

BERESHITH
"IN THE BEGINNING"

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for Beginners,
by Beginners

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בראשית

LEADERSHIP AND FAITH

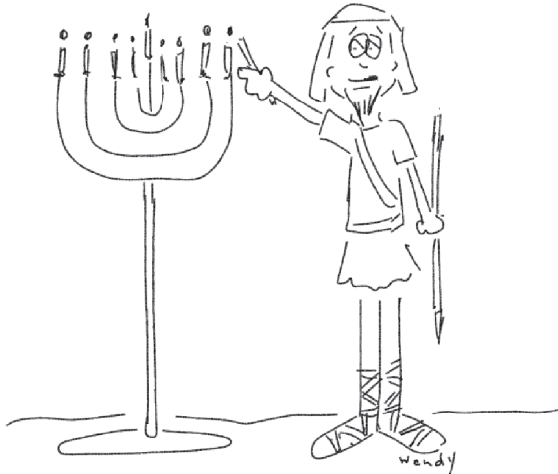
Rabbi Etan Mintz

The eminent 16th Century author of the *Shulchan Aruch*, the Code of Jewish Law, Rabbi Joseph Karo, asked and answered countless questions throughout his lifetime. There was one particular question that he postulated, though, that was so simple and yet so eloquent that it became known as “*The Kasha*” (“The Question”) or Rav Karo’s question. Asked Rav Karo, “Why do we celebrate eight days of Chanukah when the miracle was only for seven days? After all, there was enough oil for the first night, so the first night was not a miracle.” Hundreds, if not thousands, of rabbis throughout the centuries have attempted to answer this question. Some say:

1. The first day of the festival commemorates the miraculous military victory of the few Maccabees over the mighty Syrian Greek army. The remaining seven days are celebrated to commemorate the actual miracle of the oil lasting another seven days.

2. Another explanation posits that while the lighting of the first day was not particularly miraculous, the discovery of

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COMING OUT ON CHANUKAH: JEWISH PRIDE WEEK

William Kolbrenner

Becoming a *Ba'al Tshuva* for me was like coming out of the closet. For a long time you have one identity, and then suddenly you're struck by the urgency of claiming another, different one – that makes your friends laugh or just... wonder. No matter how much mockery or questioning you endure, somehow you feel like you're stuck with it, and have no choice but to pursue it. And it's not just like changing a lapel on your suit, or your hairstyle; your life changes as well. You also start to be aware of antisemitism in a different way – and though you never excuse the explicit racism of your Uncle Morty, you finally get why he was carrying on about ‘*the goyim*’ for all those Passover seders. If, as Americans, we sometimes forget that Jews are different, the anti-Semites, and today anti-Zionists are always there to remind us. Though we may sometimes today be excluded from intersectional gatherings, Jews are the original “Other,” the West’s “Original Sin” from which it has never fully repented. But on Chanukah, however, we come out in

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THE KIPPAH DILEMMA

Ezra Sakkett

Had Noah acted like everyone else around him in his time, humanity wouldn't exist. If Abraham had acted like everyone else around him in his time, the Jewish people wouldn't exist. This was the punchline of the story I heard during a Rosh Hashana sermon while in my sophomore year of college. The beginning of the story goes like this: There were two brothers growing up in Brooklyn. They weren't particularly religious, but when the older one was nearing his 13th birthday, their parents wanted him to have a Bar Mitzvah. The son had no interest, and his younger brother followed his lead. All the bribing and convincing from their parents didn't persuade the brothers. Their argument was solid: None of their friends at school are doing it, not even the other Jewish kids, why should they?

Their parents were distraught, but tried one last attempt. They implored the rabbi in their neighborhood shul to talk to their boys. The rabbi obliged, and they set up a meeting. The rabbi asked the boys, “What was your

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the one remaining jar of untainted oil marked with the seal of the High Priest was a miracle. Accordingly, the first day commemorates the miracle of finding the oil, and the following seven days commemorate the miracle of the oil lasting for those seven days.

3. Another explanation suggests that a small amount of oil went a long way on each day. The one-day's oil that was found was divided into eight small portions with the intention that the Menorah be lit for only a short time each evening until new oil could be produced. Miraculously, each day's small amount burned the entire day. Thus, the miracle of the lighting occurred on the first day as well, hence our commemoration of the miracle of the lighting for eight days. My favorite answer, though, is so simple, yet so profound and so beautiful. The miracle was that the Maccabees even lit the Menorah at all, despite knowing that they would not be able to keep the light going. After all, many would have given up and thrown their hands up in despair. They would have said: "What is the point? What is the purpose or even the end goal of lighting at all?"

As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Faith is taking the first step, even when you don't see the whole staircase."

You see, both leadership and faith exercise some of the very same muscles. My professor and leadership guru at Harvard University, Ron Heifetz, in his book "Leadership Without Easy Answers," speaks of the difficult work of "Adaptive Change" for which there are no easy or known answers. One approaches such work with acts of experimentation, without knowing the results. Franklin Roosevelt, in the midst of the Great Depression, employed that method when he called for "Bold persistent experimentation." As he put it, "It is common sense to take a method and try it. If it fails, admit it frankly and then try another, but above all, try something."

Perhaps, just perhaps, greater than the miracle of the oil lasting eight days, was the fact that the Maccabees even lit the oil candles in the first place; that they acted boldly in uncertain times, as opposed to despairing and giving up. This is no small matter and one of the central messages of Chanukah.

Friends, indeed there is a greater overlap than one might think between faith and leadership. For leadership also takes a leap of faith.

Chag Samayach. A Happy Chanukah to all!

Rabbi Mintz is the rav of B'nai Israel: The Downtown Synagogue, Baltimore's oldest and continually active synagogue. A former rav at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, he has also served as a summer rabbi at The Hampton Synagogue in Westhampton Beach, NY. He studied for two years at Yeshivat Sha'alvim in Israel, and received rabbinic ordination from Yeshiva University's Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary. He also holds a Masters Degree in Jewish Philosophy and Mysticism from the Bernard Revel Graduate School, and an M.P.A. from the Kennedy School at Harvard University.

IT'S JEWISH PRIDE WEEK



force, and stand up for ourselves – who we are – as Jews.

When I was younger, Chanukah observance – latkes, *gelt* and bright orange electric candles – strangely seemed more like a way of being similar to my Christian neighbors than different from them. They had trees and mistletoe – and we had *gelt* and latkes. True, their presents seemed more grandiose, but the promise of eight days of potential-present receiving more than compensated. This sense of equivalence – and even in a good sense, shared good spirits – added to a sense of the festive universalism of the time of year. But for all the Torah's emphasis on Jewish universalism – Jews *are* a Light to the Nations – Chanukah is the time for stressing Jewish identity – pride in Jewish tradition, the Jewish People, and the Land of Israel. Chanukah is "Jewish Pride Week." The Jewish Pride of the Hasmoneans got under the skin of the Greeks. The Greek philosophers had discovered universal ideals – truth, beauty and justice. But in the time of Antiochus, the Assyrian Greeks used their claim to the universal ideals as part of a program to wipe out Jewish expressions of difference: *no* Torah learning, *no* circumcision, *no* celebration of the new month. The Greeks struck at the heart of Jewish difference. That is, Jews would no longer shape their minds through the study of Torah; consecrate their bodies through the ritual of circumcision; proclaim their distinctive version of time through the sanctification of the new month. Through all of these activities, prohibited by the Greeks, Jews distinguished themselves as different through taking the secular – the body, the pursuit of knowledge, and time – and rendering them holy. The Greeks not only banned those, but plundered Jewish money and raped Jewish women. Jews, the Greeks reasoned, could not be certain of their heritage if their women had been raped, and no nation could sustain itself without its wealth.

On Chanukah, we take a lesson from the courageous Maccabees, and overcome our embarrassment about our distinctive Jewish identity. More than that, on Chanukah, we acknowledge that being chosen is not an (cont. on p. 4)

favorite story from Sunday school growing up?” The brothers hadn’t been to Sunday school in several years, but still remembered some of the more famous stories. “The story of Noah and the flood was my favorite,” the older brother responded. The younger brother chimed in, “I like the story of Abraham smashing his father’s idols.” The rabbi smiled, “If Noah acted like everyone else around him in his time, humanity wouldn’t exist. If Abraham had acted like everyone else around him in his time, the Jewish people wouldn’t exist.”

It was at that moment that I decided to start wearing a *kippah* every day.

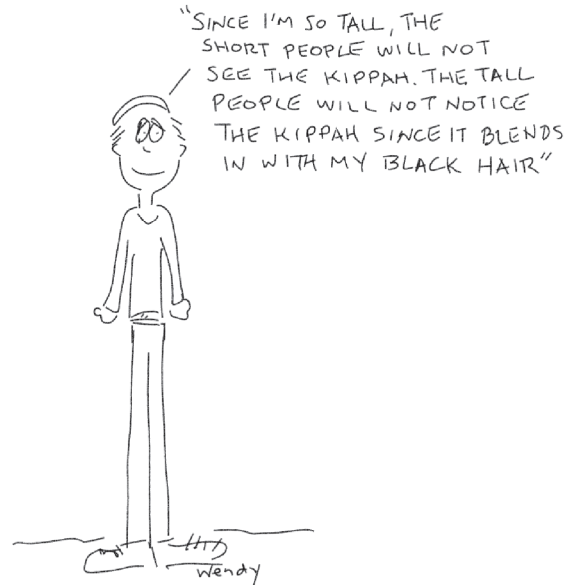
I was happy to have been brought up in the Jewish faith. I was already developing a deeper relationship with G-d and an appreciation for learning Jewish texts, and I felt that this was the right step toward reminding myself and signifying to others my commitment to living life as a decent, dignified, Jewish human being.

Alas, if only it was that simple. Immediately, thoughts of doubt and self-awareness crept into my mind. What would my family, friends and professors, who were used to seeing me one way, say? How would they react when I started donning a *kippah* regularly? Not to mention the idea of being a minority on campus. Despite the relatively large Jewish student body at my university, there were fewer than three other students who wore *kippahs* at the time. I liked the other guys who wore *kippahs*, but did I want to become “one of them?” The idea and values behind wearing a *kippah* were there, but I wasn’t ready to take the plunge, quite yet.

Just as my mind contrived various tactics to convince me to avoid doing something I wanted to do, it was equally creative about imagining ways to convince myself to finally follow through. Here was the argument: I happen to be taller than the average person, and during winter break from college I convinced myself that if I got a small black *kippah*, no one shorter than me would notice it, and for anyone taller than me it would blend into my dark brown hair. With healthy optimism, I bought a small black *kippah* and prepared for the second semester, naively expecting that none of my friends and roommates would notice.

After the first few days back, not one person had brought up the new accessory that I had added to my wardrobe. I thought it was a fluke, and that some of my other friends or professors would notice once classes resumed. A week went by. Two weeks. Nothing. I was relieved. Not only did I feel like I was carrying out something that for several months I had wanted to be doing, I was even more excited that no one seemed to notice the change, given the combination of my height and the color of my *kippah*.

During the third week of school I started a new part-time job working with elementary students after school. On the very first day on the job, a 2nd grader, who was more than a few feet shorter than me, walked up and said, “Mister mister, what’s that hat on your head?” I turned to him and in my mind replayed every social interaction I’d had thought about



over the past two weeks. If he can see the *kippah*, that means that everyone saw it! After a few moments of panic, I realized something extremely important. It’s true everyone saw it, but it’s also true that no one said anything, because it didn’t matter. True, I started wearing a *kippah*, but who I was hadn’t changed. I was now simply giving an external representation of who I had been all along.

Since then, there have been countless other moments of choices toward living a life that reflects who I am. One saying I heard along the way captures the importance of listening to one’s inner compass: Too often we adjust our values to match our behaviors. It would be much better for our long-term selves if we worked on changing our behaviors to align with our values.

Originally from Denver, Colorado, Ezra Sackett now lives in New Jersey. He works in digital advertising with clients based in NY and around the country. In addition to JCC pre-school and Sunday school, he was fortunate to spend two years learning at Yeshivat Darchei Noam in Jerusalem after graduating from college.



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COMING OUT ON CHANUKAH (cont. from p. 2)
 ...embarrassment, but a responsibility – so we come out of the closet and advertise the miracle of the Chanukah lamp, a sign of our triumph over Greek universalist attempts to eradicate us. Jewish law reflects this emphasis on ‘publication’ of the miracle. Chanukah candles are to be lit at the time when people – non-Jews presumably – are returning home from the marketplace; they are also to be lit in a place that they have maximum visibility – not too high, not too low. And for many, the best way of performing the act is for every member of the household to light; every individual acknowledges the miracle. Though the rabbis, pragmatic as they are, understand that Jewish history does not always go our way, and that sometimes, it’s too dangerous to show our courage. In that case, the law allows for lighting inside on the living room table. But even here, there is a sense of coming out – coming out to yourself. As the medieval legalist Maimonides advises: “You are to show forth the miracle” – even if you are alone in your room, lighting for perhaps the most important audience – for yourself. Family and friends may not understand for the moment, but this is who I am.

I am a Jew. I proclaim my Jewishness through support for Jewish Nationhood – I am a Zionist! I am a Jew, and I proclaim my individuality with my body and my soul – through how I exist in time, how I think, and how I act. It’s Jewish Pride Week (we even get an *extra* day!): I am out of the closet, and I am proud!

Professor Kolbrener was born in Roslyn, NY, and is currently a professor of English Literature at Bar Ilan University In Israel. He has written books on John Milton, the author of Paradise Lost, the British proto-feminist, Mary Astell, and most recently Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik. He is also the author of Open Minded Torah: Of Irony, Fundamentalism, and Love. He is a proud alumni of Rabbi Buchwald's Beginners Service.

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Bereshit: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Larry Greenman and Freeda Rudman of NJOP. 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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