

# ברשת

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BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

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## ONE FAMILY, ONE MENORAH

by: Rabbi Daniel Alter

Childhood memories of Chanukah still remain vivid in my mind. It was always my favorite holiday. Yes, the presents I received may have played a significant role in the elevated status I chose to give the holiday, but there was more. There was a sense of family, which existed more during this holiday than at other times of the year. Feelings of closeness and bonding permeated the entire holiday. There were relatives whom I rarely saw; yet I knew that they would be at the annual Chanukah party. Chanukah left me with a warm, snug and comforting feeling.

Apparently I am not the only one who feels this way about Chanukah. Today, the two Jewish events celebrated by the vast majority of Jews are Pesach and Chanukah. One of the reasons for the popularity of these two holidays, is that both are family oriented. During these two periods the family unit is strengthened--at Chanukah parties, family menorah lightings and the gathering of the entire family for the Pesach Seder.

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"ONE FAMILY, ONE MENORAH"

## EMBRACING OUR TORAH

by Fredda Chalfin

I grew up as a Jew. How did I know? Well, every Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur I dressed up and showed our gentile neighbors that I indeed was Jewish. And then, of course, there was Passover when I got to eat macaroons. Occasionally I would shlep to the Orthodox Synagogue where my Grandfather belonged. It was a chance to see my friends. However, sitting upstairs and understanding nothing of the service hardly served as incentive for me to stay there.

After marriage and moving to New Rochelle, I knew that I would have to belong to a Temple. We had two young children and I thought that they should receive religious instruction. We obediently joined a Reform Temple and for eight years had our children attend classes and we went to High Holiday services. I preferred the children's services since they were more at my ability level and were shorter.

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## THE MAN UPSTAIRS

by Alan Magill

It was snowing on March 22, on the second day of Spring, which isn't so unusual except that it hadn't snowed much all winter...less than an inch. Stuart was delivering soda and seltzer to the synagogue at the corner of the block. This was the only time in the month that he went into this or any other synagogue, which might explain why none of the congregants knew him by name, just by what he delivered.

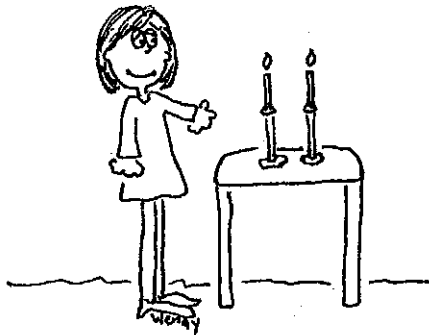
Shlomo was walking through the snow to get to the synagogue at the corner of his block. He had fought in the Battle of the Bulge, so how could a few inches of snow stop him, despite the fact he was 88 and walked with a cane. He had faith that if he made the effort to go to synagogue, things would work out. He went to synagogue every day (even that January morning two years ago when we were all digging out of two feet of snow) which might explain why, when he entered the synagogue, everyone knew him by name and greeted him with enthusiasm.

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## EMBRACING OUR TORAH...(cont. from p. 1)

And then the time arrived: the day that our son Evan would become a Bar Mitzvah. The Temple gave us a two year warning notice, so we had plenty of time to reflect on where we would have a reception. My husband and I naturally assumed that the Bar Mitzvah services would be conducted at our Temple. About two months into our research, our son approached us and asked: Why do I have to have my Bar Mitzvah here in New Rochelle? Why can't I go to Israel? Isn't that what it's all about? My husband Alan and I looked at each other in amazement. We knew in our hearts that he was correct.

Evan then added that he wanted his service to be conducted on Masada, as he found the story of Masada truly inspiring. As we began to make arrangements for a trip to Israel, our daughter Beth inquired if she could join Evan. After all, she would be 12 years old at his Bar Mitzvah and it could work for them to celebrate together. Evan agreed. Well, I suddenly got in touch with a lifelong yearning to be a Bat Mitzvah myself and asked: "What about me?" Afterwards, my mother-in-law asked if she could also join us. And so began my personal journey toward my Jewish roots.



LABELS, SCHMABELS. WHO CARES?  
WE ARE ALL JEWS!

Something magical happened to me in Israel. After our services on Masada, we went to the Museum of the Diaspora. As I walked around, I realized that even though I had secretly envied Catholic people for having such lovely, concrete icons, we had the most concrete item of all: Our Torah! Wherever we went, wherever we lived, we had the Torah...the words of G-d. It hit me like a ton of bricks! How special I was...how special we all are as Jews.

Upon returning from Israel, I knew that I wanted to know much more about our Torah. I had heard about Rabbi Mat Hoffman and his *Flame* organization. I called him. He was excited to hear about our trip and the prospect of working with us as a family. My husband Alan was particularly pleased, since his background was much more observant than mine, and for him it felt like coming home. As Rabbi Mat has so eloquently said: "Labels. Shmabels. Who cares? The important thing is that you want to learn." And he has proved to be right. Each time I do a Jewish ritual, e.g. light Shabbos candles, I feel that I am affirming my Jewish heritage. During the past two years, I have met and conversed with many observant Jews

and am overwhelmed by their generosity, their patience, and their desire to teach. I truly understand now that all our souls were present with Moses at Mt. Sinai. And, I know that our Torah is what keeps us merged as one people...the chosen people.

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## THE MAN UPSTAIRS...(cont. from p.1)

Stuart was in a hurry. He had a lot of other deliveries this morning and the snow would slow him down. His view of the world was that it was a rat race, and if you didn't bother other people they might not bother you. This would explain why he never stopped to say hello to anyone after he dropped off the soda and seltzer. But at least he didn't usually rush out of the synagogue as he did after making his other deliveries at other locales. This was his one "religious experience" of the month, and he wanted to take in the sights and sounds as best he could. And as he was leaving this morning of the Spring snow, he slowed down, and when he did, he saw Shlomo.

The 88 year old man was putting on his winter coat after the prayer service. The coat still had snow on it from when he had first come. Stuart looked at this kindly looking gentleman whom he had seen around the neighborhood the last few years and felt a warmth that he couldn't quite understand wash through him. Later, after his deliveries would be complete, he would reflect over a cup of hot chocolate that the warmth was his own positive reaction to seeing someone who still kept that "old time religion." But at this moment he was moved to break his silence and speak with the man, his first attempt at conversation in the synagogue.

"Good morning," he said.

"Good morning, yourself," said Shlomo with a ready laugh.

"I know you from the neighborhood."

"That's news to me. Where do you live?"

After Stuart explained the whereabouts of his one-bedroom apartment, Shlomo said, "I live in the building right next to yours."

"Like I said, I know you from the neighborhood," Stuart said.

"Do you ever come here for services?"

"No," Stuart said. "I don't pray in any synagogue."

"That's okay," said Shlomo. "As long as you have a place in your heart for what's right."

As Shlomo picked up his cane, Stuart made instant contact with that place in his heart 'for what's right,' which he had never known the name of, until this man had mentioned it.

"My name is Stuart."

"Shlomo."

They shook hands.

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**THE MAN UPSTAIRS...**(cont. from p. 3) All of a sudden, Stuart, who never had anything to say in synagogue, now had a lot to say, but didn't know where to begin.

After a pause, Shlomo said, "If you'll excuse me, I'll have to be getting home. I must get out of this coat with the snow on it and put on something dry." He smiled and then slowly walked short steps -- one foot ahead then the other catching up -- to the door.

Stuart was late with his smile, as Shlomo was already past him. As the veteran of the Battle of the Bulge put his hand on the doorknob, Stuart called out, "Wait!"

Shlomo turned around and smiled.

"Do you want me to walk you home?"

There was a pause and Stuart added, "You know, the snow and all."

Shlomo laughed. "No thanks. I made it here, and I'll make it back." Stuart wasn't satisfied with the answer but he didn't want to impose himself on the gentleman.

"And anyway, the Man upstairs watches me," Shlomo added. And then he was gone.

Stuart's nervousness melted like a Spring snow after the sun came out. He felt much better knowing that Shlomo had a friend who watched from an upstairs window. Stuart, who was usually in a rush, except for the times he slowed down when he made deliveries in the synagogue, slowed down even further to marvel at the generosity of the person who was watching as Shlomo walked slowly through the snow. That such a person existed filled Stuart with an even warmer feeling than he had before. If one such person existed, there were probably more. Which meant that there truly was something good to believe in, beyond making deliveries and keeping to yourself.

All at once, like soda bottles that used to break when you dropped them (until they went to plastic), Stuart's warm feeling went away. What if that man was not up there watching? What if he got called away at the last minute? Or if he just got tired of waiting. Or if he felt imposed upon to do this, and today was the day he would make his statement and not be there. Or perhaps Shlomo had just made that story up about a man watching him, a myth to console and redirect Stuart away from his concern.

Suddenly, the actual verifiable presence of that man upstairs meant everything to Stuart. Uncharacteristically leaving some return bottles in a bag in the vestibule of the synagogue, he burst out the door, at the last moment remembering that he had to hold the railing, or else he would fall, as surely no man was watching HIM from upstairs.

The snow made it a little hard to see, so when Stuart got down the steps he saw the outline and some of the substance of Shlomo as he walked slowly up the street. Stuart ran after him, alternating between looking at Shlomo, and at the windows above for that Good Samaritan.

And then, the warm feeling returned. There, at a

second floor window of a house, was a kindly looking man with a white beard and a black hat. A Jewish Santa Claus? He was looking intently down at the street where Shlomo was walking. Moved by this unprecedented (for him) act of consideration, Stuart watched the man intently, occasionally switching to Shlomo. When Shlomo finally made it into his building, Stuart looked up at the man and started applauding. His appreciation for his singular act knew no bounds. Tears began streaming down Stuart's face. The man with the white beard turned and walked away and said to his wife, "It looks like I'm going to have to shovel after all. It's not as light as they predicted." His wife cautioned, "Now don't you do it. You're in no shape."

A few minutes later the man with the white beard came out with a shovel and his wife was still calling out to him not to do it. "Please, Yaacov, don't!" Stuart noticed this and was moved by that "place in his heart for what's right." He approached the man and said, "Let me do that for you."



"THE MAN UPSTAIRS WATCHES ME!"

"Oh you don't have to," said the man with the white beard.

"Please. Let him," implored his wife.

"Sometimes you've got to listen," said the man, and he handed Stuart the shovel. "We'll pay you for this," he added.

"No need to," said Stuart. "It's my pleasure."

And it was, for the fifteen minutes that he shoveled. When he finished the shoveling, someone called out from the synagogue that he had left some bottles in the vestibule. Stuart thanked him, got the bottles, and made it a point to introduce himself and get the other fellow's name. When he returned the shovel and reiterated that he wouldn't take any money, he did nonetheless agree to come in for some coffee and cake and met two new people.

Later, reflecting on his day, this day of the surprise March 22 snow, Stuart was surprised at what had happened to him. For Shlomo, in his warm apartment sipping tea, there was no surprise, as he was confident all along that the Man Upstairs would watch over him on the way back from synagogue.

*Alan Magill is a recreational therapist and humorist who offers comedy programs throughout the New York area. He is a graduate of the Lincoln Square Synagogue Beginners Service.*

**ONE FAMILY, ONE MENORAH...(cont. from p. 1)**

In truth, the family is central to the theme of Chanukah, and to the way we celebrate the holiday. The Talmud, in describing the mitzvah to light the menorah, says that there is an obligation incumbent upon "each person and their household" to light the Chanukah candles. The formulation is striking. Generally, when the Talmud discusses various commands, the obligation placed upon each individual is stressed. For example, the Torah tells us to keep kosher. This applies to every individual. You can't ask a friend to have you in mind when they go to do a mitzvah. When it comes to lighting Chanukah candles, however, one person lighting is sufficient, indeed preferable, for the entire family unit. This aspect of the candle lighting ritual emphasizes the concept of family unity. The family is united together around one menorah. On Chanukah our motto is "One family, one menorah."

Behind this emphasis on the family unit within the laws of the holiday, lies a whole new understanding of what Chanukah means and is all about. The Hebrew word Chanukah comes from the same word as *chinuch*, which means dedication or inauguration. We celebrate the fact that the Holy Temple, defiled by the Greeks, was retaken

by the Hasmoneans, and re-sanctified. The Jews lit the menorah in the Temple, creating both a physical and spiritual light. When we light the candles in our own homes, our houses become miniature Temples, and each family becomes the guardian of its Temple. This is what the Talmud tells us that the obligation to light the Chanukah candles relates to each home, rather than to each person. On Chanukah every year, we rededicate our homes and add more light and more spirituality to our own Temple.

This holiday, however, does not focus only on the sphere of the house. We are told to put the Menorah by the window, where all can see the beauty of its light. Apparently, it is not enough for us to sanctify our own homes. Just as the Temple was a source of spirituality for the entire Jewish people, indeed the entire world, so too, every Jewish home must be a model of ethics and holiness to the rest of the world. The holiday of Chanukah is an opportunity to show others the magnificent and elegant light of the Jewish home.

May we all be privileged this Chanukah to bring this light into our lives, and the lives of those around us.

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*Illustrations by Wendy Dunn*



*Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Rabbi Yitzchak Rosenbaum, 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, e-mail [info@njop.org](mailto:info@njop.org).*

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