

**BERESHITH**  
"IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter  
for Beginners,  
by Beginners

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# בראשית

## A LIGHT FROM THE ASHES

Rabbi Evan B. Rubin

Over twenty-five years, while living in Toledo, Ohio, I came to know Dr. Blair Grubb. Dr. Grubb is well known in the medical world, and very active in the Jewish community. I once heard him tell a story, which is published in various places on the internet, entitled "It Should Once Again See Light." Dr. Grubb speaks of a trip he made to France to treat a patient, and while in the patient's home, he is presented with a menorah that had survived the Holocaust. He is told about the person who once owned the menorah, who unfortunately perished at the hands of the Nazis. Knowing that Dr. Grubb is Jewish, the family of this patient understood that this was an opportunity for this menorah to once again be used for the purpose that it was originally designed to serve, which I know for a fact it has.

For Jews of this generation, Nazi Germany is the entity we speak of in the context of the quote from the Passover

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"Doctor, this menorah is for you. It survived the Holocaust. The owner did not. Use it in good health for the purpose it was originally intended."



## CHANUKAH: THE HOLIDAY OF ACCESSIBILITY

Sarah Fertig Trauben

If grades were given out for observing individual Jewish holidays, I would definitely get an A+ for Chanukah. Aside from the special prayers that we say, there is one simple *mitzvah* that applies to each night of Chanukah: Publicize or display the miracle of Chanukah with the menorah lights. Necessary holiday supplies can be in my house year-round since they are all non-perishables; the menorah, candles or oil with wicks, matches and a table near the window (with drapes safely tucked away). I got this one!

Chanukah is also the Jewish holiday that I believe is the easiest to share with the widest audience. (It is also known as the holiday with the most ways it can be spelled).

Most of my life, I have been surrounded by people from a wide range of Jewish backgrounds and practices. As an extrovert and hostess from age 10, I have had hundreds of people at my holiday and Shabbat tables. And as my children and our family have befriended Jewish families who are less traditional in their practices, I often have the following thoughts running through my mind: Am I explaining the rituals enough or too much? How might my rituals or conversation impact them in a positive way so they might be inspired to return to our home for another

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## THE DRIPPINGS OF MY MENORAH

Sarah Rochel Hewitt

Do you clean your menorah each night after the flames have finished burning? Goodness knows I don't, and each night it gets a little trickier to light the menorah. There's old wax stuck in the hole, even after you use a random household item to try and scrape it out, and the cheap Chanukah candles break when you push them in. Or if you're using oil (in our house we have both), then the cups from the first few nights are always grimy and slippery from previous splashes.

So, in our house, where we light quite a few menorahs, by the time we get to the eighth night of Chanukah, we have a pile of broken candles that never made it, lumps of broken off wax drippings (many imprinted with fingerprints) and a few discarded, slimy wicks from the oil menorah. And if you have one of those candle menorahs where the *shamash*, the lighting candle, is elevated in the middle of the row, every time you try to place the *shamash* in its proper spot, you bump into the candle next to it, resulting in additional spillage!

The mess of the Chanukah candles may seem like a silly issue to discuss, but just the other day I was thinking that this issue may serve as an interesting metaphor for Jewish growth.

When a person first becomes excited about Judaism, it is

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...Haggadah, that "In every generation they rise up against us to annihilate us, but the Holy One, Blessed be He, saves us from their hands." Hitler's fervent hope was to eliminate the Jewish people from the face of the earth and to extinguish our light forever. He had all too much success, murdering six million, including 1.5 million children. The Jewish people, however, survived the attempt, and remain an integral part of today's twenty-first century world, with our light continuing to burn brightly.

Throughout Jewish history, many attempts have been made to destroy us and to put out our light. Despite all, however, we remain strong and bright, with our menorahs burning luminously. Beginning even before the official start of Judaism, the Midrash relates that Nimrod tried to extinguish Abraham in a furnace. Then came Pharaoh, followed by the Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, etc. Each had their own strategy as to how to eliminate the Jewish influence from the world. With G-d's help, and our stiff necks, we have continued to survive, despite all. All the "theys" that have arisen are gone, and we remain to tell the stories of our triumphs over them.

If we look at the story of Chanukah, we see an attempt by the Greeks, led by King Antiochus, to uproot Jewish practice and to Hellenize the Jews. The Jewish people, led by the Maccabees, rebelled against the Greeks, restored the service in the cleansed *Beit Hamikdash*, the Holy Temple in Jerusalem and triumphantly lit the menorah. Miraculously, the oil, which should have only lasted one day, lasted eight days, allowing enough time for new pure oil to be produced and for the menorah to stay lit continuously. Today we celebrate that miracle with the eight-day holiday of Chanukah, during which we light our menorahs for eight nights.

The section of the Torah that we read in the synagogue on Chanukah tells of the original dedication of the altar in the *Mishkan*, the portable Tabernacle that the Israelites built in the desert. Over twelve days, the princes of the twelve tribes each brought a series of sacrifices. The Midrash relates that Aaron, the High Priest, was saddened that he was not a part of this dedication. G-d, however, had something greater in mind for Aaron. At the end of the Chanukah reading, we are told of the command given to Aaron to light the menorah. This was not a one-time job for Aaron, but rather one that he continued to do every day for the rest of his life. The Torah records that Aaron did exactly as he was told, and never deviated from what he was instructed to do. The commentary *Sefas Emes* teaches that this means that Aaron had the same excitement the last time he lit the menorah as he did the first time.

As we celebrate this Chanukah by lighting our own menorahs, may we thank G-d for our continued survival and ability to fulfill His commandments. May we also aspire to attain the fervor of Aaron, and may we continue to shine our light upon the entire world.

Rabbi Evan B. Rubín is the spiritual leader of Keneset Israel Torah Center in Sacramento, California. Previously Rabbi Rubín had served Congregation Etz Chayim in Toledo, Ohio, for a total of twenty-five years, filling multiple roles.

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## CHANUKAH: THE HOLIDAY OF ACCESSIBILITY

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...holiday or Shabbat meal? How best to invite them to share in a holiday experience such as making a *bracha* in my sukkah, especially when it may likely be their only sukkah-related blessing this year? I wonder exactly how much detail, if any, should I provide to my neighbor on Tisha b'Av, when I'm markedly missing my regular smile and joyful greeting, as it is a mournful day?

I sense that these individuals are in my life for a reason, so how might these decisions enable me to fulfill a role of mine in this world which is to share what I feel is uplifting and special about Judaism? My joy, commitment and love of Torah and tradition may be personal, but at the same time, I would like to be able to share that with those with whom I come in contact, without imposing upon them. I'm cognizant of the fact that we have survived as a people for thousands of years precisely because of our connectivity to our fellow Jew. Since the light of the menorah is so visible, it provides a wonderful opportunity to connect with Jews in our community.

For other holidays I have shopping lists, menus, guest lists, candle lighting and shul times, with lots swirling in my mind as I want things to be just right. When Chanukah approaches, my head stops thinking so much. My focus is around which Sunday will be best to set up our Chanukah inflatables. Yes, we have numerous moving displays and lights on our porch and lawn. We have found it a fun way to not only display the miracle of Chanukah lights but to also make Chanukah accessible to all the people in our lives, no matter their practice. Our display shows all who see it that in our tradition, there is room for silliness. It signals that there is

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## THE DRIPPINGS OF MY MENORAH (cont. from p. 1)

...like setting up the menorah. There is great anticipation about participating in the new *mitzvot*, and the first acts of Jewish observance that one does on one's own can be compared to the first night of Chanukah. The menorah is in pristine condition and the candles fit in easily (unless, of course, it wasn't cleaned after last year).

Time passes, however, and for many people who have moved toward greater Jewish observance, living a more involved Jewish life often results in the loss of some of the original sparkle of being new. It gets harder. Unexpected obstacles arise: bosses who have "emergencies" just before Shabbat or relatives who don't understand the implication of "kosher style."

More challenging than the unexpected obstacles, however, are the slimy drippings of apathy and routine. *Mitzvot* that were once exciting start to feel like common acts. There is a constant struggle to grasp again the beautiful inspiration that so energized those original first steps.

The Talmud records a disagreement between two of the great academies of Talmudic study: the Academy of Shammai and the Academy of Hillel. The first believed that eight lights should be lit on the first night of Chanukah, and one less on each night that follows. Hillel's students, on the other hand, said that on the first night one candle is lit, adding one each night until eight candles are lit on the last night (Talmud *Shabbat* 21b).

One explanation cited in the Talmud for their different opinions was that the Academy of Shammai was comparing the candles to the decreasing number of bulls brought on the holiday of Sukkot. The Academy of Hillel, on the other hand, was underscoring the idea that matters of sanctity should always be increased rather than decreased (ibid.).

It was decided that the practice of Chanukah should be observed according to the opinion of the Academy of Hillel. Each night we increase the light until the eighth glorious night when all eight candles burn in their full glory.

Following the path of traditional Jewish life can have its challenges. But the greater the effort that we invest, the brighter the light that we shine. The *mitzvah* of Chanukah is intended to proclaim to the world our faith in G-d's constant and active role in our lives. This is what we do when we tell the boss that we cannot work late on Friday or explain that the term kosher of "kosher rye" refers to a style and not that the bread is actually kosher.

Jewish life is a spiral of cycles. There are the daily cycles of prayer, the weekly cycles of Shabbat, and the yearly cycle of holidays. Each requires preparation. If I, as a working mother of five, don't pick away at the "wax drippings" of chaos that dominate my home every morning, then I won't have time for the daily morning prayers. If I don't prevent "slippery spots" from entering my schedule, then I have to work harder to prepare for Shabbat, and if I don't prepare in advance, then I cannot make the most of the beauty that inhabits each of the Jewish holidays.



If I were to continue my metaphor of the crowded menorah, then perhaps I would say that not only do I shine brighter the more effort I invest, but I would also connect to the *shamash*. For everything that I do, my role is now that of being a continual helper. How I treat my own menorah -- my own spiritual development -- is reflected in the lights that surround me, the *neshamot* (souls) of my children.

This year, as the lights of Chanukah increase and we each stand by our menorahs trying to remove the drippings from the night before, think not of the struggle against the wax, but rather of the incredible brilliance and rays of holiness of your beautiful Jewish soul.

The article originally appeared in the December 2016 edition of Bereshith.

*Sarah Rochel Hewitt, the former Publications Coordinator for NJOP, now lives in Montreal.*



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**DATED MATERIAL**

CHANUKAH: THE HOLIDAY OF ACCESSIBILITY  
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...room for public holiday displays (since most do not see the sukkah behind our house). Yes, it is safe (in many locations) to show Jewish pride in 2021/5782. It is fun to eat donuts and latkes and have the kids excited about gifts and playing dreidel. At our house, there is added excitement as we watch children of all ages (that means adults too) stop in front of our house to marvel at the Chanukah display on our front lawn.

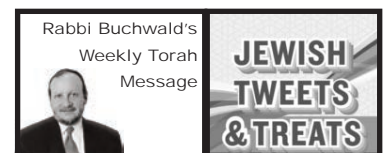
Last year, we received a thank you note from each of the two girls across the street, showing appreciation for our Chanukah display that they look forward to each year. Particularly during a time of year when Jewish children may feel a twinge of envy for all the non-Jewish hoopla on display, making Chanukah fun and accessible is now our family tradition.

May your Chanukah be filled with lots of light, and may you find ways to share that light far and wide. (And some good fun too!)

*Sarah Fertig Trauben has been Shomeret Shabbat her entire life, living more than half of it not in a traditional Jewish community. She has lived in six states and now resides in our nation's capital with her husband and three children. Sarah helps her kids plan creative holiday celebrations to include their friends, imprinting celebration and fun as part of traditional Jewish practice.*

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