

בראשית

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BERESHITH: "In the Beginning"

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HOW TO OBSERVE CHRISTMAS

by Shlomo Dov Gewirtz



Going to a Christmas party on isn't so terrible these days unless, of course, somebody pulls out a gun and tells you to genuflect or else. Jewish law says, sorry, say "Sh'ma Yisrael" and hope the gun isn't loaded. But since that scenario is highly unlikely in the world of corporate America where religion is taken less seriously than who makes the coffee in the morning, religious Jews can take a Perrier in one hand and a few grapes in the other and assume a posture of comfort and ease as the sounds of "Deck the Hall" fill the air with uninhibited good cheer.

But this is not to say there isn't any tension whatsoever. After all, some folks will offer you a "Merry Christmas" greeting, expecting, of course, you'll reciprocate with "Merry Christmas to you!" Others may wish you a Happy Chanukah, unaware, perhaps, that candles were lit a week earlier. Be prepared for anything, however, especially the gal with her second or third margarita in hand, wanting to know, "Just what do Jews do on Christmas Eve?"

The first time I heard the question, I answered, "well, we sit around the fireplace, read James Baldwin and listen to the Mamas and the Papas." "Really?!!" the woman shouted. I continued, "I hope you understand I'm speaking only of Orthodox Jews--I know nothing about
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"REFLECTIONS" ON CHANUKAH

by Rabbi Yale Butler

The Talmud (Shabbat 21b), mindfull that Chanukah is not mentioned in the Bible, relates that "our Rabbis taught: on the 25th of Kislev...when the idol worshippers (Greco-Syrians) entered the sanctuary, they defiled all the oils there (for use in the Temple candleabrum or Menorah). And when the House of the Hashmoneans vanquished them, they searched and could not find but one cruse of oil bearing the seal of the High Priest, (without which the oil would be considered unfit), and (they saw) that there was not enough to light for one day. A miracle occurred and they were (able) to light from it for eight days."

Many commentators, including the famed Bet Yosef, (who compiled the *Shulchan Aruch*, the Code of Jewish
(cont. p.3)

TAKING A TORAH BREAK

by John B. Kosecoff

This year, a few weeks before Rosh Hashana, I hired a tutor and took a week off from work to study Torah. I sensed it was about time for some remedial education.

Six years had past since I joined the Beginner's Service, and nearly two years since my first aliyah with the Intermediate Service. My wife, Marilyn, and I joined Lincoln Square as members early in 1987, about the time our son, David Benjamin, was born. Despite our making many acquaintances and several dear friends while learning more about traditional Judaism, what we learned had hardly become integrated into our daily lives.

For me, several signs of being a faltering Baal Teshuva were particularly bothersome. We most often
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ignored Shabbat, disregarding it for the sake of network or VCR television, shopping, or packing in extra hours at the office. My commitment to building a career had long ago frustrated any attempts I'd made to take Torah evening classes or to attend weekday services. Not surprisingly, when I occasionally got to shul, most often my Hebrew was faltering, the order of the service was confounding, and I was unprepared to participate in discussing the weekly Torah portion. I feared, too, that some of my basic religious notions (circa Reform religious school, youth movement, camps and Venice-to-Berkeley happenings) were far afield of traditional thinking, and might never have the chance to be aired.

Marilyn arranges props and wardrobes for commercials and print ads, and last September a production team asked her to go on location in Hartford for a week. She was nearly panicked about whether to accept this first separation from baby David. But knowing that I was long overdue for a vacation, and that David's sitters' stamina and devotion are beyond measure, she elected to go. The idea of my taking the week to heal physical and emotional exhaustion was understandable; taking the time for Torah was not in the scope of what she might consider reasonable. But I jumped at the chance.

The next morning I arranged to meet with Rabbi Brander for help in structuring a week-long "Shabbaton". He suggested a basic curriculum and texts covering Hebrew, Torah, philosophy, daily prayer and the Rosh Hashana service. Most important, Rabbi Brander put me in contact with his friend Adam Furziger, a rabbinic student, on leave from his work in Jerusalem. Finding a good teacher is like discovering a treasure.

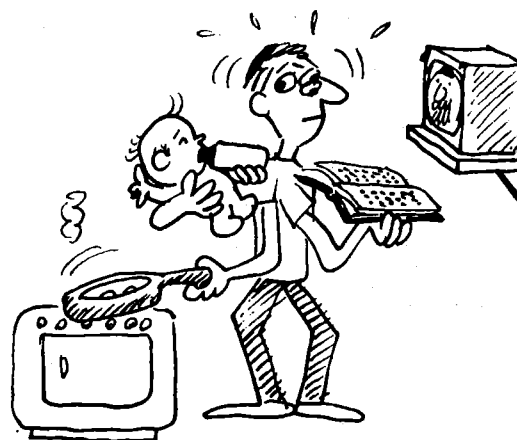
In the course of our getting acquainted, Adam explained aspects of his yeshiva upbringing I couldn't begin to ask about. Also he helped me better appreciate my own social-action-oriented upbringing steeped in Nevi'im, the Prophets. We set a schedule of meetings mid-morning each day for three or four hours. I was able to use the balance of my days and evenings reading, note-taking and enjoying late summer outings with my son. Adam also politely, but pointedly, asked if I was trying on the garb of Modern Orthodoxy just to be into the fashion of these times. We talked.

Getting onto our work, we made my grandfather's tefillin left handed, practiced daily brachot, and discussed the meaning of what we read in the Metsudah Machzor. I gained confidence in my Hebrew and took a liking to our lunches, eaten with less haste and new meaning.

Word-by-word, we peeled back the layers of interpreting the trial of the Akeidah. As a new father and a near-father, we empathized with the faith allowing the unconditional sacrifice of Abraham's only loved son. As Baal Teshuva and tutor, we discussed the choice and

fate symbolized by Azzazel. And as individuals profoundly committed to Am Yisrael, we were moved by the first generational transfer of the covenant.

We verbally arm-wrestled over several of my less conventional notions, such as my belief that Hashem and Torah have more in common with the tautologies of scientific laws concerning how the universe works than they deal with obedience to rules of conduct. We bantered over my belief that "death" referred to in the Torah is a relative concept; less a part of fire and brimstone, and more of Abe Maslow's hierarchy of developmental needs. We also drew liberally from Maimonides, Rabbi Soloveitchik, Rabbi Kook, Victor Frankel, Martin Buber and others without citation. Toward the end, we talked about wanting to belong to the traditional community, the implications of being a Baal Teshuva, and the separation ensured by not making my home kosher. On Friday, Adam also tested my Reform knee-jerk attitudes about premarital sex, feminism, abortion, homosexuality, religious pre-school for my child and the West Bank. We talked about the futures we want for our children and particulars about how I might follow up on our tutorial.



A half dozen or more weeks have past since we exchanged those thoughts and there's no doubt that my studies have slackened to, perhaps, a more sustainable pace. I wonder sometimes if without some good teacher intervening, I'm going to stumble around. But some signs look positive. Marilyn's asked David's sitter to pick up challah on Fridays. Also without my asking, Marilyn lights Shabbat candles and recites the *b'rachot*. She patiently listens to me read *Ayshit Chayil* and recognizes that its words are heartfelt. Together, we hope that David will receive the blessings of Ephraim and Manasseh and that, over time, he will have the chance to find his place in shul. Also since September, even our non-practicing parents on each coast have surprised us during our visits with them by encouraging us to recite *b'rachot* at our meals together. Gradually, we seem to be moving forward, step-by-step.

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Conservative or Reform." As her eyes widened, the small group of three or four around us saw me raise my eyebrows and laughed. It was time to end the charade. "He's only kidding," the martini man said to the margharita lady. "Jews don't do anything special on Christmas; it's not their holiday."

The next day, a friend in shul told me that when he went to yeshiva, he spent Christmas Eve tearing up toilet paper. For a moment I thought he was pulling on me what I pulled on the margharita lady. I was getting a taste of my own medicine. But he went on to explain. "It's the tradition of *Nittel*. Jews purposely avoided going to the *Bes Midrash* to study that night so as not to provoke rowdy bands of drunken gentiles seeking to harm us. If we couldn't *study*, then, the rabbis said we should at least use the time for something else that's Jewishly productive. Hence, the tearing of toilet paper. Usually tearing the toilet paper is the last thing you do a few minutes before Shabbat, since tearing on Shabbat is prohibited according to Jewish law. But if we had a free night to kill, why not do it all in advance, up to 52 weeks ahead??"



And so, that Christmas Eve, I can't tell you that I did as my friend does, but I began to think about how Jews *should*, in fact, observe Christmas. Should we sit around the table discussing the stories of how Jews throughout history feared for their lives that night? Should we review the comments of the *Shulkhan Aruch* (Code of Jewish Law) on the tearing of paper on Shabbat and begin to look at his viewpoints seriously? Or should we think about Shabbat in the perspective of the positive commandments and make an extra effort to offer Sabbath hospitality to a Jew who was just offered invitations to four Christmas parties in one night?

Maybe, it's time that we diaspora-lovers look Christmas in the eye and take it with the seriousness it deserves. No more hiding out in the movies or the sold-out Broadway show you can finally get into, thank G-d. Maybe it's just bundling up warm and taking a walk by the ocean so you can say, for the first time

"Blessed are you, O Lord....who makes the great sea. "Or going to the local grocery store just to pick up a pear and smell it without charge, just so you can say "....who implants the fragrance in fruit". All of this, I would suggest, is really a way not of observing Christmas, as it is for preparing us for December 26, when after all the Christmas hoopla, America gets down to the serious business of coasting into New Year's Eve and assimilating all of us into its very appealing secular society.

On the other hand, if all this religion talk gets you uneasy, or the idea of performing, say, one brand-new mitzvah gives you an anxiety pain, forget about it, and this Christmas pour yourself a *L'chayim* and toast your new found sense of Judaism, convinced you're immune from Christmas and everything else going on around you.

Look how far we've come. The way it's going, next year's party will even have mock shrimp cocktails for us religious Jews. I can't wait 'til the margharita lady comes up to me and says, "I thought Jews can't eat shrimp." I'm going to tell her, "only on Christmas!"

Shlomo Dov Gewirtz is a free lance writer and a graduate of Lincoln Square Synagogue's Beginners Service.

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Law) ask: Why do we celebrate the holiday for eight days? The miracle was only for seven days since there already was enough oil for one night.

Many answers are given. One of the most perceptive is given by the Turai Zahav, one of the classical commentaries on the *Shulchan Aruch*. He notes that there was also a miracle on the first night, because although there was only enough oil for one night, it did not all burn. Miraculously, enough remained for the subsequent seven days. Because as the days passed the miracle became more spectacular, we Jews have the custom of adding a light each night until all eight are burning. In essence, the miracle on the eighth day was greater than that on the seventh and so on. Therefore, Jews throughout the world follow the practice set down by the House of Hillel in the Talmud of adding one candle each day of Chanukah rather than the view of the House of Shamai who suggested that we begin with eight candles and diminish by one each day.

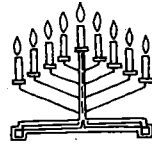
The analogy to life is clear. From Chanukah we learn that we must always see the glass (in this case the cruse of oil) as half full rather than half empty.

Rabbi Yale Butler is the editor of the Bnai Brith Messenger in Los Angeles, CA, and former leader of the Beginners Service at Beth Jacob Congregation, Beverly Hills.

THE HANDS OF CHANUKAH
("Chanukah": "A Dedication")

by Carole S. Handwerker

Through my child-eyes
I'd watch
As my father would
Miraculously
Twirl his oh-so-masculine
Fingers
Above--and through!--
The glowing, dainty,
Happy flames
of the candles
of Chanukah.



But our hearts
And our hopes--
Both in the magic of miracles
And in the magic of a father's hopes
to fill his children with wonder--

Told us
That these metallic discs
Warmly sprung
Were of the flames
and the candles
of Chanukah.



Miraculous--
(The Maccabean feat!)
But, miraculous!
For my child-amazement
At how my father
Would somehow extract
Shiny glowing coins
That seemed to be borne
from the depths of the candles
and out through the very flames themselves.

We, (my sister, brother, and I),
Would so very carefully inspect
The candles
The flames
My father's fingers...
But no where were there signs
Of these coins-to-be.
Our minds
(intelligent little beings that we were)
Told us
That, indeed, this was just a trick.
(The hands are quicker than the eyes?)

Today,
When I see a menorah
With candles all burning brightly,
I achingly see melting fingers
stretching up futilely
for
my father's fingers
To relieve them
From the gifts within.
But then,
As a light-switch is flipped on
From my core,
I do see
From the child-heart
Within that of my adult,
The flames
Caressing and warming
My father's fingers.

November 13, 1988

בראשית Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Beryl Levenson of the National Jewish Outreach Program, Inc. 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 programs of the NJOP, please write or call: 475 Fifth Avenue, Suite 1810, New York, NY 10017, (212) 725-1690.

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Cartoons by Stu Hample



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