

# BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter  
for Beginners,  
by Beginners

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# בראשית

## TREE VS MENORAH



"WHAT A LETDOWN, WE LIGHT MORE CANDLES  
ON A BIRTHDAY CAKE!"

## THE HIDDEN CANDLE

Rabbi Yehuda Meyers

Bright sparkling holiday lights are anywhere and everywhere! Loud and joyous songs constantly ringing in our ears! It's the most wonderful time of the year! Except that the previous description more aptly depicts what we experience living in America in our exposure to our neighbors' "other holiday" season. Our holiday celebration, on the other hand, seems quite different.

As a matter of fact, it almost feels anticlimactic. As little children, we spend weeks in school making our very own menorahs. We bring them home and cordon off an entire area of our house for the Chanukah lighting. The first night of the holiday arrives, the whole family gathers together, we sing three beautiful blessings, and then (drumroll please) ... we light a few dinky little candles. What a dramatic letdown! Where are the big sparklers?! Where are the fireworks!? We light more candles on

(cont. on p. 2)

## PIRSUMEI NISA (PUBLICIZING THE MIRACLE)

Rabbi Dr. Chaim Keller

Our second daughter was born on the fourth day of Chanukah in the year 1991. It was a cold and rainy day. That wasn't so unusual for Jerusalem winters before the great smokestacks of the world dried up our clouds and warmed our climate.

What was unusual, almost magical, was how the rain would always stop just long enough for us to light our menorah. We lived then in a street-level apartment which had its own private parking area, where we would light our menorah. My wife Liba, was in the hospital giving birth. I was charged with watching our children, who were quite little at that time. I would bundle them up in their coats and we would march outside after sunset, after the rain stopped, to light. In Jerusalem, it is the custom to light outside. That is how *Chazal* (our rabbis) intended it to be in order to publicize the miracle of Chanukah; It is known by the Aramaic term *Pirsumei Nisa*.

The menorah was outside with us, inside a metal box with a glass window. I had attached the box and the menorah to our fence that faced the street. After we lit, the children and I would remain standing watching the menorahs across the street lighting up one by one. The slowly twinkling lights of all the neighbor's Chanukah lights

(cont. on p. 2)

## FROM ONE GENERATION TO THE NEXT – IN HONOR OF MY BUBBIE

Sari Sholom

During this time of year, I have often pondered this question; If one grows up secular but feels strongly connected Jewishly, where does their Jewish identity come from?

For me, it was through the intense connection and love that I had for my "Bubbie," my maternal grandmother who was deeply rooted in her Judaism. It was this relationship that helped to plant the seeds that ultimately influenced my decision to live an observant Jewish life approximately 35 years ago.

My grandmother narrowly escaped Nazi Germany with my mother in 1941 and immigrated to the US. The daughter and granddaughter of prominent rabbis in Europe, she shortly remarried after arriving and gave birth to my uncle. Both of her children grew up in an Orthodox home and attended Yeshiva. My mom, who did not speak English when she arrived here at age 7, initially attended Bais Yaakov, an all-girls Yeshiva in Brooklyn.

Since my mother struggled in school, my grandmother had no choice but to enroll her in public school where she ultimately rebelled against my grandmother's observant lifestyle. My uncle, attended Torah Vodaath, an all-boys Yeshiva. My uncle's observant lifestyle ended while

(cont. on p. 3)

...a birthday cake!

Why does all the enthusiasm and passion for the incredible miracle and holiday of Chanukah find expression in just a few little lights?

It may at first seem odd. However, when we take a closer look at the Chanukah candles, we discover that perhaps the lights are intentionally miniscule.

To actually notice the light of the menorah requires one to slow down and pay attention to the world outside. If we just drive or walk by quickly, we wouldn't even realize that there are a few candles in the windows. The mitzvah of the menorah requires us to look closely, to gaze into those little flames as they dance to-and-fro and to listen to the whisper of the fire, "There is more here than what meets the eye."

In Judaism, fire represents the hidden soul of the human being. Although we know that it is there inside of us, it requires sincere effort to access and to connect with. So too the flickering Chanukah flame represents a deeper, concealed reality--there is much more beneath the surface. The little light of the menorah candle reflects only the tip of the iceberg, merely the overflow of the pure beauty and holiness that is bubbling inside of us threatening to burst forth at any moment.

For most of the year, and for much of our lives, however, that light remains obscured, hidden in the recesses of our hearts. We are too busy, too distracted, to acknowledge it or allow it to shine. It is specifically in times of outer darkness when we are not distracted by the bright, flashing lights of the world around us, that we become attuned to our inner light. It is particularly in the bitter cold winter, when we yearn for warmth, that we realize there is a fire burning in our souls.

It is that warmth, that light, that we embrace on Chanukah.

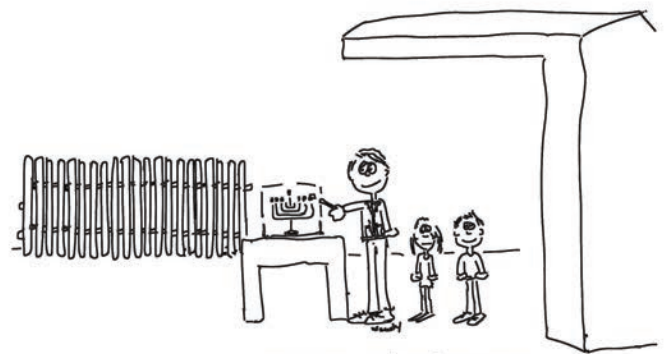
Yes, we light the candles on the menorah. However, perhaps even more important than kindling the physical flames, is finding the eternal spark glowing inside each and every one of us. It's there, we just need to find it! On Chanukah we embark on this precious journey, yearning to discover our true selves.

This Chanukah, when we light the little flames, let us begin the search. Let us turn on the valves and allow the G-dliness concealed inside each of us come forth, and shed a little light for ourselves, our families, our community, and our world.

And it all starts with just one candle.

*Rabbi Yehuda Meyers is the rabbi and spiritual leader at Lincolnwood Jewish Congregation A.G. Beth Israel, a suburban synagogue right outside Chicago. In addition to his rabbinic duties, Rabbi Meyers is currently enrolled in a Master's program to become a clinical mental health therapist.*

(cont. from p. 1)



"IT WAS A DOUBLE MIRACLE! MY WIFE HAD JUST GIVEN BIRTH AND I WAS IN CHARGE OF THE KIDS AND LIGHTING THE MENORAH!"

...would become an intricate constellation of stars. It was always a powerful spiritual and moving experience. It was a *Pirsumei Nisa*. That will always be my favorite part of Chanukah, and that particular Chanukah will always be my favorite.

During those years, in the early '90s, I was learning in Kollel at Yeshivat Torah Ohr. Rav Pinchas Sheinberg, *z"l* was my *Rosh Ha'Yeshiva* (Head of Yeshiva). Rav Sheinberg was renowned for his dedication to Torah study. He also expected the same from his *talmidim*

(students). Every year he would lecture us about how Torah study predicated the mitzvah of lighting Chanukah lights, since Torah study is a Torah ordained mitzvah, unlike the case for Chanukah lights, which is a rabbinic mitzvah. He would state that nothing would be lost if one were to wait to light the menorah until after the Yeshiva *sefer* (learning session) was over, since nowadays, family members are present at all hours, and people are walking around the street until very late.

I'm sure that Rav Sheinberg would only light when it was possible to do so without interrupting his Torah study. We all knew that he would light his Chanukah lights while standing on his balcony on the 7th floor. Rav Sheinberg would joke that his living room was actually a public area, making it almost as though he lit down on the street, since many people would visit every night to ask questions and consult with him about complicated halachic matters. After all, he was one of the great Torah giants of recent times, and that was one form of his Torah study. Nevertheless, he would only convince one or two of his *talmidim* (students) to stay until the very end of the seder, many hours after sunset. Many *talmidim* would often go back after lighting to finish the evening *sefer* in the Yeshiva. That is what I usually did. But not that year.

Several years afterwards, I started learning in a different Kollel. Part of my duties at that new Kollel was to work on the visible sunrise times for Israel which eventually developed into the Chai Tables. You see, I'm a physicist. When I met Rabbi Buchwald, I was a PhD graduate student from Seattle working part time at the Brookhaven National Laboratory in Long Island. It was a special treat to travel to NYC; especially for *Shabbatot*, and especially with the old rickety

(cont. on p. 4)

FROM ONE GENERATION TO THE NEXT –  
IN HONOR OF MY BUBBIE (cont. from p. 1)

...he was in Israel in his early twenties. I can't imagine the heartache this caused my grandmother. Even so, as my mother recalls, she never lamented that her children were not *Shomer Shabbat*, Sabbath observant. Her dying wishes were that her son say *Kaddish* for her and that she be buried in Israel.

Unfortunately, neither of those came to pass.

I grew up in a traditional non-observant home and my Bubbie lived in the downstairs apartment of our two-family home in Brooklyn. Our home was only a block from the Glenwood Jewish Center, an Orthodox synagogue, so she could walk to shul on Shabbat. While we didn't keep Shabbat, we kept kosher in our home and celebrated the major Jewish holidays. While growing up, I watched my mother *bentch licht*, light candles, every Friday night until after my grandmother died. I did not have any formal Jewish education, just what I was exposed to in my home.

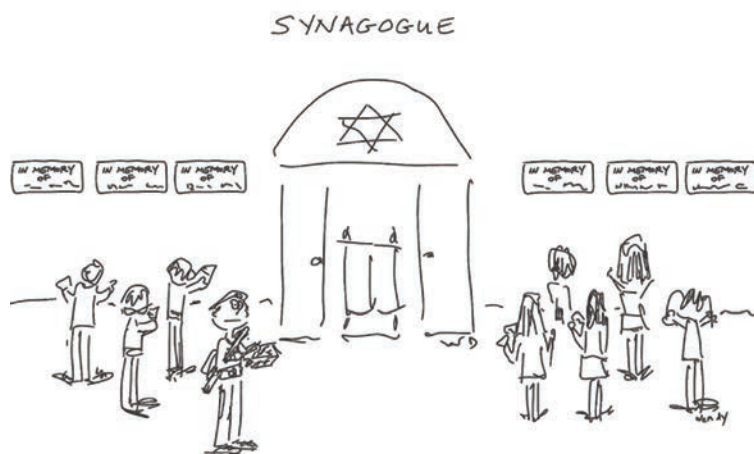
My Bubbie was the light of my life until she died when I was 11. I can recall spending Friday night dinners with her in the dark dining room with just the Shabbat candles illuminating the room and the sense of serenity that I felt as I ate her delicious chicken soup and engaged in conversation. I recall her once speaking only Yiddish to me and I pretended to understand every word. I told her I would marry a rabbi which made her ecstatic, and she showered me with kisses of approval.

Having traveled to Israel in my teens and early twenties, my connection to my Jewish identity merged into my connection with Israel and I became a fervent Zionist. After graduating college, I lived on a kibbutz in Israel for 6 months and decided to make *Aliyah*. My mother threatened to cut off all support if I made such a decision. I relented.

Fast forward 16 years later after my grandmother's death in 1971. I was dating my husband at the time and we were invited to attend an Aish HaTorah *Discovery Seminar* at the Homowack Lodge in the Catskill mountains which was billed as a weekend to learn more about Judaism. We panicked when we saw all the religious looking men and women checking in and thought we had made an awful mistake. We were Jewish, but non-observant. We knew we did not belong there and were prepared to leave. After a little more exploration, we were told, "those people" were attending other events at the hotel and this seminar was exactly for people "just like us." We were in the right place. Crisis averted; fear abated. So, we stayed, and my life changed from that day forward.

As I write this, on November 28th, my husband and I are celebrating our 35th wedding anniversary. Rabbi Ephraim Buchwald officiated at our wedding. Since then, we have been on an ongoing religious journey. We are *Shomer Shabbat*, live in a religious community and sent our 3 children to religious Jewish schools. Our eldest son who I would describe as *Dati Leumi*, a religious Zionist, lives in Israel, with his wife and 3 boys.

During our son's service in the IDF, I learned that the Torah scrolls along with all the *yahrzeit* (memorial) plaques including



"IT CAME AS A SHOCK AND SOMEWHAT OF A MIRACLE, TO LEARN THAT UNBEKNOWNST TO OUR SON, HE HAD BEEN PRAYING AT BUBBIE'S SHUL THROUGHOUT HIS ARMY SERVICE!"

my grandmother's plaque from the shul that she attended in Brooklyn, had been transplanted to a shul in Israel. We were told that *Kaddish*, the special prayers of remembrance, are recited yearly on those *yahrzeits*, on behalf of those individuals who are deceased. It came as a shock and somewhat of a miracle when I learned that unbeknownst to our son, he had been praying at this very shul throughout his army service when he came home for Shabbat. His great-grandmother, my precious Bubbie is memorialized in Israel where her memorial plaque remains, where she is remembered yearly on her *yahrzeit* and where her great-grandson prayed while defending the Jewish state.

Not only did her dying wishes come true in some form, but the Jewish identity that she implanted in me so many years ago lives on... through our son and our grandsons.

The decisions that we make along the way in our life's journey really matter. From generation to generation, the memory of my grandmother and the future of the Jewish people live on.

*Sari Sholom resides in Edison, NJ with her husband, Greg. She is a mother of three adult children and grandmother to four beautiful grandsons. A graduate of Yeshiva University's Wurzweiler School of Social Work, Sari is a clinical social worker and practices psychotherapy in Piscataway, New Jersey.*





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## DATED MATERIAL

### PIRSUMEI NISA

(cont. from p. 2)

wooden cars of the Long Island Railroad. During one of those first *Shabbatot* a friend suggested I attend the Beginners Service at Lincoln Square Synagogue. But that is really another story....

Calculating the moment that the sun set over the visible horizon was also part of my duties at my new *Kollel*. Knowing the time for sunset is very important for Chanukah since sunset is the earliest time that Chanukah candles may be lit. The sunset that we see depends, of course, on the terrain; it is different for mountainous areas than for level terrain. The astronomical sunset used in the US is certainly not the sunset used by *Chazal*, the rabbis in *Eretz Yisrael* even only for the most obvious reason: they didn't have computers. However, the visible sunset is often hard to calculate. That happens when the local horizon is obstructed by nearby hills. As a mitigating factor, it is also likely that such places use the sunset of the highest vantage point in the vicinity. But the atmosphere is not

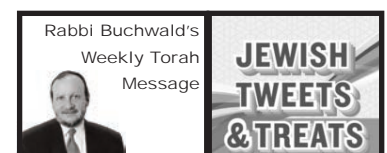
stable; weather is chaotic. This was certainly the case for that special winter.

Even after I moved to a distant neighborhood, I would usually walk home to light our Chanukah candles. In those days, my path was through fields and forests. It was a time to reflect and contemplate. Frankly, there were other reasons to walk. Traffic jams would form everywhere by people bent on arriving home to light shortly after sunset. But for me, as a pedestrian, it was also something else: another *Pirsumei Nisa* of *Eretz Yisrael*.

*Rabbi Dr. Chaim Keller has lived in Jerusalem for more than 35 years. He learns Torah, and in his spare time he manages the ChaiTables, [chaitables.com](http://chaitables.com). Rabbi Keller's work on Zmanim, Jewish time charts, has been recognized worldwide.*

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*Illustrations by Wendy Dunn*