

בראשית

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BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

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CHANUKAH - A TIME FOR CELEBRATION AND REFLECTION

by Rabbi Brian Thau

Every one knows something about Chanukah, either the miracle with the oil or the miracle of the war in which the Maccabees were victorious. However, there was another miracle that took place which is often overlooked. At the time of the Maccabees, there were many Jews who had abandoned their heritage for what seemed to them a much richer culture, that of the Greeks. Jews were embarrassed to be known as Jews, even to the point where certain men had special surgery to hide their circumcision. Jewish pride had disappeared, and Jewish identity was following rapidly.

Even when the Maccabees began their heroic battle to stop the religious persecution of the Jews by the Greeks, many of their fellow Jews did not help them or support them. It was only later, well into the war, that the disinterested and unaffiliated Jews decided that a culture which persecutes others because of religious beliefs cannot be such an advanced culture after all. Only then did they decide to help

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THE INEXTINGUISHABLE LIGHT

by Kari Bookbinder

As long as I can remember, even before I began unwrapping its unique significance among Jewish celebrations, I have felt a magical affinity to Chanukah. I don't know what touched me so deeply about those eight bright days of winter — whether it was the colorful array of candles, the golden dancing flames, or the familiar chorus of family blessings ushering in each new day. Surely, G-d's close presence always pervaded our home, in the love between my parents and their three girls. But, at this particular time of family warmth, He was especially palpable.

In choosing my favorite holidays, I can unequivocally identify Chanukah and Yom Kippur as the two that most moved me. Perhaps this choice stems from the fact that when I grew up my family's yearly holiday observance led directly from

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NINE MONTHS AND A NEW LIFE!

by Hilary Alpert

For many non-observant Jews, the thought of entering a synagogue where everyone knows what they're doing, is terribly intimidating. Especially if you don't read Hebrew very well, or not at all, and you don't understand what's being said. When finally you build the courage to enter, you are confronted by a sea of black yarmulkes and beards. Combined with the *shukling* and emotion, it's enough to make most unaffiliated Jews run in the opposite direction, never to return!

That's where the Beginners Service comes in. It's at the Beginners Service that a Jew, even from the most limited background, can learn the fundamentals of prayer in a comfortable, non-threatening and uninhibiting environment.

I began attending Rabbi Aron Dov Friedman Beginner's Service at the Jewish Learning Exchange in Los Angeles when

(cont. p. 2)

NINE MONTHS . . . (con't. from p.1)

it was just founded in December of 1989. I had recently made a commitment to keep Shabbat and learn more about Judaism, and this was my first step. I was truly a beginner, with no previous experience in Orthodoxy and traditional Judaism. I came to learn and understand, and this setting allowed me to accomplish both objectives effectively and painlessly.

The Beginners Service began with an overview of the prayer structure, and an open invitation to all to ask questions. No question was considered insignificant. Each week we learned new prayers, while reviewing others, so that there was enough reinforcement and change for both regulars and newcomers. Sometimes we would dwell on the same prayer for weeks, but the prayers were often so deep that sometimes it took many weeks to clarify their meanings. Surprisingly, the question that wasn't asked until almost ten months had gone by was, "Why the mechitza?" Since both men and women were present, everyone benefited from the discussion.



These questions often sparked lively discussions, and led to even more questions. For some, this was their only learning all week, and they were eager to take advantage of this unique opportunity.

As I became more comfortable with the Shabbat service, and with the davening itself, I had questions of a more personal nature. Rabbi Friedman was always available whenever I needed him, and answered my questions with patience and kindness. He welcomed me into his home, so

that I could experience the warmth, love and satisfaction which is part of the Torah lifestyle. And finally, when the time was right, he encouraged me to go to Israel for more concentrated learning.

Nine months may not be long when you compare it to 120 years, but during those months, my life was changed forever. The Beginner's Service played a fundamental role in my Jewish growth. It's an incredible concept whose impact and successes are far reaching.

Hilary Alpert is a graduate of the Beginners Service at the Jewish Learning Exchange in Los Angeles, California.



A TIME FOR CELEBRATION . . . (cont. from p.1)

their outnumbered Jewish brothers and sisters. In reality, they returned to their Jewish families only after realizing that the only ones that truly care about the Jewish people are the Jewish people themselves.

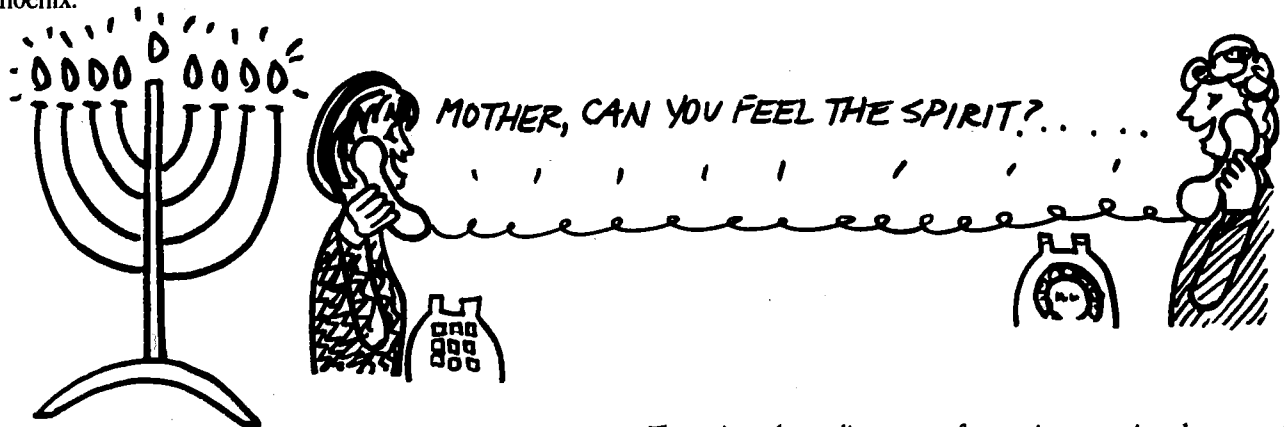
This is a lesson that we have had to learn ourselves, in our own days, and at too great a cost. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, and throughout the entire history of the state of Israel, we have been reminded time and again that the Jewish people often stand alone. But even if we stand alone, as long as we stand together as one people, we can successfully confront even the most powerful enemy. Part of this standing together is the return to Judaism on the part of so many of our people. Beginners Services, Hebrew Reading Crash Courses, and TURN FRIDAY NIGHT INTO SHABBOS — all have marked the return of Jews to their heritage, to a feeling of pride in their identities as Jews. Like the miracle of Chanukah in days of old, not everyone is able to see the miracle. But a miracle it certainly is. We celebrate Chanukah today for the miracle of the Maccabees then, and for the miracle of the Baalei Teshuva now. Chanukah Sameach!

Rabbi Brian Thau is Rabbi for Outreach and Adult Education at Congregation Ohav Zedek in New York and leads its Beginners Service.

THE INEXTINGUISHABLE LIGHT (cont. from p.1.)

the Day of Atonement to the Festival of Lights, without the Sukkot season in between. Somehow, the serious intensity of Yom Kippur was joyously illuminated for me in Chanukah.

Later in life, wherever I traveled, whatever religious differences separated me from my family, when we lifted our voices in song together during Chanukah, bridges were built and distances filled. It is difficult to express in words, the overwhelming moment of spiritual focus and freedom I still feel, as I light my candles in New York and sing the blessings with my mom, lighting her candles 1000 miles away in Phoenix.



As I have proceeded on my journey to seek greater closeness with Hashem through learning and striving to understand His highest hopes for me in this world, I have unwrapped, among many other gifts, the essence of my love for Chanukah, beyond the intangible intuition that lured me, magnetically, year after year, to the menorah candle-lighting and its melodious blessings. I am certain that many newcomers to Torah observance can identify with the often all-encompassing passion to connect with the Creator, especially after being severed from the "Source" for many years of life. We find ourselves vulnerable at times, yet greatly empowered in our new-found reliance upon G-d, for security, acceptance, and direction. For many of us, the process of growing to greater human holiness is a mighty battle of spiritual bravery, as we confront external challenges to our fragile faith, and grow ever stronger in the fight. What sustains our front-line fervor? It is the inner attitude personified by the festival of Chanukah -- the courage to put our trust in G-d and conquer the threats to our higher selves.

The power of Israel's faith in G-d's singular omnipotence was reflected in the war cry of Mattathias' son, Judah, who carried the banner, "MaKKaBEe": "Mi KamoKha Ba'elim Hashem" - "Who is like you among powers, O G-d" (Exodus 15:11), the words of faith uttered at the Red Sea.

And as the family of Kohanim, Mattathias and his sons, defeated the Syrian Greeks' attempt to make the Jews forget the Torah and forsake G-d, so too, from our own spiritual struggles, we cry: "G-d, help us, teach us, show us how to access and hold on to our connection with you".

Chanukah highlights not only the miracle of physical victory, but primarily celebrates the spiritual triumph of the Jewish people rekindling the Temple's Menorah lights and rededicating themselves to the pure worship of G-d.

The miraculous discovery of one tiny, untainted cruse of oil beneath the Temple's defilement, thus represents the unyielding faith in G-d and in the G-dliness within ourselves. For we have an inextinguishable point of inner purity that is ever-attached to G-d, despite the darkness under which it is buried. Scaling spiritual heights depends greatly upon our ability to recognize the inner light we possess, the capacity to imitate our Creator, and to illuminate it whenever our mortal lights dim.

Finally, we see the clear connection between Chanukah and Yom Kippur. In the joyful awe of Yom Kippur's judgement, we experience G-d's personal love and care, knowing that, no matter where we have strayed, He still calls: "You are never too far away, my child, to reach out and grab my hand. You are always within reach."

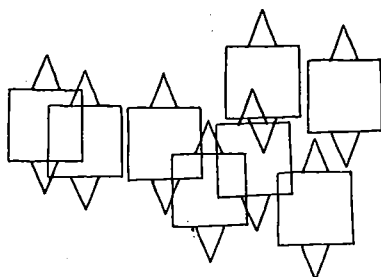
This is the special spirit of Chanukah -- a holiday of hope for the renewal of our human relationships and for intimate closeness with our Creator, a time of expressing the point of purity within, and a festival of faith.

Chanukah affirms that if we call on our inner courage to follow the A-lmighty's command, we will always reign triumphant.

Kari Bookbinder, originally from Arizona, coordinated the November TURN FRIDAY NIGHT INTO SHABBOS at Congregation Ohab Zedek in New York, and intends to continue her outreach activities in Milwaukee Wisconsin.

Friday Night

by Marjie Ordene



Three women
Two boys
Seated round the Shabbos table
Candles lit
We sing "Shalom Aleichem"
Jed and me
Then I chant kiddush
While Jed does the English
We all wash hands
And pounce on the challah
To speak.



Marjie Ordene, M.D., is a holistic family physician and attends Beginners Services at Lincoln Square Synagogue, New York.

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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: 485 Fifth Avenue, Suite 212, New York, NY 10017, (212) 986-7450.

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DATED MATTER

EMERGING AS A NEW ME

by Valerie Tishman Diker

As a child I learned Catholicism from Tessie the maid, and Mademoiselle took me to Mass. During the second world war, our family's concern was about the German occupation of France. The Holocaust was not discussed. I gave up candy for Lent and bemoaned my unsmudged forehead on Ash Wednesday. My Easter basket overflowed. Each Christmas, my parents brought the biggest tree on the block. I never heard of Chanukah.

When I was seven, my brother became a Bar Mitzvah in a Reform ceremony. The memories linger. . . his arguments with my mother, her prodding him to prepare, his lack of interest, hundreds of thank-you notes. The day itself labored on. Judaism was not discussed again.

When I was 28, my father died. The funeral was held in a Reform temple because it was the only place large enough to hold the 2000 people who came. Kaddish was not recited. It was the second and last time I ever entered a temple with my mother.

I didn't think much about being Jewish again until my eldest son turned thirteen. I had no wish to repeat the sham of my brother's experience; however, my husband persisted and I agreed. On the day my son became a Bar Mitzvah, a tiny flame ignited in me.

August of that same year, I accompanied my husband to Israel. It was a time of political upheaval. Invited by the Mayor of Jerusalem, we stayed at the King David Hotel while Henry Kissinger negotiated the Sinai. It was a week that changed my life; I came home concerned, and proud to be a Jew.

I began traveling to Israel twice yearly to fulfill philanthropic and social obligations; the Israel I knew was secular. Inevitably, however, I began meeting survivors of the Holocaust who had remained observant. I was fascinated. Why? How? What was it that kept them faithful? I needed answers that they were unprepared to verbalize. I began to seek more specific Jewish experiences. I saw the hill where Saul fell, mortally wounded. I stood by the brook where David took his stone and slew Goliath. I attended services.

A wise woman in Jerusalem spoke to me one

day of prayer. We did a visualization in which I saw myself praying. Alone in a desert cave, I "spoke" with G-d and gained a new awareness. This "waking dream" remained with me for months. When I returned to America, I felt driven to discover more about the powerful world of prayer, to learn the active faith which had sustained the Jewish people over 4,000 years. I studied privately and in class, and I attended different synagogues. I struggled for hours with the Hebrew liturgy until one Rosh Hashanah a fellow congregant took pity on me. In one afternoon, he taught me the Hebrew alphabet. Soon I "broke the code" and slowly I began to read. I hired a Hebrew teacher, and learned the sweet side of

Torah from Hasidic Rabbis. Within weeks I realized that the religion I sought was a way of life, not an intellectual exercise; I knew I must reshape my lifestyle around Judaism. This came as a surprise to me and as more than a surprise to my family.

Friday night became Shabbat, a night of family observance. Saturday, Shabbat continued, an oasis of prayer and rest. One day blue and red tape appeared all over our pristine, white kitchen to distinguish "meat" from "dairy". Menus changed; blessings accompanied meals and snacks; morning prayers began each day.

Ritual laws informed my life. I was elated. My family was caught off guard.

From these acts came enhanced commitment. Each week was a new unfolding of knowledge and treasured understandings. Every day brought a new way of being, of dealing with issues thoughtfully and intentionally. I gained a different perspective in which I was no longer the center of my world. Rather, I was a crucial part of a larger, G-d centered, universe, a world with purpose beyond human ambition; a world ordered by faith, in which people could be open, honest and responsive. Fragments of feelings, murmurs of the heart threw my inner life into kaleidoscopic patterns. I was dazzled by the colors, touched by emerging truths.

My search for spiritual intimacy continued; but I was unprepared for the intensity of the moment when I first felt G-d's presence.

(cont.)



