

BERESHITH
"IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter
for Beginners,
by Beginners

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בראשית

MATISYAHU

Rabbi Dov Fischer

Back in 2006, I was hospitalized with an “Appendicitis for the Ages.” If you have ever wondered how bad it really is if your appendix actually starts leaking before they take it out, wonder no more. It is pretty bad. By the time my wife forced me into the car at 3:00 a.m. -- the earliest hours of the morning that, for some reason, we call “the middle of the night”-- I quietly knew this was bad. We got to the hospital. It did not take long for the Emergency Room people to realize that, in the words of the triage expert: “Wow! This is so great! Tonight, for the first time in weeks, we finally have a real life-or-death emergency here in the Emergency Room.” I was honored.

I ended up stuck in the hospital for a few days. They have these undergraduate volunteers from a nearby Christian Bible College who come by to help with the patients. “Good Samaritans” trying to assist in little ways without inadvertently killing anyone.

After several days supine, I wanted to start walking, and they assigned this sweet guy to help me ambulate. He was so amazingly excited to learn that he had been assigned to a Bible-learned Orthodox Rabbi with a yarmulke who actually was studied in the book that he called the “Old Testament,” and that we alternately call the “Torah,” the “Chumash,” the

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ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE

David Cohen

Growing up in the South Texas Hill country in the seventies was an incredible experience. Not just because everything in Texas is BIG, which is true, but because things progress at a much slower pace -- the way molasses flows. People took the time to get to know their neighbors, the bank manager and even the grocery bagger.

One day, when I was about 17 years old, I was at home sitting on the couch mustering up enough courage to cut the lawn in the hundred degree heat, when the phone rang. I answered the phone, and much to my surprise, it was my trombone teacher Mr. Hoffman. “Hello Mr. Hoffman, was I supposed to have a lesson today?” I asked. He said, “No you didn’t miss your lesson today, but I have something to ask you.” I was all ears. “Would you be interested in going to Israel for 10 days, all expenses paid?” After literally picking the phone up off the floor, I asked him to tell me more. He explained that the church for which he professionally performs, was in need of a trombonist, and that his first choice was headed off to summer school in order to graduate early, and that I was his next choice.

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— HOSPITAL —



THE MIRACLE OF CHANUKAH

Fabia Preminger

There is a heartwarming story I'd love to share with you. It is a story that brought tears to my eyes and pride to my soul. I believe that you too will be touched by it.

A little Jewish girl, Anne, arrived in Israel with her parents from communist Russia when the Iron Curtain finally fell. Anne was enrolled in an Israeli Jewish day school where she flourished, learning new concepts about Judaism, which ignited her dormant soul and transformed her. Being a feisty, determined little girl, she'd come home to her baffled parents and relate all that she'd learned during her school hours. She would beg them that they, too, adopt the laws and customs to which observant Jews adhere.

Surprisingly, Anne's parents consented. After doing thorough research, they found a kind, understanding rabbi, who slowly and gently guided them in the observance of Torah and mitzvot. Anne was overjoyed when her mother announced, one Friday at sundown, that she and Anne would kindle Shabbat candles together, side by side. Tears coursed down both mother's and daughter's eyes as they slowly said the *b'racha* (blessing) for the very first time--their souls "lit up" by the sparkling Shabbat lights.

Weeks passed. Anne and her parents continued their religious

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MATISYAHU (cont. from p. 1)

“Pentateuch,” the “Five Books of Moses,” or the “ArtScroll with the blue cover.” As he started walking alongside me down the hall, he thanked me profusely for giving him the chance to bless a Rabbi. He explained that G-d said to Abraham in Genesis 12:3, that He will bless those who bless Abraham’s children, so he always had wanted so much to bless any Jew. And now, he got himself an Orthodox Rabbi.

So we walked and schmoozed. And then he asked me a question whose Judaic erudition, coming from a fellow at Christian Bible College, actually impressed me: “Rabbi, have you ever heard of Matisyahu? I am absolutely fixated on Matisyahu and would like to know all I can about him.”

I was so impressed. As it says on the Chanukah dreidel acrostic: “*Nes Gadol Haya Pol*”-- a Great Miracle Happened Here. So I told him all about Matisyahu:

“Matisyahu (or Mattathias in Greek) was the *Kohen Gadol* -- the High Priest of the Jewish People . . .”

Suddenly, my volunteer helper interrupted me: “Did you say that Matisyahu is the High Priest of the Jewish People?”

“Yes,” I answered, “The High Priest, or as we prefer to say the *Kohen Gadol*. In a way, you might say he was a king without a crown.”

“Please continue,” he eagerly urged me.

“Well, Matisyahu was based in Israel, in a city called Modi’in. We were under Greek domination, and they had conquered our land and defiled our *Beit HaMikdash*, the Holy Temple. And now they were coercing us, at pain of death, to abandon our Torah laws and values. In an incident that is probably the most famous and often-repeated event in Matisyahu’s entire life, it is said that the local Greek occupation forces compelled all the local Jews to gather at a central location, where the leading Greek official demanded that some Jew in the group eat a piece of forbidden pork or ham or bacon. One of those pig foods. As you know from Bible College, we Jews are forbidden from eating pig.

Well, one Jewish guy in the group apparently was looking to advance his status with the Greeks, so he came forward and said he would eat it. And, at that juncture, Matisyahu stepped forward, unsheathed a long sword, and he slew the guy dead.”

My helper stopped in his tracks: “Matisyahu has a sword? He uses the sword? Matisyahu killed a guy with a sword? Just for eating a piece of pork?”

I nodded affirmatively. “Yep. That’s Matisyahu.” I explained the context. We Jews do not go around slaying people, nor do we even stop other people at the supermarket (East Coast – Waldbaums; West Coast – Ralphs; St. Louis - Schnucks) to stop them from buying Oscar Meyer sausages. Rather, this was a moment in time when the Jewish people faced utter destruction, not only physical catastrophe, but spiritual destruction, as well. It was not about a single guy eating non-kosher food, but a defiant apostate signaling publicly to the Greeks that all the Jews could be terrorized into abandoning our G-d and Torah, not only to abandon our kosher laws, but all of Judaism. It was a moment in time, in a different context from today.

Our walk came to an end. I was feeling pretty energized, but my new “Friend for a Day” was breathless: “I cannot thank you enough, Rabbi. I will always remember this walk. I thought I knew a bunch about Matisyahu, but wait until I tell my friends that Matisyahu kills people with a sword, especially Jews who eat pork or ham. Wow!”

I injected that he should be aware that Matisyahu planted the seeds that led to Jewish freedom and the Chanukah miracle. He had five grown sons, and *Yehudah HaMaccabee* -- Judah the Maccabee -- was the hero who ultimately led the revolt that drove the Greeks out of Israel, liberated the Holy Temple from Greek desecration, and revived the daily lighting of the menorah in the Temple. It was that rekindling, when there was not enough kindling oil to last more than a day, that led to the great miracle of Chanukah, as only a day’s supply of oil sustained eight days, enough time for more sacred oil to be produced in accordance with Judaic law.

He paused and asked: “Did you just say, Rabbi, that Matisyahu has five fully grown sons, and one of them freed Israel from the Greeks and caused Israeli independence?”

I was back at my bed, and I think I nodded affirmatively. He was such a sweet fellow, and we wished each other well.

That night I told my wife about this really nice guy from Bible College, about our walk and our conversation. She then asked me: “Dov, you do know there is a pretty popular reggae singer out there named ‘Matisyahu,’ right?”

“Nope, Ellen. Never heard of him.”

Rabbi Dov Fischer, an Adjunct Professor of Law at two major California law schools and a Senior Rabbinic Fellow and West Coast Vice President of Coalition for Jewish Values, is Rav of Young Israel of Orange County in California and Contributing Editor at The American Spectator.

THE MIRACLE OF CHANUKAH (cont. from p. 1)

journey, the Shabbat candles ushering in the Shabbat Queen every week.

One Friday afternoon, Anne, exhausted from a school trip the day before, fell fast asleep. Her mother, not wanting to awaken her young daughter, lit her own candles at the proper time, leaving Anne’s candle unlit. When Anne awoke, she was absolutely devastated. It was already way past sundown and her candle was left standing forlornly. She had missed the mitzvah of *hadlakat neivot* (kindling Shabbat candles).

The little girl burst into heartbreaking sobs as she fell onto her mother, crying: “Now I can’t light the candle! Why did no one awaken me?!” The little girl was inconsolable, and her mom felt totally helpless, unable to calm her distraught daughter.

But *Hashem* as He always does “intervened.” As mother and daughter sat there watching the candles, providing them with inspiration for reflection and introspection, suddenly one candle fell from its holder onto Anne’s little candle and the candle lit up! As Anne watched mesmerized, she started dancing around the table in joy: “G-d lit my candle!” And, indeed, He had.

This beautiful story set me thinking. Anne merited an open, revealed mini miracle: an experience where she clearly saw G-d’s

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ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE (cont. from p. 1)

Who says second fiddle is a bad thing! I handed the phone to my mother for the particulars and she approved the trip. Now off to the post office for my passport. How could this be happening?

What a sight! Two hundred and fifty-two people from San Antonio en route to Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv, Israel. This was my first trip outside the U.S. and how appropriate, to the Land of Israel. I toured with this group as the only Jew. I asked my mother to make sure that my Bar Mitzvah yarmulke was packed in my carry-on as it was my intention to wear it during the entire trip. The second I stepped off the plane, a rush of extreme emotions took hold of me. What is this feeling of euphoria that I am experiencing? It felt like I arrived HOME, but I just took my first steps off the plane and had not even made it to baggage claim. How could this be happening?

One of our next stops was a large auditorium in Jerusalem. It was customary that we get there early, for a warm-up and sound check. As we were leaving the stage following rehearsal, I noticed a much older woman sitting in the front row. I smiled at her and she was pointing to something on her head. I didn't quite understand her gesture. Then it hit me that she was referring to the yarmulke on my head. I motioned to her to "wait and see." At the conclusion of the concert, during the many ovations, I looked for her. She was still in her seat with tears in her eyes, applauding for me, and we both understood each other.

Of all the places we journeyed, the most memorable place for me was the *Kotel*, the Western Wall. I remember it being Friday night and I was approached by, what seemed to be, a limitless number of people, each one inviting me to their house for Shabbat. I accepted an invitation from a saintly rabbi and we waited a few minutes for the other invitees to join. As we made our way to his apartment, not more than one hundred yards from the *Kotel*, we passed archaeological digs revealing artifacts thousands of years old. Although I was not the only guest, I was once again the only Jew in the group.

Jump ahead thirteen years to July 30, 1996 (my birthday), and here I stand at the funeral of my beloved father. I have never been so distraught then or now in my entire life, and thought that there was no way to recover from such a loss. My whole focus from then on was to always honor the memory of my father in the best way possible. Growing up in the Jewish Conservative synagogue movement and even staying in Hebrew school an additional two years, wasn't enough to inspire me to keep my learning and interest moving forward. I began asking questions and started reading books about Judaism and its customs.

Four years later, after working for the same company for 16 years, I was notified that I was being forced out of my job. I was shocked. I had helped this company create new products and patents. How could this be happening? I reverted to the same strategy I employed after my father's passing. I chose to become more engaged in Jewish practice.



"ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE!"

I decided to start going to services at a more traditional shul. Much to my surprise, the services were similar to the prayers and melodies that I grew up with, but I realized that I felt more comfortable here than the shul that I attended as a child. How could this be happening? When the Rabbi invited me to his house for Shabbat, he requested that I join his family for the entire Shabbat in order to experience its full beauty. This once again reawakened the feeling I had not so many years ago in Israel. How could this be happening?

Right after that Shabbat, I decided it was time for me to become fully observant. One day, on the way to morning services, my friend handed me a copy of a magazine. After reading some of the articles, I noticed in the classified section that a company based in Brooklyn, NY, was looking for someone with my exact credentials. How could this be happening? I raced home that same evening, rewrote my resume, and sent it to this company. About three weeks passed and just when I thought the opportunity was lost, my cell phone rang and I was being asked to fly to New York for an interview. The company offered me a job I couldn't refuse. I accepted the job and moved to Brooklyn, NY.

This was eighteen years ago. After five and a half years of searching, I was fortunate to marry my soulmate and start our family. Interestingly enough, a month before I moved to Brooklyn, my wife embarked on her own path in becoming observant. With the help of G-d, anything is possible.

David Coben lives with his wife and two children in Passaic, NJ. When not learning Torah, he sells medical equipment in the state of New York.



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THE MIRACLE OF CHANUKAH (cont. from p. 2)

...providence in her life, regarding a matter about which she cared so deeply. While we know G-d is always present in our lives, seeing it so clearly is what marks it as a miracle, causing us to feel so overwhelmed and humble.

Speaking of revealed miracles, we know the Jews merited miracles of tremendous proportion and impact in the times of Chanukah.

In English translation, the Hebrew word *nes* (miracle) could be explained as a "supernatural" occurrence. In the Chanukah story, a handful of untrained Jewish soldiers were victorious against a fearsome army of tens of thousands of Greek soldiers. A few drops of olive oil sufficed to light the Menorah in the Tabernacle for eight days. Miracles beyond doubt.

We'd all love to experience miracles in our day-to-day life.

How, then, can one merit a miracle from on high (if even not so stupendous as the Chanukah miracle)?!

The answer is both profound as it is simple: G-d treats us to supernatural events or experiences if we act in ways that are supernatural too... Now, this is, of course, easier said than done.

Doing the supernatural means going above and beyond what is logical, comfortable or simply convenient to answer G-d's call. It means going against certain so-called social

"norms" to conform to G-d's will.

Difficult? Of course! Sometimes unnatural? Definitely! But if we indeed want to merit those miracles, we need to deserve them, just as the Jews in the Chanukah story, who learned Torah, observed Shabbat, and kept the mitzvah of *brit milah* (circumcision) despite the threats of death.

The process is often totally illogical, and like our dear little Anne, who, despite the challenges and difficulties involved, was the spark of inspiration that led her family on a path of true light and finding inner joy.

Each person knows how far they can stretch beyond their comfort zone in order to enrich their personal path to grow and connect

to G-d. The more humble we make ourselves, the greater space we leave for G-d to enter and help us lead our lives. As miracles happen at all times, not solely during Chanukah, it is up to each and every one of us to be mindful, recognize and appreciate them, either small or big, hidden or revealed.

L'lu nishmat my noble Mom, Bula Yehudit bat R' Menachem, a"b, who was an extraordinary example of a Jew who, unassumingly recognized the Divine's presence and ongoing miracles in her daily life.

Fabia Preminger is the Programming Associate at NJOP.



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