

BERESHITH

"IN THE BEGINNING"

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for Beginners,
by Beginners

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בראשית

"CELEBRATING CHANUKAH IN INDIA"



CHANUKAH: FINDING LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

Rabbi Hyim Shafner

My first job as a rabbi was in 1995 in Mumbai (then Bombay), India. There were several communities of Jews there, some of whom had been in India for thousands of years. But, there were no rabbis in India.

Since the Jewish people there wanted a rabbi, I was sent by an American organization to India for the year. It was an amazing experience to see Jewish life in a vastly different culture and country. Just before Chanukah, I was walking down the street and saw a street vendor selling small clay oil lamps shaped like ducks. I had an epiphany and bought eight of them. I lined them up into what I thought was my cutest menorah yet. During Chanukah, we had a group of the Indian Jews over to our apartment. They took one look at my menorah and exclaimed, "Rabbi, we did not know that you celebrate Diwali!"

Of course, I had not realized that Hindus also celebrate a holiday, Diwali, in the winter around Chanukah time and it too is a holiday which involves light. Additionally, in the Western world, Christians also celebrate a (cont. on p. 2)

A NEW YORK JEWISH WOMAN IN AN ARAB NEIGHBORHOOD

Nancy Jacobs

On the morning of October 7th, before full extent of the horror of the Hamas terror attack was understood, while walking to my local Arab-owned grocery store, I saw frightened and tear-stained faces of Arabs huddled together watching the news and talking.

I am a Jew and a New Yorker by birth, and an Israeli by choice. I am politically Conservative, and I moved to Israel at age 60, leaving behind my home, my friends, my language and, six months later, my husband.

I was greeted with the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and following a grueling year, finally settled in the city of Jaffa, south of Tel Aviv.

Jaffa is a mixed Jewish and Arab neighborhood (I would say 60% or 70% Arab). It is a beautiful Mediterranean port city whose architecture still reflects the Turkish occupation and the Greek influence. I live right off the beach, and it's truly magical.

It's true, Jaffa has had a dark history: In 1921 there were Arab riots against Jews, many died. (cont. on p. 2)

LIGHT FOR A CLEAR MIND

Bruce Fader

Chanukah is a time to wonder at the individual candles shining brightly. As maybe you do too, I step outside my home to stare at the beacon of light displayed in a prominent window. Hopefully, my gentile neighbors take notice of it, and feel some warmth amidst the winter night.

The lit candles symbolically represent shedding light on darkness to reveal truth. Throughout my life, that truth has supported my ideal to learn, know and care about people different than myself so that together, we coexist in peace.

October 7, 2023 alienated my ideal. Barbarism and the failure of certain parts of the gentile world to accept the truth behind it, are constantly on my mind. The protection, and actually the saving, of Israel for the perpetual home of Jews is paramount. Those who blame Israel for its present situation, those college presidents lacking the moral leadership to call out the Hamas murders for what it is, and those who support the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, among other things unfortunately, cause a rage within me.

But I must fend off becoming insular. My (cont. on p. 3)

CHANUKAH: FINDING LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

(cont. from p. 1)

...holiday around Chanukah time, also on the 25th of the month, and, surprise, it's also a holiday partly celebrated through light.

What's going on with all the coinciding holidays of light in the dead of winter?

The Talmud (*Avodah Zara* 8a) seems to hint at a primordial source for the confluence of these winter light celebrations in the following teaching:

"Our Sages taught: When Adam, the first person, saw that the days were progressively getting shorter toward winter, he said: 'Woe is me, perhaps because I sinned, the world is becoming dark around me and will ultimately return to the primordial state of chaos and disorder, and this is the death that was sentenced upon me from Heaven, as it is written: "And to dust shall you return"' (Genesis 3:19). He arose and spent eight days in fasting and in prayer. Then as the season progressed and he saw that the pattern began to reverse and the days were progressively lengthening he said: 'Clearly, the days become shorter and then longer, and this is the natural order of the world.' He then observed a festival for eight days... Adam established these days for the sake of Heaven, and, later, the pagans established them for idolatry."

Though Judaism and Paganism are vastly different, it seems that human beings share a common collective unconscious, a shared feeling and sense of things. As the days get shorter and darkness overtakes light, we can respond not with dread, but by lighting candles and bringing light into the darkness. Chanukah is actually often the darkest week of the year since it falls around the solstice and contains the new moon, a night when, in addition to the seasonal darkness, there is no moonlight either.

Perhaps the lesson of Chanukah and the rededication and lighting of the menorah in the Temple which it commemorates, not only teaches us to fight against those who wish to put out the Jewish light, but to also proactively bring light. On Chanukah, in our homes, we imitate the lighting of the menorah in the Temple. If we use olive oil, which is recommended, we appear like the *Kohen Gadol*, the High Priest, who did this with sanctified olive oil.

This process of lighting holy candles in the midst of the darkest time reminds us that service to G-d, Torah, commandments, and kindness--namely bringing more holiness in our world, brings light.

This Chanukah may we kindle lamps of holy oil to light the darkness.

Rabbi Hyim Shafner, MSW, is the rabbi of Kesher Israel: The Georgetown Synagogue, in Washington D.C. Previously he served as rabbi of Bais Abraham Congregation in St. Louis, Missouri, as rabbi of the Hillel at Washington University in St. Louis, and as the rabbi of India for the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. Rabbi Shafner is the author of "The Everything Jewish Wedding Book" and has published widely in an array of Jewish journals, periodicals and books.

A NEW YORK JEWISH WOMAN IN AN ARAB NEIGHBORHOOD

(cont. from p. 1)



But today, Jaffa stands as a living testament to what is possible.

When there was "trouble" here two years ago, the violence that occurred was not caused by locals. The moment the entrances to the city were shut down at 4 PM every day to non-residents, suddenly the violence stopped.

No one here wants to burn a car that belongs to their own mother, or burn garbage on their brother's front door.

My neighbors are store owners, doctors, mechanics, social workers; Christians and Muslims, and no one supports Hamas.

So, let me answer a question I have been asked over-and-over again: "How are the Arabs? Aren't you scared?"

Let me be clear, we are all scared.

This is NOT a battle of Arab against Jew - this is an epic struggle between light versus darkness.

This is still Israel, and we are at war. I am not naïve, and when the a pro-Hamas rally happened at 4 AM, I was well aware that I am not in Kansas anymore. But again, these were not local Arabs, they come from outside our community to try and stir up trouble here. They left; their mission was unsuccessful.

I walk my dog (a large Doberman) with pepper spray (mostly to protect both of us from aggressive stray dogs). And, when two Arab men, who were clearly part of the pre-dawn pro-Hamas rally, looked menacingly at me on the very quiet street at 5 AM, Margot, with full teeth, let them know they should make wiser choices.

I walk past the mosque in front of my building every morning during the call to worship, and it's very quiet--not many people praying. The area is not terribly religious.

I can hear you thinking, "You are crazy to walk at 4:45 AM!"

I am not crazy, I know my neighborhood, and if I yelled, there would be 30 Arab neighbors, who, in seconds, would descend on whoever dared bother me.

There is a sad energy in Jaffa, not a violent one. In the past few years, I have learned so much about the Arabs with whom I live - you don't say no to food or coffee, it is a

(cont. on p. 4)

...varied life experiences have taught me that a lit menorah means to have a clear mind, particularly in the face of troubling times. With that clear mind, I will try to step out of the fog of bias caused by my rage. Admittedly, it is not easy. But I must recount those life experiences to get back on track.

I once took my family on a trip to Germany. Most of it was delightful, but a hidden reason for the trip was to introduce my then two young daughters to the depths of antisemitism. In the visited small cities, we would walk along the streets named "Judenstrasse," trying to find in the upper right-hand side of the doorways any diagonally spaced nail holes, the lost reminders of once proudly displayed mezuzahs. There were no holes; the passing of time, or maybe a new owner, filled them in. And then there was the hard journey to Buchenwald.

The pain initially deepened when traveling to a town in the Harz Mountains. While my younger daughter and I were meandering through the back cobblestone streets noting the time worn half-timbered houses, we stumbled across a second-hand store. It was poorly lit, but we ventured inside, curious about what we may find in this foreign place. To my distress, in a back room under a table, were a pile of menorahs covered by dust. So, I thought, this, too, is what has become of the remembrance of Jewish life. I returned to my car, in despair.

While waiting at a traffic light to leave the town, I casually noticed a nondescript Catholic church and its convent. Then my eyes suddenly fixated on the convent's picture window facing the street. Quietly, but boldly, it was displaying a large, shiny brass menorah for the world and me to see. I witnessed hope. A church, a gentile, remembering the Jews.

As another instance, while in Dubrovnik, Croatia, I visited one of the oldest shuls in Europe. There, I learned about The Sarajevo Haggadah. Not only is its origin, but the stories of its keepers and protectors, are remarkable. The Spanish Jews created this illustrated Haggadah during the medieval ages and took it with them when expelled in 1492. Some Sephardic Jews settled in Sarajevo, in current Bosnia-Herzegovina, a primarily Muslim country.

During the Holocaust, the Muslim community secretly took possession of The Sarajevo Haggadah for safe keeping until the Jewish community (or some part of it) returned, which they

did. Equally inspiring, during the Bosnia War in the 1990s, that same small Jewish community, in remembering the righteous deeds of the Muslims, reciprocated and safeguarded their religious artifacts until they too returned, ready to build back their religious life.

I must resolve to have a clear mind and not be so quick to judge the gentile stranger about who is and who isn't on my side. Hopefully, there are those who are in the middle, and I must engage them and educate them about Judaism's universal contributions.

When lighting the menorah this year, I will remind myself of the words of the French philosopher Henri Bergson, a non-observant Jew throughout most of his life, who once considered converting to Catholicism. At the time the Nazis forced the Parisian Jews to wear the yellow badges of Jewish identity, Bergson's friends in the diocese of Paris told him that they would save him from persecution. Instead, Bergson voluntarily joined the line and wore a yellow badge. Earlier in his

life, Bergson once wrote, now very relevant today, "Think like a man of action, and act like a man of thought."

During this Chanukah, 5784, in whatever way we may act individually, we all will join in the loud chorus of "Never Again Is Now."



Bruce Fader was born and raised in northern New Jersey, and currently lives with his wife in Connecticut, near his daughters and their families. He has worked domestically and internationally, with many people and houses of worship of many faiths. He may be reached at brucefader11@gmail.com.



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DATED MATERIAL

A NEW YORK JEWISH WOMAN IN AN ARAB NEIGHBORHOOD

(cont. from p. 2)

...capital offense, and besides, it is the best food and coffee you will ever have! I am from NYC. I know.

The second day of the war, I packed up a car-full of food and supplies to go to an Israeli army base in the north, all donated by Arab stores and store owners, ALL of it!

I got hugged and blessed by Allah (G-d in Arabic).

These are stories of light that need to be told, and maybe now is not the time, but I have a child in the ground, and I know grief. I do not want to get lost in it again or I will die.

I saw one Arab street cleaner at dawn sitting on the ground praying. It was 5 AM, and the sun was rising over him, and the sight made me feel hopeful.

There was great suspicion toward us when we moved in, but we were quickly accepted into the community. This is an area of great and special energy, no one wants it destroyed.

I am home. This is unequivocally the Jewish Homeland, but my Arab neighbors are our cousins. That's not to say that

I have not met Arab "jerks" who do not want me here, and I have told them, in no uncertain terms, that this is *my* house, I am not leaving, and if they are unhappy with me being here or the country, *they* are free to leave (of course none do). I am lucky to have been educated and can poke holes in any false narrative.

I will never apologize for coming home, and no, I am not scared.

My love for my Arab neighbors in NO way diminishes my Zionism. In fact, it completes it.

Nancy Jacobs has been a respected commercial agent for over 30 years. She is known for bringing award winning talent to agencies and brands, including Cannes and Academy Award winners. She has put together some of the most loved animation campaign deals in the world of advertising in the past 30 years. She was in the LSS Beginners Service during the years 1990-1995.

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Beresbith: "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.

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