

BERESHITH

"IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter
for Beginners,
by Beginners

Vol. XXXIV No. 2

Kislev 5781/December 2020



בראשית

JERUSALEM



WHAT IS CHANUKAH REALLY ABOUT?

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

The Talmud, in tractate *Shabbat 21b*, states: “*Tanu ra’banan: Ner Chanukah, mitzvah l’hanicha al pe’tach bay’to*,” our Rabbis taught: the proper way of performing the mitzvah of Chanukah is to place the candle by the door, outside one’s home. “*Im ba’ya dar ba’aliya, manicha ba’chalon ha’s’mucha lir’shoot ha’rabim*,” If one lives high up, the Chanukah candles should be placed at the window that faces the public thoroughfare. “*U’rish’at ha’sakana, ma’nicha al shul’chano v’dayo*,” but in times of danger, it is sufficient to place the Chanukah candles on the table.

It is from this Talmudic selection, that we learn that the basic purpose of displaying the Chanukah candles is the mitzvah of “*pir’sumai nisa*,” to publicize the miracle: to allow the public to become aware of the great victory of the Jews over the Syrian-Greeks, and, of course, the wondrous miracle of the cruse of oil that lasted for eight days instead of one. In ancient times, the place to put the menorah for everyone to see was outside the door, which was open to the public thoroughfare. Obviously, for those who lived

(cont. on p. 2)

THE JEWISH POWER OF CHOICE

David B. Smith

Perhaps THE greatest benefit of choosing as a young adult to become more traditional is that with some age and experience comes a more mature awareness of, and appreciation of, the power of choice.

I was raised in a home profoundly committed to Jewish activism, Jewish communal service and the idea of *tikkun olam* — repairing the world. I sincerely felt overwhelming pride in my Judaism. The State of Israel was revered. Fighting injustice was a core value. Giving *tzedakah* (charity) and acting like a *mensch* were so much more important than getting top grades and being the big man on campus. *Halacha*, Jewish law, was deemed to be quite charming and certainly worthy of our respect, but otherwise antiquated and, therefore, not all that relevant.

Children learn early on that choices matter. This usually starts with parents and siblings who encourage us when we’re being adorable and redirect us when we’re making bad, especially unsafe or dangerous choices. At this time, we’re

(cont. on p. 2)

THE GREEK THAT IS STILL IN ME

Rabbi Zev Kahn

My first trip to Israel was as a 21 year old to play rugby for the South African Jewish rugby team in the 1985 Maccabi Games. We stayed in the newly built Kfar Maccabiah Hotel. We won the gold medal and that experience began a spiritual journey that brought me back to Israel again and again, until I moved there in 1992 to go to Ohr Somayach Yeshiva. I was at Ohr Somayach for six years, during which I got married, we had two children and I got my *semicha* (rabbinic ordination). All six years were memorable. One of my favorite times of the year was Chanukah. Celebrating *chagim* (Jewish holidays) while learning in yeshiva was always special because I learned so much about each *chag* in the weeks leading up to it. As the saying goes: “The more you put into something, the more you get out of it.” There is so much to learn about Chanukah - the history, the practical Jewish laws and the philosophy of the holiday.

At Ohr Somayach, a *baal teshuva* yeshiva (a yeshiva geared to those returning to their Jewish roots), where the students were coming with a very limited

(cont. on p. 3)

THE JEWISH POWER OF CHOICE (cont. from p. 1)

...largely unaware of how much we are learning-by-doing and how much our personalities are being formed by these choices we make and by the real-time feedback, and pushback, we receive.

This really begins to come together at whatever age we start attending a play group or a school. Peer interactions take decision-making to a whole new level of relevance and impact. At this age, at this stage, all of us, irrespective of the ways in which we experience our Judaism, are developing both our aptitude and our character. We are being valued, and validated, by outcomes that are principally defined by our choices. In my less “traditional,” though passionately “Jewish” home, “good character” was about “making good choices” — choices that were kind, considerate and empathic. It wasn’t always easy or fun, but it was important. The only deficiency with this otherwise wholesome playbook is that, from a Jewish continuity perspective, it’s not sustainable because, at its core, it’s anchored by an individual-centric vs a G-d-centric worldview. At its core, it values the feelings and wants and yearnings of the individual as “the greatest good.” In a G-d-centered world, gratitude partners with service to create a very powerful combination. Choices become so much more potent with potential because choices are so much more about the “other” than the self. Choices are the result of thoughts and words and deeds, all of which can repair and build or harm and destroy.

After my mother’s untimely death (at the age of 48), I, as a distraught 21-year-old, started asking some really tough questions for the first time in my life. I had already graduated from Washington University, where among other things, I studied a lot of philosophy. But nothing I learned prepared me to make sense of such a devastating loss. When I soon thereafter learned that Judaism believed that each soul “comes down” into the world with a specific mission (maybe my mom’s mission had been completed?!), I was both comforted and inspired to begin studying what our classical, traditional texts had to say about life and death and everything in between. What impacted me most profoundly was the idea that we live in an imperfect world that G-d intentionally made flawed so that He could engage us (man and woman) — His flawed partners — to repair that which He intentionally made defective. From G-d’s perspective, the free will (*bechira*) He gives us, empowers us to make choices about how we think (*machshava*), how we speak (*dibbur*) and how we act (*ma’aseh*). The 613 Mitzvot are about refining our character so we can be(come) the better (best?!), version of ourselves with the limited time that we are blessed and privileged to play out the specific, singularly-unique mission that our Partner has assigned to us. That’s the power of choice! So, use it well. Use it wisely. It’s such a great, powerful and empowering gift!

At this time of year, in this season of longer nights and colder weather, the Maccabees remind us that each and every one of us is an integral part of our Eternal Nation known as

The Jewish People... that each and every one of us is capable of making heroic choices... of speaking truth to power... of fighting for what we believe... of moving mountains for what we know is right and true... And, ultimately, the Maccabees remind us about the importance of bringing light and warmth and love into our homes and into our communities.

What better response to darkness than light? What better response to cold than warmth and love? That’s the Jewish perspective. That’s the Jewish power of choice!

David B. Smith lives in Miami Beach, Fl. He is a proud Jew, passionate Zionist, devoted husband, father and friend.

WHAT IS CHANUKAH REALLY ABOUT (cont. from p. 1)

“WHY ARE WE LIGHTING THE CANDLES ON THE TABLE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE ROOM, RATHER THAN AT THE WINDOW?”



“LET US ALSO LIGHT OUR CANDLES IN OUR HOMES, AS WELL -- ON OUR TABLES AND IN OUR HEARTS.”

...high up, it was better to place the candles in the window, as we do today, so that everyone could “behold the miracle.”

Twenty-one hundred and eighty-seven years ago in the year 167 B.C.E. on the 25th of *Kislev*, the Jews won a great victory over the Syrian-Greeks. But, the truth is, it wasn’t so much a victory over the Syrian-Greeks, as it was a victory of the Traditional Jews over the Hellenist Jews. Hellenist culture was extremely popular at that time, and exceedingly attractive. Many Jews became leading adherents of Hellenism, abandoning their Jewish practices and adopting and promoting this alien culture. History books tell us that some Jews were so keen on Hellenism, which promoted the physical world over the spiritual realm, that they engaged in naked wrestling, just as the Greeks did. And, because many Jewish men were embarrassed that their bodies had been marred, they underwent the most painful operation to reverse their circumcisions. We see, once again, how devoted the Jews are to alien values that they adopt. If only our brothers and sisters would display the same devotion to G-d and to His Torah!

And so, while the story of the military victory over the Syrian Greeks is very popular, Rabbinic tradition emphasizes the spiritual victory over the Jewish Hellenists. “*Ma’sarta t’may’im b’yad teh’bo’rim*,” You [G-d] delivered the impure into the hands of the pure, “*V’zay’dim, b’yad oskay to’ra’techa*,” and those who defy G-d, You [G-d] delivered into the hands of those who engage in Your Torah at all times.

That explains why publicizing the miracle is such an essential element of Chanukah.

(cont. on p. 4)

THE GREEK THAT IS STILL IN ME (cont. from p. 1)

...Jewish education to learn more about their heritage, there was a particular emphasis on the significance of Chanukah to their lives.

Rabbi Nachman Bulman זצ"ל, my rebbe, and who we named our third son after, used a very powerful metaphor. He said that each and every Jew has a small flask of oil inside of them, the *'pintele Yid'*, the inextinguishable connection to the Torah, the Jewish people, our land, our history and our G-d. For so many though, that flask lies faintly lit. It is our job in yeshiva to fan that flame inside ourselves and then, by example, to teach the beauty of Torah and mitzvot to others, to light their inner flame so that it too will burn brightly and make them feel proud to be Jewish.

Rabbi Bulman would contrast the light of the Torah with the darkness of the Greek view of the world. Their emphasis of the physical over the spiritual was the main battle between them and the Maccabees. They believed the human body was perfect and banned circumcision because it made the body imperfect, while we looked at it as a covenant with G-d to be partners in creation and perfecting ourselves.

The Greeks celebrated this glorification of the human body with the Olympic Games, striving to elevate the physical achievements of athletes and crowning those who would be fastest and strongest. It was the Maccabees, and we, their descendants, who rejected that worldview and fought a war to defeat it. It is that victory and the ongoing battle we fight today, that we celebrate every Chanukah.

How ironic, Rav Bulman would say, that those who brought the Jewish version of the Olympic Games to Israel (then Palestine), would choose the name Maccabi Games, using the name of those who fought against the very idea! And yet, even more ironically, it was the Maccabi Games that brought me back to my Jewish roots and ultimately to becoming a rabbi.

Shortly after I moved to Chicago, I was called the "Rugby Rabbi." It is not just a cute marketing idea. To me it is an acknowledgement that something very good Jewishly came out of something that is not that Jewish.

That's an important lesson for every *baal teshuva* - and maybe everyone else too. Even if a person has not always been connected Jewishly in a meaningful way in the past, there's always opportunity to connect in a more significant way in the future.

There's something deeper too.

Growing up in a sports-crazy country that South Africa was, I followed sport religiously. There was the popular culture too - movies, music. Yeshiva gave me the opportunity to focus on my inner self. I was able to see that my true identity was bound to something eternal, not to something temporary. I was very fortunate that there were no smart-phones when I was in yeshiva. I had very limited access to the internet. The only time I saw a sports score was an occasional glance at the back page of a Jerusalem Post brought into the dining room. Looking back, it was liberating.

"WE NEED TO LIGHT THE EXTERNAL CANDLES, AND THE INTERNAL CANDLES."



"HAPPY CHANUKAH"

[Important note: I'm not talking about playing sports. I'm a big proponent of that, although not in too competitive a way - a discussion for a future article.]

I'll be honest. I still follow sports a little now. I didn't rid myself of that sports fascination entirely. Although it is 25 years since I left South Africa for yeshiva, I'm still happy when their rugby team wins. I was also happy when the Cubs won the World Series.

That's the "Greek" that is still in me. I know it. I recognize it. It's contained.

It's the *pintele Yid* inside me that shines more brightly.

So when I gaze at the menorah on Chanukah, I feel a sense of gratitude to G-d and His messengers who helped fan that flame and for the opportunity I have to light it in others. Happy Chanukah.

This article originally appeared in The Chicago Jewish Home on November 30, 2017.

Originally from Port Elizabeth, South Africa, Rabbi Zev Kahn is better known in the Chicagoland area as the "Rugby Rabbi" from his days as a former Maccabi Games Gold Medalist in 1985 and 1989. In 2005 Rabbi Kahn founded JET- Jewish Education Team, an outreach organization that reaches about 1,000 college students and young professionals throughout Illinois. (see www.jetcampus.com) He can be reached at zevkahn@jetcampus.com.



1345 AVENUE OF THE AMERICAS, 2ND FLOOR
NEW YORK, NY 10105-0014
1-800-44-HEBRE(W)
www.njop.org

NON-PROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
New York, NY
PERMIT #5047



In partnership with
Lincoln Square Synagogue

DATED MATERIAL

WHAT IS CHANUKAH REALLY ABOUT (cont. from p. 2)

But what about the third part of the Talmudic statement, that in times of danger it is sufficient to place the menorah on the table? It certainly makes sense that when Jews are being persecuted by their enemies and it would be dangerous to display the menorahs publicly, that one should light the Chanukah menorah inside the house, on the table.

It is important to note that "*sha'at ha'sakana*," time of danger, may not only mean physical danger, but spiritual danger, as well, that is--assimilation! When the forces of assimilation gain ascendance, says the Talmud, "Light your candle on the table, and that will be sufficient." When the blandishments of the outside society are so attractive, it is vital to reinforce one's commitment to the light of Torah, by making certain that the light is placed firmly on the table in one's home, in the bedrooms, in the kitchen--literally pervading all parts of one's home and family life.

Rav Abraham Yitzchak Ha'Cohen Kook (first Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Israel, who lived from 1865-1935) writes that this is what is meant by the words in the twenty third psalm, "*Ta'aroch l'fah'nai shul'chan neged tzo'r'rai*," You [G-d] will prepare before me a table in the face of my enemies. It is at

the table, where we eat, in the intimate moments of our home life, where we gain the strength, the spiritual strength, to fight off the cultural and philosophical enemies.

Of all the blessings of Chanukah, I'm always deeply moved by the blessing, "*Sheh'asa nissim la'avoteinu bayamin ha'haym baz'mahn ha'zeh*," Thank You G-d, who wrought miracles for our forefathers in those days in these times. How valid is that blessing today, because we too, just like the Maccabees of old, are truly fighting for our very survival.

And while we light our candles on our windowsills and in our doorways, let us also light our candles in our homes, as well--on our tables and in our hearts. In fact, let us celebrate a form of Chanukah every day of the year, by making certain that the light of Torah becomes the focal point of our family and our home life.

May we all be "*mo'sif v'bo'laych*," let us all increase the light of our Chanukah candles, until the whole world is illuminated by the light of Torah that the Jewish people have successfully spread.

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald is the Founder and Director of NJOP.

Words of Torah for everyone! To receive Rabbi Buchwald's exciting and provocative weekly e-mail message, please send an e-mail to: ezbuchwald@njop.org

To receive a juicy bit of Judaism, daily, from Jewish Treats, please send an e-mail to: jewishtreats@njop.org



בראשית

Beresith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Larry Greenman and Rivka Bornstein 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: 1345 Avenue of the Americas, 2nd Floor, New York, NY 10105-0014, 646-871-4444, e-mail info@njop.org or visit www.njop.org.

Readers: This is your newsletter and we'd like to hear from you. Article contributions are always welcome.

Illustrations by Wendy Dunn