

בראשית

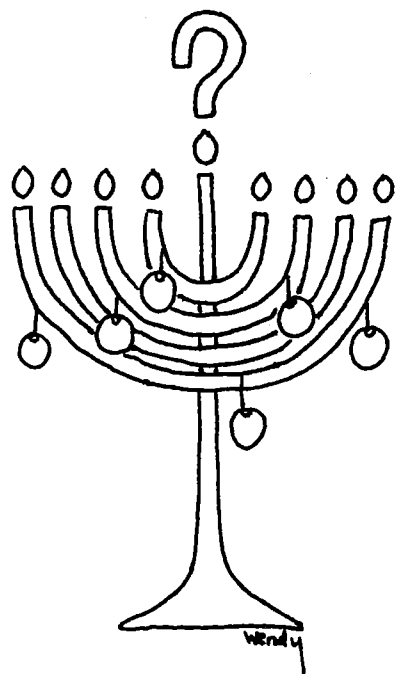
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BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

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LIVING IN CONFLICT WITH SEASON'S GREETINGS

by Rabbi Mark Nenner



CHANUKAH — THE CANDLE WITHIN

by Ted Sandler

My return to the East coast after a 22 year absence, marked a return to the faith and spirituality I had left behind. As a "child of the 60's" (am I really that old?), I was drawn to the adventure and allure of life anywhere but New York. I migrated to Colorado and began an odyssey which took me from Aspen to Los Angeles, on to Chicago, then to San Francisco, and finally my return to New York last year. My "moment" occurred high atop a hill in San Francisco almost two years ago.

After years of adventure on the road of secular success, I retired at 39 and concentrated on socializing, surfing, skiing, and skating. Two years later I was broke, alone and depressed. I began again, got a job, developed friends and with hindsight, realized the emptiness of the goals I had won and lost. But, what else was there? I was frustrated, angry and lost. How could I let this happen? I held on precariously to a few of the vestiges of my former life while I struggled to pay my staggering debts. For a brief time, my fancy car and big house allowed me to

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"Tis the season to be jolly." Baruch ata...Shehecheyanu V'kiyemanu V'higi'anu Lazman Hazeh (Blessed are you...who has sustained and delivered us to this time). Christmas trees, Chanukah menorahs, ham and turkey, blintzes and latkes. Shopping sprees galore. No two holidays could be more alike, yet no two could be so different.

It is confusing, to say the least, when a Jew enters the December season. Celebrations abound, eagerly seeking our participation. But what is confusing to some Jews, is often a desperate conflict for others, as they confront the issue of their true identity. Chanukah bush? Tree and a menorah? Presents for both? How does a Jew differentiate between the two festivals, when on the surface they appear so similar.

Furthermore, why is it that Chanukah is such a public festival? At no other time in the Jewish calendar do we publicly advertise our rituals as we do on Chanukah. There is no ritual to leave matzah at the front door, or the lulav in the mailbox. Why do we light the menorah in the window, at, ironically, the same time the world celebrates its holiday with its own symbols? To understand these questions, perhaps an insight into the very nature of Chanukah is in order.

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FINDING MY ROOTS

by Bob Morgens

My uncle, Frank Morgens, once told us that he and I were descendants of a Chassidic Rebbe. It didn't make an impression on me at the time because genealogy hadn't been an issue which piqued my curiosity; but my wife, Amy, was interested, and shortly thereafter she decided to call my uncle to find out more about that Rebbe.

While she was speaking to my uncle, she became quite excited and said, "Oh my G-d!" She repeated the phrase over and over, and after the conversation ended she told me the story.

I was a direct patrilineal descendant of the Kotzker Rebbe, whom we had come across in our reading a number of times. His name was Menachem Mendl Morgensztern (my father and uncle were born with the same surname but shortened it when they came to the United States), and although not born into a Chassidic family, he rebelled, became a Chassid and then a Rebbe and settled in the town of Kotzk, Poland.

The Kotzker Rebbe was a dynamic personality who,

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The two Rabbinically mandated festivals, Chanukah and Purim, while similar in style, are very different in nature. On Purim when faced with Haman's plan of annihilation, the Jewish people fasted for three days. They cried out to the heavens, and pleaded for their lives. But they did not fight. Faced with physical extinction, the Jewish people should have formed a militia. While it is true that they were few, they could have at least shown some physical resistance. Why did the Jewish people simply fast and pray, and not try in some small way to defend themselves?

Chanukah poses the opposite question. During the period of Chanukah, the Jews were never threatened physically. The Greeks didn't mind that Jews survived, so long as their beliefs didn't challenge Greek culture. Why then, when their spiritual backs were against the wall, did they begin to fight. Where were the rallies and calls for public prayer? Why is it, that when faced with physical annihilation they repented and fasted, but in spiritual crisis they went to war. What accounts for these opposite reactions?

Our Rabbis resolve this conflict by underscoring the unique relationship G-d has with the Jewish people. As partners - both G-d and Israel are responsible for maintaining the universe, but each has a unique and separate responsibility. Israel's task is to safeguard G-d's Torah, the precious gift we received at Sinai. G-d, in turn, seeing our dedication, commits Himself to maintaining our physical existence.

When a nation threatens us physically, we appeal to G-d to deliver us and live up to His professed responsibility, by going to great lengths to uphold our end of the bargain. We turn to the Almighty in prayer and fasting -- vowing to strengthen His Torah -- and we pray that He will be there for us. The Purim battle was waged in the synagogues and study halls, as Klal Yisrael (the Jewish People) redoubled its efforts

for G-d in the hope of gaining salvation.

Chanukah, in contrast, was an attack on G-d's Torah, which is our responsibility. The Jewish people needed to do everything in their power to defend this precious gift. By waging war for G-d's Torah, Israel once again demonstrated its never ending commitment to the Almighty, and, as a result, was victorious despite the overwhelming odds against it. Chanukah is the celebration of our never ending commitment to defend G-d's Torah. It is a festival, which, unlike Purim, has little mandated physical celebration. Rather, it is set aside for Hallel (praise of G-d) and song, a chance to rejoice in our spirituality.

It is for this reason, I believe, that Chanukah falls at a time that is most appropriate for its message. Chanukah symbolizes spiritual survival. Whether the threat is as overt as the one posed by the Greeks, or is veiled behind the silent danger of American-style assimilation, it is up to us to react. We live in an age of modern Hellenism, a time when it is not always easy to be a Jew, as we are surrounded by a very attractive and seductive culture. The Christmas season serves as a microcosm of how difficult Jewish observance is in a gentile society. Christmas trees and office parties are issues we, as Jews struggling to maintain our identity, need to confront. It is precisely at the moment of intense celebration throughout the Christian world that we place our menorahs in the window for all to see. The light of the candles burning in the darkness serves to remind us of our holy mission. Yes, we are in exile. True, we may be unpopular. But the flame of Torah continues to burn in the windows of our homes and hearts. May G-d give us the strength to continue our never ending quest to carry out His word.

Rabbi Mark Nenner is the Educational Director of the Holliswood Jewish Center in Queens, NY, where he leads the Beginners Service.

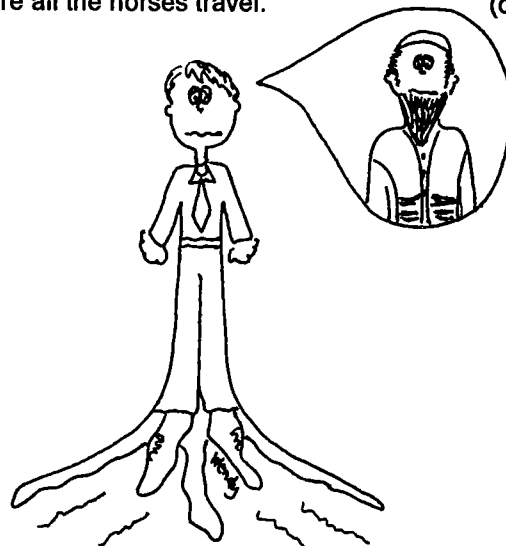
Finding my roots (cont. from p. 1)

at his peak in the early 19th century, had hundreds of thousands of followers. His reputation was legendary. The Rebbe's son and grandson were also Rabbis but were deemed not quite worthy of being Rebbes, so the Kotzkers merged with the Chassidim from the nearby town of Ger.

The Morgensztern family remained Gerer Chassidim for generations, including my grandfather, who lived in the city of Lodz. He only traveled to Ger once a year but, as a "Kotzker einikl" (grandson) was given the honor of reading the Torah on Shabbos. The Chassidic tradition ended, however, with my father, who was not religious, and did not even tell his children about their lineage.

Hearing about my distinguished Chassidic ancestry aroused my curiosity, and I started to read about the Kotzker. I was amazed at what I found. Dr. Abraham Twerski, Elie Wiesel and Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel, among others, had written about the Kotzker. The Kotzker's most salient feature was his obsession with the truth; he would not tolerate people deceiving themselves, or others. The pursuit of truth was his

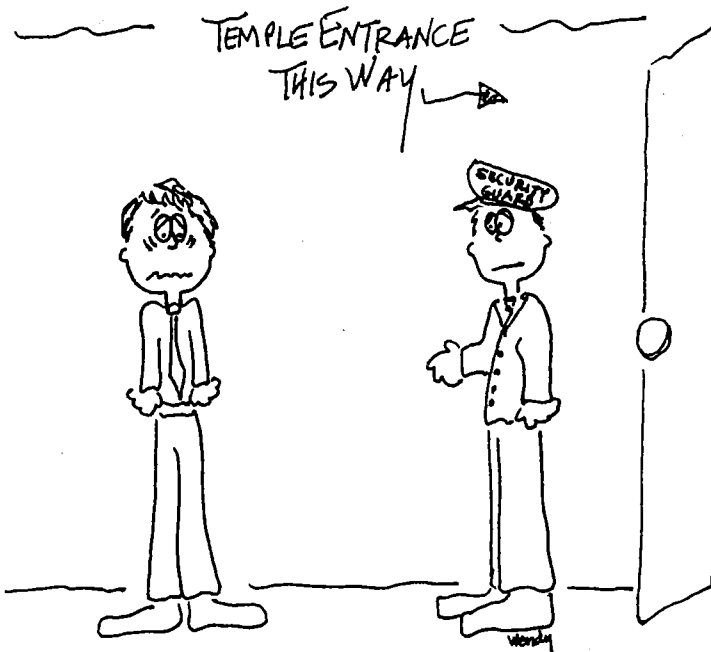
main goal in life. The Kotzker's philosophy was that "deviating from truth constitutes falsehood, and a little lie is no less false than a big lie. Hence truth must always be an extreme; There can be no median between truth and falsehood." A well known quote of the Rebbe was "the middle of the road is where all the horses travel." (cont. on p. 4)



Chanukah — The Candle Within (cont. from p. 1)

delude myself into thinking I could make it all back, and that was all that mattered. Then, I lost my job, an earthquake damaged my house and my car broke down.

Rosh Hashanah came early that year, and for the first time in over twenty years I was drawn to temple on my own. Most years I had spent the High Holidays in a reflective mood, paying my respects in my own way: taking off from work, going to the beach, doing something different. I just didn't have the desire or motivation to attend services among strangers, chanting prayers I never understood in the first place.



"I'll let you in for a minute, but don't you dare let me catch you praying!"

This year was different. I walked down the hill to a Temple just a couple of miles from my house, and as I climbed the steps I was greeted with a request for tickets, which of course I didn't have. "Sorry, we can't accommodate you" the young man said, as he shut the door. Despite my plea and promise to pay after the holiday, he wouldn't let me in. As I walked back up the hill tears began to stream uncontrollably down my face, "Happy New Year" I thought, as I found my way to a bench in the park atop the hill. I tried to regain my composure. I was angry, rejected and depressed; the tears just would not stop.

My thoughts flashed back to the times I had spent as a child holding the hand of my Uncle Nate as we'd walk to Shul together. I remembered looking up at his smile as he tried to make me believe that with the wave of his hand he now held my nose within the grasp of his fingers. I recalled the joy I felt, when I had returned to New York the previous year to visit my friend David. I sat with him at KJ (Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun), together with his father and children, three

generations side by side. What joy I felt then. What utter sadness I felt now.

I continued to sit in the park, trying to look through my tears at the beauty of San Francisco Bay which spread out before me. It was like trying to drive a car through a blinding rain storm without a windshield. I prayed and sobbed even more. I finally regained my composure and walked back down the hill. I went back to the Temple. I'm as Jewish as any man on the planet, I thought, as I considered what I would say when I arrived. The young man who had turned me away was gone by then, an elderly gentleman with a smile greeted me. "Good Yom Tov" he said, as he smiled and opened the door. I explained that I had recently moved to the neighborhood and hadn't had time to get tickets and would be happy to pay after the holiday. "No problem," he replied, as he escorted me inside. He gave me a Tallit and prayer book and showed me to a seat near the Bima. "Sit here," he said, "this is my seat," as he introduced me to his son on the left. As I extended my hand, the son looked up, and sure enough, it was the same fellow who had refused to let me in! "Make him feel at home" he told his son, "he's new here."

As I sat down, I closed my eyes and concentrated as much as I could. I realized something extraordinary was happening. After a long silence the son offered that he had just been filling in briefly for his father, who had told him to check tickets. "I understand," I told him, as I recalled my own zealous feeling when given an important task by my dad. "No problem," I continued, "actually I want to thank you." He looked at me with that sarcastic look of disbelief, waiting for the punchline. I reassured him that I was serious, for I could sense that he was now filled with that universal Jewish emotion which resides just to the left of our right ventricle. The guilt overcame him. I realized at that moment that he and I had to meet, on that day, at that Shul, for we carried urgent symbolic messages destined for each other.

After the holiday David called with a business proposition. Within a few weeks I sold my house, and shortly after that moved back to New York.

The transition from West to East is comparable to the adjustment from secular self absorption to spiritual enlightenment. There are several ups and downs and many curves along the way. The beginners program at KJ has provided just the right measure of support, encouragement and inspiration. The experiences I've had in the past have enabled me to appreciate the experience I'm having right now. I've come to realize that the Yiddishkeit I carry within me, instilled by my parents, is as fundamental to my being as life itself. When I truly needed guidance, it was always there. I just had to be ready for it. Like the candles of Chanukah, against all odds, it is the light that is always lit within us.

Ted Sandler has successfully resumed his business and broadcasting career and is a regular at the Beginners Service at Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun in New York.

Finding my roots (cont. from p. 2)

Chaim Feinberg, author of the book, Leaping Souls - Rabbi Menachem Mendl and the Spirit of Kotzk, writes that "[to the Kotzker] truth is searing and it cuts mercilessly through the fog of illusions and secret wishes, burning a path straight to G-d.... What the human eye and heart understand as truth is often only sorry and self-willed falsehood, unconnected to the truth of G-d." The Kotzker had the ability to see through any hypocrisy. He said, "A world of truth is worthy of redemption - without truth, let it be a desert."

According to Dr. Twerski, "The Rebbe of Kotzk lived his existentialism at extraordinary personal sacrifice." The Kotzker was completely unmaterialistic, even to the point where he chose to live his life in abject poverty rather than accept money from wealthy followers. Feinberg relates the following story: "... a notoriously poor follower burst into Reb Mendl's study with joyful news, 'Rebbe, I just received a huge windfall of money!' The Kotzker ran to the student, shook him by the shoulder and shouted, 'I'm not to blame! I'm not to blame!'

The follower consequently went and divided the money among the needy."

Amy and I had the pleasure of spending a Shabbos with the Gerer Chassidim in Monsey. We found them to be very warm, intelligent and spiritual people. They break for a half hour of study in the middle of Friday evening services and for an hour of study in the middle of Shabbos morning services. They were quite excited to meet me, a "Kotzker einikl," and were very knowledgeable about the life of the Kotzker Rebbe. We look forward to returning there for another Shabbos.

Interestingly, I have never read about anyone whom I consider to be a more perfect role model for myself than the Rebbe of Kotzk. Were I to spend the rest of my life trying to emulate him, I wouldn't begin to approach his level of holiness, but perhaps I should try.

Bob Morgens is a freelance writer and has attended the Beginners Program at the Lisker Synagogue in New York.



Illustrations by Wendy Klein Dunn



Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Beryl Levenson and Amy Gugig 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 701, New York, NY 10017, (212) 986-7450.

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