONY (cont. from p. 2)...What, you might ask, is the big deal if we give gifts on Chanukah? It makes everybody happy?!?

Which brings us to the irony I mentioned in the introduction. What are we celebrating on Chanukah? Many in the hands of the few. Correct. Oil lasting for eight days. Right. Military victory over our Syrian-Greek oppressors. True. But, I think there is a core issue that ties all of these events together.

Chanukah was not really a war against the Greeks. It was a war against *Greek culture*, or Hellenism. Now, do Jews really take issue with other cultures? Usually not enough to go to war. When does another culture challenge us? Only when it begins to take us over.

At the time of the Macabees, Hellenism had taken over the Jewish world so much that many Jews were more Greek than Jewish. They had changed their names to Hyrkanus and Aristobulus. They played sports in the nude and read little else but Aristotle and Plato. There was actually a procedure developed that undid the circumcision!

When the war broke out, who was really fighting? It was Jew against Jew. The Jewish people were fighting their brethren for *spiritual survival*. We were fighting to stop this wave of assimilation that had engulfed the Jewish world. The Greeks were a secondary problem. And this is what we are truly celebrating on



Chanukah. The survival of Jewish culture over the Greek culture.

The irony: Here is the holiday where we are celebrating the fact that at one point in history, a foreign culture infiltrated us so completely that everything that was Jewish was becoming Greek. And how do we celebrate it? Presents (*like the Christians*), decorations (*like the Christians*) and STOCKINGS! I think that we

can all see that there is something wrong here.

As Chanukah approaches, we should all take some time and think. Think about the lives we live. Are we driven by Jewish values or by Western values? Is our Jewish education on par with our Western education? These are the questions on which we should be focusing as the Eight Days of Chanukah approach. As we stare at the light of the menorah and spin those dreidels, we should let the truisms of Chanukah penetrate our hearts, and make a firm commitment to live as Jews, and not as something else.

I will say in conclusion, however, that there is no problem giving gifts on Chanukah. Just make sure that you do it on Purim, Pesach, Shavuot, and Succot as well! I wish everyone out there a very Happy Chanukah!

Rabbi Pinchas Landis currently resides in Cincinnati, OH, where he is the Director of the Cincinnati Kollel Retreat Center. He and his wife Naomi, have three children.

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Message



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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 contact us: 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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Illustrations by Wendy Dunn



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