

# ברשת

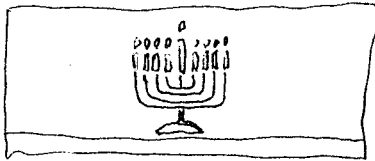
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BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

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## CHANUKAH: WHOSE LIFE IS IT ANYWAY?

by Rabbi Mathew Hoffman



WHO DO THE RABBIS THINK THEY ARE ANYWAY?

When I was first exploring Judaism, I found Rabbinic authority one of the most difficult concepts to understand. After all, I reasoned, G-d gave His law to us all. Since I was a pretty bright fellow, couldn't I understand and interpret it better, much better, than some old, bearded guy poring over a bunch of musty books with no contact with reality? Whose life was it anyway? I was going to make the decisions for myself!

I was hardly alone in these views. Year after year I heard them expounded by lots of people who should have recognized that rabbis are, after all, trained to interpret Jewish law. They spend many more years in study, and constant ongoing study at that, than doctors or lawyers do. Yet, if we have a medical issue, we try to find the best trained and most experienced doctor. If we have a legal problem, we search for the best lawyer, one who has seen this issue time after time. (I suppose I should thank G-d for this, since I earn my living as a very experienced lawyer.) But rabbis? What do rabbis know? When it comes to Judaism *everyone* is an expert!

Perhaps that is why we need Chanukah, which is often referred to as the *Yom Tov Shel Torah Sheb'baal Peh*, the Holiday of the Oral (cont. on p. 4)

## SPARKS THAT STICK: A WORK OF FICTION

by Alan Magill

Working in the big time. Fortune 500. Manhattan Address. Three piece suits. What could be better?

Holiday party coming up. Everybody in chipper mood.

Christmas decorations going up. There's Santa...and the wreaths...and the tree.

Check that, many trees.

People gawk and admire.

I wonder.

Where is Chanukah?

Should I wonder such things? This is the big time. I've made it out of Brooklyn. Fortune 500. Madison Avenue. Three piece suits. My own desk.

Vice Presidents smile at me. They know me by name. They like my work. I've made it.

And still I wonder.

Where is Chanukah?

The party and then more parties. Gift giving. Lots of candy canes, red and white.

The President comes to our floor. He calls (cont. on p. 2)

## LIGHTS IN THE DARKNESS

by Varda Weinstock

This year, Chanukah begins on the first day of winter, December 21. While winter is a season of darkness, of cold and of often melancholy mood and temperament, Chanukah is the holiday of light and joy. Furthermore, Jewish tradition teaches us that there is significance to the season of every holiday. So what is the meaning of Chanukah as a winter holiday?

In *The Phantom Tollbooth*, a children's book written by Norman Juster, a young man named Milo goes on an extraordinary journey. One of the places Milo goes is the Doldrums -- a place "where nothing ever happens and nothing ever changes...People who don't pay attention often get stuck in the Doldrums." Whenever I read this scene, I picture a gray winter day, like the days on which I wake up, look out my window at what seems to be a constant, low-hanging cloud, and long to return to sleep. And as the winter progresses, some people sink further and further into a state of melancholy. Nothing can stop this downward spiral, except the first signs of spring, when the days become longer and brighter.

While modern psychology has rushed to inform us that there is a definitive correlation between winter, (cont. on p. 3)

**SPARKS** (cont. from p. 1)... me by name. I have made it big. I'm in with the upper brass. Co-workers compliment me. I've come along way from my small Flatbush apartment, sleeping on a cot when I first got to New York. Now I have a Manhattan address.

I'm also invited to the President's office. He tells me, in a room filled with Christmas decorations that he likes my work. Wants to make me a Vice President.

I can't believe my ears. I thank him profusely and he thanks me. He offers a drink and I take it. He gives me a Christmas gift and I take it. I shake his hand and walk out. Others gather around; they had heard the news. They slap me on the back...tell me how no one has ever risen so far, so fast.

I go back to my desk with a big smile on my face and a happy feeling inside.

Then I look at the Christmas gift in my hand.

And I look around at all the Christmas trees, all the wreaths, the candy canes, the red and white and I start rummaging through my drawers. I start going through the closets. People ask me what I am looking for, but I'm of no mind to answer. I ask where the holiday supplies are kept. I go to the closet and rummage through it. At the very bottom, under yet another Christmas tree is a flat cardboard rendition of a menorah complete with eight candles and the big candle in the middle, I go back to my desk and leave the menorah on it. Then I go home.



"COME OUT, COME OUT! YOU DON'T HAVE TO HIDE ANYMORE"

The next day, on the way back to my Madison Avenue address, a man with a beard and yarmulke asks if I am Jewish. I respond "Yes. Why?" He answers me with a bag and wishes me a happy Chanukah.

I am too busy to open the bag. I am late for work. I am a new Vice President. When I get to my office I see the cardboard menorah on my desk and think it is a bit silly all I went through the night before to get it. I get to work. In a matter of minutes I am interrupted by a surprise Christmas party. An all day party. Like the other Vice Presidents I have too much to drink. I happily sing Christmas carols with them. I have another drink. Someone hands me a Christmas gift. I look at it, shocked at what I am holding in my hand.

I have nothing to give back.

I abruptly left the party, the first Vice President to do so. I went back to my desk. I needed to see the flat cardboard menorah. I wanted to look at it, draw something from it...what, I did not know.

I thought "how silly," and got up to leave. Picking up my

briefcase I noticed the bag on top of it fall to the ground. Out of it came a sheet of paper with some Hebrew words on it. I looked at it closer and saw that it was the prayers you say before lighting the Chanukah candles.

Another Vice President came over and said, "Come on, the party's just starting."

Then I saw it. The light. My light. Yellow sticky paper...The kind you write notes on and attach to people's laptops. Important messages can't get lost.

"Could you stay here for a moment?" I asked him.

"What for?"

"You'll see."

I cut out from the yellow sticky paper a little splash of yellow as large as the flame of the small candle. Then I cut out another one.

I looked at the paper with the prayers and said the transliterated version of the blessings. Then I put the yellow sticky paper on the cardboard menorah on top of the tall candle and the candle on the far right.

"Thank you," I said to him. "No, thank you," he replied.

"What was that all about?" I looked up and four partygoers had stopped to watch my "candle lighting." I explained.

The next day when I came to work, the yellow sticky paper in the shape of a flame had remained where I had left them. My feelings for Chanukah had also remained.

That night at 4:30 when I went to do this new ritual again, eight people gathered around. The following night...14. By the last night of Chanukah, I had 32 people watching, including the President. They all seemed very excited about it, and I read something on the piece of paper with all the blessings on it about "publicizing the miracle."

The President said in front of the large gathering, "Next year, we're going to get a real menorah for this office."

I didn't have to wonder any more where Chanukah was.

Or about where I was for that matter.

*Alan Magill, a playwright and Director of Programming at Ateret Avot in Brooklyn, notes that the character in this story might be using real candles by the next Chanukah given the progress of his religious interest. He is a graduate of the Lincoln Square Synagogue Beginners Service.*

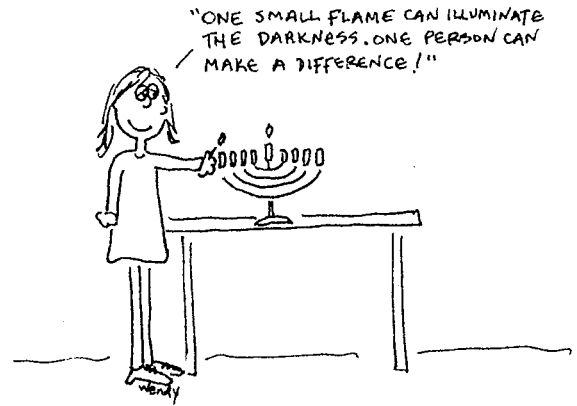


**LIGHTS** (cont. from p. 1)..light and one's emotional state, the Jewish sages had long ago documented this fact in a Midrash (legend) about Adam, the first human being. When the days first began to get shorter and shorter, Adam believed the world was coming to an end because of the increasing darkness. Petrified, he called out to God to save him, as he was not prepared for the world to end. G-d, wishing to quell his fears and to help him understand the world on which he was to live, guided him to discover fire. Adam lit two candles, which shed light on his dark world. Adam no longer feared impending doom. To the contrary, he was comforted by the warm flames that cast away the darkness.

The midrashic story of Adam precedes the story of Chanukah by thousands of years, but the message is the same. Adam's fear was similar to the melancholy that many of us feel during the winter months. He feared that the darkness meant that the world was over, but God showed him that humanity has the tools and ability to triumph over the darkness.

Our sages have taught that Adam lit those first flames during the month of Kislev, the month of Chanukah. Chanukah, the "Festival of Lights," is characterized by illumination and joy because we do not allow the darkness to overwhelm us. Instead, we spend eight days ensconced in light, both physical and spiritual. The Maccabees, the heroes of the Chanukah story, are also lights in the darkness. The darkness, in this case, was the religious oppression suffered under Syrian-Greek rule; and the light was the victory of the Jews over their oppressors. After laying siege to Jerusalem, the Syrian-Greeks so thoroughly

desecrated the Temple that even the pure oil needed for the Temple's Menorah (candelabra) was not available. The Maccabees, the leaders of the Jewish uprising, searched diligently until one small flask of oil was discovered and the Menorah could be lit. Although this oil was only enough for one day, the flames lasted for eight days, allowing sufficient time for new oil to be produced. The miracle of the light was a physical representation of the spiritual triumph.



By lighting the Menorah today, we commemorate the miracle of the oil. Through our actions, we take steps as individuals to overcome the darkness. In the Talmud there is a dispute between the great scholars Hillel and Shammai regarding whether to begin Chanukah by lighting one candle and then increasing daily until eight candles are lit, or to light eight candles and decrease daily until only one light remains. Shammai said one should begin with eight candles and decrease the number of lights. By lighting all of the candles at the beginning, one recognizes the idea that the initial impact must be the most powerful, and over the next eight days the need for the candles lessens since the first night's flame has already broken through the darkness. Hillel, on the other hand, maintains that one should begin with one light and increase the number daily, perhaps reasoning that even a single light is sufficient to drive away the darkness. However, the light is increased each succeeding day. This increasing light also represents the idea that as time goes on, we draw increasingly closer to the Divine.

In practice, we follow the opinion of Hillel. One small flame is increased in number each day over the ensuing eight days. The winter days may be short, but we do not allow darkness and depression to overwhelm and defeat us. On Chanukah we move forward, increasing the light and joy. Like the initial Chanukah light, within each Jewish soul there is a spark, as it says in Proverbs (27:20): "The spark of God is the soul of man." Just as one small flame can illuminate the darkness, one person can make a difference. As one flame is added to another the light increases. In every era there have been forces who tried to annihilate the Jews, but when the individual sparks have joined together, our light has successfully prevailed and defeated the darkness.

*Varda Weinstock is a Regional Program Coordinator at the National Jewish Outreach Program.*

### CHANUKAH WORD SEARCH

T	O	I	B	A	G	S	E	E	N	R	G
A	C	A	H	L	R	A	C	I	D	O	I
G	F	H	M	O	E	R	O	D	R	H	F
O	R	S	A	O	A	V	R	G	E	S	T
E	T	O	C	N	T	S	W	A	I	T	M
C	E	G	C	I	U	C	A	N	D	L	E
A	M	P	A	V	D	K	O	I	L	G	N
J	P	U	B	L	I	C	A	T	E	R	O
U	L	R	E	I	G	H	T	H	B	E	R
P	E	T	E	M	B	E	E	N	W	E	A
V	A	A	S	L	A	T	K	E	A	K	H
W	D	G	E	L	T	V	J	U	M	S	N

- |           |          |
|-----------|----------|
| Candle    | Chanukah |
| Dreidle   | Eight    |
| Greeks    | Latke    |
| Maccabees | Menorah  |
| Oil       | Temple   |

**WHOSE LIFE** (cont. from p. 1)... Law. It is the quintessential Rabbinic holiday, particularly because it is not mentioned in a single book of the written Torah.

We all know, or think we know, why we celebrate Chanukah: the oil that was supposed to burn for one day burned for eight days, giving the Jews time to make new, pure oil to burn in the Temple. Actually, it was pretty miraculous that the Jews found pure oil at all, since there was no notion that the High Priest ever sealed and stamped any jug for purity other than the one they found. But what was the big deal about this miracle? In fact, the Rabbis tell us in Pirke Avot [Ethics of the Fathers] 5:5 that there were ten ongoing miracles in the Temple. (My favorite one -- that no Jew ever complained to another about a lack of room in Jerusalem. Can you imagine Jews not complaining? Now, that is a miracle!) So who cares about this oil? Obviously, we do. But why?

The first thing we need to know is that, under the circumstances, the Jews were not required to burn pure oil. For a variety of complicated legal reasons, the requirement was inapplicable at that time. Why, then, did they care about burning pure oil? Because the rabbis told them to! Oh boy, I can just hear what the young Mat Hoffman would have said: "Who do they think are? G-d said we don't need pure oil. They know it. We know it. But there they go deciding things for me and my life."

I am sure there were a huge number of Jews just like this at the time. After all, this was the period of the beginning of the redaction of the Oral Law and many Jews questioned the authority of the rabbis. But the rabbis had the perfect defense: G-d. After all, He confirmed the authority of the rabbis through the miracle of Chanukah. And our celebration of this holiday, a holiday contained only in the Oral Law, confirms our acceptance of Rabbinic authority, because without the rabbis there would not be a holiday at all.

The importance of Chanukah to Rabbinic law is actually upheld by what appears to be its lack of independence in the Talmud. It is interesting to note that only two of our holidays do not have their own Talmudic tractate: Shavuot and Chanukah. I suggest that this is because they have similar functions as holidays. Shavuot commemorates our receiving of the written law on Mount Sinai. In that sense, the Torah and Talmud are all about Shavuot - the acceptance of the law - and, therefore, it does not need its own section. Similarly, Chanukah represents the whole entire oral law; and, thus, it too does not need its own section.

The Oral Law, which is Rabbinic authority, is the foundation stone of Judaism. Through the miracle of the oil of Chanukah, G-d reminded the people that the understanding of the Written and Oral law is in the hands of the rabbis. So the next time we see one of those bearded (or not bearded) experts, we might remember a few things: First, that expert has been studying for quite a few years (or decades). Second, that fellow has seen more people and decided more difficult problems than most great lawyers or doctors ever will. Third, while finding your own rabbi is more an art than a science, it really is necessary. And finally, our rabbis get their authority not just from their brilliance, not just from their experience, but also directly from G-d. (And, to answer the young Matt Hoffman's question, "Whose life is it anyway?" It is not my life, it is G-d's. He gave it, and some day, hopefully after at least 120 years, He will take it away.)

This article is dedicated to Rabbi Avraham Kaufman, one of the earliest rabbis who tried so hard to teach Torah to a stubborn, young Mat Hoffman.

*Rabbi Mathew Hoffman runs the litigation department of Todtman, Nachamie, Spizz & Johns in NYC, AND is the Rabbi of the Flame Alternative Service of Westchester. He ran his first beginners service over 20 years ago, and now his 6 children and his wife Brachie help run the services.*

Illustrations by Wendy Dunn

**בראשית**

*Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Sarah Rochel Reid, Rabbi Yitzchak Rosenbaum, and 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 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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