

BERESHITH
"IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter
for Beginners,
by Beginners

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בראשית

THE DRIPPINGS OF MY MENORAH

Sarah Rochel Hewitt

Do you clean your menorah each night after the flames have finished burning? Goodness knows I don't, and each night it gets a little trickier to light the menorah. There's old wax stuck in the hole, even after you use a random household item to try and scrape it out, and the cheap Chanukah candles break when you push them in. Or if you're using oil (in our house we have both), then the cups from the first few nights are always grimy and slippery from previous splashes. So in our house, where we light quite a few menorahs, by the time we get to the eighth night of Chanukah, we have a pile of broken candles that never made it, lumps of broken off wax drippings (many imprinted with fingerprints) and a few discarded, slimy wicks from the oil menorah. And if you have one of those candle menorahs where the *shamash*, the lighting candle, is elevated in the middle of the row, every time you try to place the *shamash* in its proper spot, you bump into the candle next to it, resulting in additional spillage!

The mess of the Chanukah candles may seem *(cont. on p. 2)*



THIS LITTLE LIGHT OF MINE, I'M GONNA LET IT SHINE

Sara Bram

As winter is setting in and Chanukah is fast approaching, many Jews will struggle over how to 'do Christmas' or, rather, how to get around Christmas. Really, it's also how to react to all the Christmas tidings and cheer as they find themselves faced with pretty lights on snow set homes, carols in the department stores, performances, parties, and gift exchanges all dedicated to a holiday with which they don't identify.

I live in a very small Jewish community. My children don't have many Jewish friends. In fact, most of our daily interactions outside our home are with non-Jews. We are constantly confronted with the question of how to keep our children and ourselves from feeling isolated when everyone else seems to be celebrating something fun and different from us. It can be very easy to get swept up in the appeal of holiday cheer, gift-giving with friends, pretty lights, eggnog - and who doesn't love eggnog? What's a *pintele yid* (a Jew with a Jewish soul) to do?

Everybody knows the story of how Judah *(cont. on p. 3)*

TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN? OR THE MIRACLE OF THE CHOCOLATE COINS

David Linn

Last night my family and I went to my mother's house for a Chanukah party. We do that every year, getting together with my brothers and their respective families. Even though there is a *minhag* (custom) to have dairy on Chanukah, at my mother's house we always have meat. (You have to listen to your mother.) Everything was going along fine. My mother was giving the grandchildren "the chocolate gelt," which no Chanukah party would be complete without, and there was a whole tumult. I was in charge of buying the gelt this year because my mother doesn't drive and she couldn't find pareve gelt close to her home. I walked over and asked what was going on. The children screamed, "These are dairy, they're dairy!" I asked myself "How did I do that?" I remembered when I had bought the gelt thinking that the packaging of the dairy and the pareve coins were strikingly similar. Usually, they put the dairy coins into the blue nylon plastic netting and the pareve ones in the red netting or the gold foil is the dairy *(cont. on p. 2)*

THE DRIPPINGS (cont. from p. 1)... like a silly issue to discuss, but just the other day I was thinking that this issue may serve as an interesting metaphor for Jewish growth. When a person first becomes excited about Judaism, it is like setting up the menorah. There is great anticipation about participating in the new mitzvot, and the first acts of Jewish observance that one does on one's own can be compared to the first night of Chanukah. The menorah is in pristine condition and the candles fit in easily (unless, of course, it wasn't cleaned after last year).

Time passes, however, and for many people who have moved toward greater Jewish observance, living a more involved Jewish life often results in the loss of some of the original sparkle of being new. It gets harder. Unexpected obstacles arise: bosses who have "emergencies" just before Shabbat or relatives who don't understand the implication of "kosher style."

More challenging than the unexpected obstacles, however, are the slimy drippings of apathy and routine. Mitzvot that were once exciting start to feel like common acts. There is a constant struggle to grasp again the beautiful inspiration that so energized those original first steps.

The Talmud records a disagreement between two of the great academies of Talmudic study: the Academy of Shammai and the Academy of Hillel. The first believed that eight lights should be lit on the first night of Chanukah, and one less on each night that follows. Hillel's students, on the other hand, said that on the first night one candle is lit, adding one each night until eight candles are lit on the last night (Talmud *Shabbat* 21b).

One explanation cited in the Talmud for their different opinions was that the Academy of Shammai was comparing the candles to the decreasing number of bulls brought on the holiday of Sukkot. The Academy of Hillel, on the other hand, was underscoring the idea that matters of sanctity should always be increased rather than decreased" (*ibid.*).

It was decided that the practice of Chanukah should be observed according to the opinion of the Academy of Hillel. Each night we increase the light until the eighth glorious night when all eight candles burn in its full glory.

Following the path of traditional Jewish life can have its challenges. But the greater the effort that we invest, the brighter the light that we shine. The mitzvah of Chanukah is intended to proclaim to the world our faith in God's constant and active role in our lives. This is what we do when we tell that boss that we cannot work late on Friday or explain that the term kosher of "kosher rye" refers to a style and not that the bread is actually kosher.

Jewish life is a spiral of cycles. There are the daily cycles of prayer, the weekly cycles of Shabbat, and the yearly cycle of holidays. Each requires preparation. If I,

as a working mother of five, don't pick away at the "wax drippings" of chaos that dominate my home every morning, then I won't have time for the daily morning prayers. If I don't prevent "slippery spots" from entering my schedule, then I have to work harder to prepare for Shabbat, and if I don't prepare in advance, then I cannot make the most of the beauty that inhabits each of the Jewish holidays.

If I were to continue my metaphor of the crowded menorah, then perhaps I would say that not only do I shine brighter the more effort I invest, but I would also connect to the *shamash*. For everything that I do, my role is now that of being a continual helper. How I treat my own menorah -- my own spiritual development -- is reflected in the lights that surround me, the *neshamot* (souls) of my children.

This year, as the lights of Chanukah increase and we each stand by our menorahs trying to remove the drippings from the night before, think not of the struggle against the wax, but rather of the incredible brilliance and rays of holiness of your beautiful Jewish soul.

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TWO SIDES... (cont. from p. 1)...and the silver foil is the pareve. But these were exactly the same except for the little writing on them saying "pareve" or "dairy." I grabbed the gelt and, sure enough, they were the pareve ones; call me the "Man who saved Chanukah."

I was thinking about what we can learn from that confusion. We see in the story of Chanukah that there were two warring cultures, the Greek culture and the Jewish culture. We usually spend our time discussing the differences between these cultures, how disparate they were, and that, thank G-d, the Jewish culture was able to win the physical war and the ideological war.

What we often overlook is that there is a lot that is very similar between the two cultures. Winston Churchill speaks of how the Jewish people and the Greek people have made the greatest contributions to Western civilization. He says that Jerusalem and Athens were the prime places from which wisdom and knowledge emanated. But we don't have to rely on Churchill for this point. The Rambam, one of the greatest Jewish philosophers, says that Aristotle, the greatest Greek philosopher, was just a step below prophecy. There is a *halacha* (Jewish law) that a *sefer Torah* (Torah scroll) can be written in one of two languages. One of them, of course, is Hebrew. The other is Greek. There are many references in the commentaries, especially the Zohar, that speak (*cont. on p. 4*)

THIS LITTLE LIGHT OF MINE... (cont. from p. 1)... the Maccabee lead a revolt against the evil Syrian-Greeks who tried to change the Jews by restricting their religious freedoms. The miracle of the oil and the rededication of the Temple was the end result of a long civil war that took place in Ancient Israel. But what was the fight really about?

The Maccabees and those who followed them struggled in a time when Greek Hellenism was the rule of the land. What was so bad about Hellenism? Hellenism focused on the physical, tangible world. Outward displays of beauty and strength were the most revered traits in Greek culture. The Greeks believed that physical prowess and human strength were the most important, defining characteristics a person could have. G-d and spirituality, which cannot be seen or touched, had no meaning for them.

After enough time under Greek occupation, the Hellenized Jews also began to believe it. They began casting off ancient Jewish beliefs and traditions. They too wanted to participate in the physical challenges most loved by the Greeks, so they sent their children to the gymnasiums for sport. As most of these games were played in the nude, so the attributes of the body could be admired, many Jews began to reverse their circumcisions through painful surgery so as not to appear 'mutilated' when they were unclothed in front of their Greek neighbors. There was no appreciation for the spiritual world, a world beyond their own senses.

The Greeks also sought to take away the unique Jewish calendar, our study of Torah and our right to circumcision - in effect separating us intellectually and physically from the bond that connects the Jewish people to G-d. When the Maccabees rose up against the Greeks, it was a holy war, literally a war for G-d and the right to practice religion in the ways G-d had commanded us.

And here we are today, still fighting the same fight. Why can't we do what everybody else is doing? Wouldn't it be a lot easier to just enjoy the prevailing customs of the season with everyone else? Why do we have to be different?

Celebrating Chanukah answers those questions and reminds us that, just as it was in the time of the Maccabees, it is up to us to stand up and claim our heritage with pride. So here are a couple of thoughts on how to make Chanukah special and how not to feel left out this holiday season.

1. It's Not About The Presents. Oftentimes we tend to compete with our Christmas-celebrating neighbors when it comes to gift-giving. They give presents, so we give presents. Who got the most? Whether it's eight nights' worth or a bunch, all on the same day, it all turns out equal, right? Chanukah is not about gift-giving. It's not about receiving physical gifts, it's about experiencing the spiritual through our senses. It's about celebrating our right to be ourselves without comparison to any other group. Talk about the story of Chanukah with your children. Put on a re-enactment. Sing

Chanukah songs. (*Maoz Tzur* is our family favorite.) Play dreidel with your kids or Texas Hold 'Em Dreidel with your friends. Get together with friends for latkes, or have a wine and cheese party, since these are also traditional Chanukah foods. Make the experience of Chanukah something to remember.

2. Check Your Calendar. The Greeks sought to take away the Jewish calendar and all of our holidays and days of remembrance. Check your Jewish calendar not just during Chanukah but for the rest of the year too. Don't wait for your synagogue's emails to remind you when it's Tu B'Shevat, Simchat Torah or Purim. In this way, we honor the rest of the holidays, affirming that they are as much beloved as Chanukah. Our calendar is rich with holidays and traditions. Fill your spiritual cup by celebrating both the major and minor holidays. If you don't know how to observe a certain holiday or day of remembrance, *Ask*. Ask a Rabbi, ask your friends, or Google it. Be informed. Get a Hebrew calendar app so these special days don't sneak up on you or pass you by. Christmas is a major holiday for the Christians. Chanukah is a minor holiday dating fairly late in our history and is not even mentioned in the Torah. When we celebrate our own holidays to their fullest throughout the year, the yearning to participate in someone else's big holiday diminishes.

3. Respect Other People's Differences. When we pass by the homes in our neighborhood all lit up with pretty lights, my children oooh! and aaahh! Should I begrudge them the twinkling lights? We teach our kids to be respectful of our neighbors and the ways that they celebrate the season. "That's how they celebrate. That's good for them. And here's what we do." We remind our kids how we hang lights in our Sukkah, and how people stop to look at our twinkling chanukiah that is proudly displayed in our window for all to see. Remembering to respect others' differences reminds us that we don't need to be like them to be important or feel validated.

Let's enjoy Chanukah to the fullest this year. Make it a meaningful holiday among the many other holidays that Judaism offers throughout the year. Show your Jewish pride, and let's make this holiday a time to be your truest, Jewish self.

Sara Bram is the proud wife of a US Air Force Chaplain. Her family is currently stationed in Anchorage, Alaska, where she homeschools her 5 children and is currently training for her first 5K ice run.





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TWO SIDES... (cont. from p. 2)...in praiseworthy terms of the Greek culture, how there is a certain level of respect that must be given to it, and how the “ancient Greeks” had a certain level of “*emunah*” (faith) that should not be ridiculed. I was thinking how this is a very interesting thing. I think we find in our struggles, in our daily lives, that most of us are not running after something that is obviously “not Jewish.” If there is any type of a question or any area that we personally or communally fall into [that we shouldn’t], it’s because it is something that “looks” Jewish, it is something that sounds good, it sounds right. We’re not running out to do something that we know is completely forbidden. What we can learn from that, just like the story of the chocolate coins, is that you’ve really got to look closely at whatever it is that you are interested in incorporating into your life. You’ve got to look to see if it’s pareve, see if it’s dairy, see if it’s kosher. Even if things are packaged exactly the same way, you’ve got to look deeper than the surface.

One of the understandings of Chanukah is that we bring light into our homes, into our lives. Light is exactly

what we need in order to distinguish between two things that are apparently the same.

The Gemara (*Brachot* 53b) states that you cannot make the *bracha* (blessing) on the Havdallah candle until you have benefited from its light. The Gemara defines “benefit” as being close enough to the light to distinguish between two coins. That is one of the reasons that some people look at the tips of their fingers in the light of the Havdallah candle (since the difference between the nail and the skin can be determined by the same amount of light that you need to distinguish between two coins). We need to shine the light of our intellect and the light of the Torah into our lives so that we can properly discern what is Jewish and what is “all Greek to me.”

A *Lichtiger* (Illuminated)
 Chanukah to everyone.

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