

ברשת

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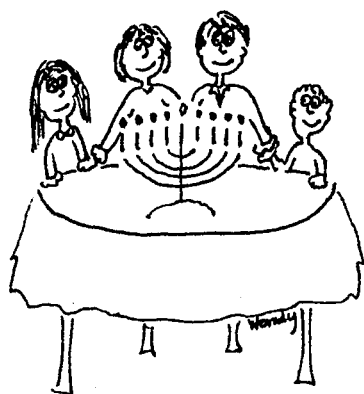
BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

Kislev 5762/Dec 2001

LIGHT AND ENLIGHTENMENT

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

"FOR WITH YOU IS THE SOURCE OF LIFE.
IN YOUR LIGHT DO WE SEE LIGHT."



A holy light burns in the lights of Chanukah. A light as old as the world itself.

According to Jewish law, we may not use the Chanukah lights to illuminate our homes. Their radiance may not be used for any practical purpose at all. We may only look into the light itself. We may only gaze into its depths.

Why can't we use the lights of Chanukah for some other sacred purpose? Why can't we use their glow to read words of Torah, for example? What sets aside the Chanukah lights from every other worldly light? Why may we only gaze into the light itself -- and what are we supposed to see there?

You can look at light in two ways. Firstly, through your surroundings being illuminated so you can see what is around you. Secondly, as the light itself, the source of illumination. And when you look into the light -- into the source -- the world that surrounds you recedes from view.

When we look at our surroundings, our perception of the light is second-hand, reflected. It's "enlightenment" -- but it is (cont. on p. 2)

A LESSON FROM SANTA CLAUS

by Carolyn Dawn

I grew up in a small East Coast city with a speakable Jewish presence -- as I always defended it: we have 5 synagogues (1 Orthodox, 2 Conservative, 1 Reform and 1 Reconstructionist) and an elementary day school. Nevertheless, it was your typical American Jewish community, with packed synagogue services on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, and a JCC that was really a fitness center.

My family had one of those "typical American Jewish" homes. Other than holidays, the only real services I attended after my Bat Mitzvah was through the B'nai B'rith Youth Organization (BBYO), a fairly secular Jewish youth group. But I was proud to be Jewish, and this youth group became the focal point of my social life. It was thus, with my BBYO friends, that I learned a strange lesson from Santa Claus!

Now I don't know about where you grew up, but in my small East Coast city there is really only one place for teenagers to hang out...the mall. Off we went, my friend Anne, her boyfriend Eric, his friend Joe, and me -- four Jewish kids with a car and a little cash, seeking to pass a Sunday afternoon and to find a few Chanukah presents.

The mall was filled with its usual seasonal cheer -- blinking lights, colorful wreaths and every pole a (cont. on p. 3)

OLIVE OIL AND THE JEWISH SOUL

by Cheryl Rosenberg

The holiday of Chanukah is a celebration of the Jewish defeat of the Syrian-Greeks, who were, at the time, the arch-enemies of the Jewish people. Unlike Haman (the Persian Purim villain) or, more recently, Hitler, the Syrian-Greeks were not interested in the physical annihilation of the Jewish people. The Syrian-Greek threat was similar to that of modern secular humanism and Stalin's communism in its insistence that religion is the "opiate of the masses." Like those who wish to physically exterminate the Jews, those who wish to spiritually annihilate the Jews have claimed millions of Jewish souls. Chanukah was actually a physical battle against a spiritual enemy, for all the Syrian-Greeks wanted was the assimilation of the Jews.

On Chanukah, we recite the special holiday prayer, *Al Hanissim*, when saying the *Shemoneh Esrei* and *Birchat HaMazon* (Silent Devotion and Grace after meals): "...that the wicked Hellenic regime rose up against Your people Israel to make them forget Your Torah and violate the decrees of Your will." This addition notes that two of the major decrees against the Jewish people by the Syrian-Greeks involved the acceptance of the Torah and the commandments known as *chukim*, decrees. (cont. on p. 3)

LIGHT (cont. from p. 1)...not the light itself. When we look at the light itself, we see the source. We perceive the light, not as a reflection, but as the thing itself. We know of the light's existence because we see the light, not because its reflection gives us evidence of its existence.

There are two words in Hebrew that are spelled identically. They have different vowels, but their letters are the same. One is the word for "proof" (*rye-ah*) and the other is the word for "sight" (*ree-ah*). These two words express these two aspects of light: *Rye-ah*, proof, is the reflection of the light, the verification that the light exists by its illumination of our surroundings. *Ree-ah*, sight, is seeing the source. When you look at the source, you don't need proof. You don't need "enlightenment." You are looking at the light itself.

In the Book of Psalms (36:10), King David writes "*For with You is the source of life. In Your light do we see light.*" Because the Creator is the source of life, His light cannot be perceived by reflection. To see G-d's reflection in this world, if we want a proof of the existence of the light -- a *rye-ah* -- we could look at the way His light illuminates this world and we will find evidence of His Hand, of His light. We will find this evidence in the outrageous improbability of a "cosmic soup" which just happens to spawn life. We will find this evidence of His light in the highly unhistorical history of the Jewish People. We will find direct evidence of His light in the unbroken chain back to Sinai. Yes, we will find evidence of the light. Yet while we will find proof of its existence, a *rye-ah*, we will not see the light itself.

At the beginning of time, there shone a unique light called the *Ohr Haganuz* -- the Hidden Light. With this light you could see from one end of the Creation to the other. Even though the Creator hid away the *Ohr Haganuz* after the first thirty-six hours of Creation, there are times when you can still catch glimpses of its hidden glow...

On the first night of Chanukah, we light one candle; on the second night, two. Thus after two nights, we have lit three candles. If you continue this calculation, you will find that the total number of candles that we light on Chanukah is thirty-six (not counting the *shamesh*). The thirty-six lights of Chanukah correspond to the thirty-six hours during which the *Ohr Haganuz* shone.

"*For with You is the source of life. In Your light do we see light.*" We may not use the lights of Chanukah for any purpose, however holy, for "... *with You is the source of life.*" When we look into the lights of Chanukah we are looking to the Source of life itself, for "*In Your light do we see light.*" We connect to the Source of life, not through its reflected light, not through evidence and proof, not through *rye-ah*, but rather through *ree-ah*, through gazing directly into the light. And when we do that, this world of reflection vanishes from our sight.

Chanukah, the festival of light, represents the freedom from an exile, the Exile of ancient Greece. Unique among the exiles which the Jewish People have suffered, the Exile of Greece was the only exile in which the Jewish People never

left their land. And yet an exile it still was. It was the exile of the Light. The wisdom of the Torah was exiled by Greek philosophy.

To the ancient Greeks, what is beyond the mind of man does not exist. The Greeks view the world as a world of evidence, of *rye-ah*, of proof. It is a world of reflected light alone. A world of enlightenment. The Greek eye is blind to a source that is brighter than the eye of man can bear. Thus it grasps the reflection as being the source. What I can see, exists. Beyond that, beyond concrete evidence, in that place where the human eye cannot penetrate, there can exist nothing. The Greeks engaged the Sages of the Talmud over and over again, challenging them to give incontrovertible evidence for the efficacy of the Torah. Prove to us, they said, that *brit mila* causes some empirical improvement in a person; that keeping Shabbat changes someone, something. The Sages could not give these proofs -- not because of any lacking in the Torah, but because the Greeks misunderstood the nature of the Torah itself.

If we wanted to prove the efficacy of an antibiotic, we could go to a laboratory, take a blood sample and analyze it empirically. We could evaluate how many white blood cells there were, how many red. We could take finite measurements which would lead to empirical conclusions. There is, however, no empirical measurement for a *mitzva*. The Torah is lacking in empirical proofs because it is not a description of that which already exists. It is the source of that which is to be. It depicts an existence which has yet to be. It is the source, not the outcome. It is the light, not its reflection.

The Torah doesn't conform to Greek thought. It doesn't observe the world. It is the source of the world. It is not a reflection of the light, but the light itself.

When you look into the light all you can see is the light. When you look into the light itself, into the Source of life, the empirical realities of this world, the reflections of the light, pale and fade, for we are gazing far above and beyond to the hidden Source of life itself.

"*For with You is the source of life. In Your light do we see light.*"

Rabbi Asher Yaakov Sinclair is a Senior lecturer at Ohr Somayach in Jerusalem. This article was reprinted with permission from ohr.edu.



HAPPY CHANUKAH

A LESSON (cont. from p. 1)... candy cane of green and red ribbon. Like good teenagers, we sported through the mall playing with chach'kes (trinkets) and ravishing the food court. Looking back now, I must admit that, yes, sad but true, we even sang along with those piped-in Xmas carols.

How else, I ask you, could we culminate our frivolity that day in the mall other than by jumping into the spirit of the season and paying a visit to that great capitalist icon of joy -- Santa Claus? As typical American Jewish teens, there was no other satisfyingly silly way to revel in the December spirit than to join the line of mothers, fathers and crying children.

Good ol' Santa and his helpful elfish assistants didn't even blink an eye when we four not-so-little kids tumbled towards his throne (after the requisite \$15, of course). Ann, Eric, Joe and I, all piled onto poor Santa's lap.

"Cheese!" we shouted, ignoring the blonde elf's call of "Merry Christmas!"

Snap! Our photo was done and Santa was ready to really get down to business.

"What would you like Santa to bring you this year?" he puffed out through his thick, cotton beard.

Silence.

A giggle from Ann.

"What would you like to get from Santa this year?" he asked once again, stressing his good cheer.

We had to answer, so I chose to speak. I set my voice low and whispered: "Nothing. We're Jewish."

Now I am fully willing to admit that when I was a child my mother had let my brother and me take pictures with Santa. It was that, or fight off a tantrum in the middle of the mall. I had always told those Santas that there was no Xmas in my house, and the usual response was a still cheerful inquiry as to what I wanted for Chanukah. Now, if this Santa of my teenage jaunt had replied in this way, then there would be no story to tell and no lesson to learn. This special Santa instead took us all by surprise.

Glancing furtively towards the line of angelic kids and impatient parents, he lifted his hand to his big white beard and coughed delicately into his fist. Then, certain that he was not being watched, he pulled his beard forward and whispered to us: "Me too!" More than that, he chuckled and told us his synagogue of choice.

I think we all nearly fell off his knees.

"HO! HO! HO!

Have a good Holiday!" he thunderously called, as that blonde elf came forward to usher us out.

I can thankfully say that the real story doesn't end here, but continued far into the spectrum of our lives. We were all disconcerted by this Santa's admission. Okay, so *we kids* had made a joke to go "visit" Santa, but where



were the lines to be drawn? How had Christmas so easily become part of that "typical American Jewish" experience that even Santa was Jewish? From Chanukah bushes to "Hanukah Harry," the lines keep on blurring.

It's been over a decade since this strange Santa visit, and I can proudly say that a lesson was learned. I've taken on Shabbat, eat only Kosher, and now go to services on a regular basis. And while I've lost track of Joe, Ann married a "nice Jewish boy" and they've kashered their home. Eric's married now also, and raising his twins to love being Jewish.

Looking back now, it's often funny to see all the different messengers that were guiding me. This run-in with a Jewish soul in a Christmas display in an East Coast city mall, was one little push to my Jewish soul. It was a wake-up call to that "typical American Jew," that being Jewish means not being typical, not fitting in with everyone else, but standing apart and proudly declaring who we are. And that, my friend, is actually the lesson of Chanukah, (so odd that Xmas shares its season) -- from our window the light of the menorah shouts out to the world: "I am proud to be a Jew!"

Carolyn Dawn has been involved with Beginners programs for just under a decade or so, and currently resides near a large East Coast city.



OLIVE OIL (cont. from p. 1)... While the Syrian-Greeks permitted us to read the Torah, Torah was not allowed to be studied as a religious text. To our enemies, the Torah was a literary text or an historical document, bereft of all spirituality because the Syrian-Greeks were troubled by the concept that the Torah was from G-d. They thus caused us to "forget Your Torah."

"The decrees of Your will" that the Syrian-Greeks made the Jews violate were, in particular, the *chukim*, the decrees which have no logical reason for their performance. The commandments of the Torah are divided into three categories, *mishpatim*, *edot* and *chukim* (laws, statutes and decrees). *Al Hanissim* does not mention *mishpatim* or *edot* because these are considered logical commandments, such as "Do not murder," and cultural festivals, such as the Passover Seder. The faith-based *chukim*, however, imply the acceptance of the existence of a Superior Being whose "intelligence" is greater than our own, but who is also ultimately unknowable. *Chukim* include such mitzvot as keeping kosher and *shatnez*, the commandment not to wear wool and linen together.

Although the Syrian-Greeks waged war and tried to kill us, this was not their primary intention. They didn't fight for land or spoils. Not only did they leave the Holy Temple standing (unlike the Babylonians or the Romans), but they also left all the golden vessels of the Temple. In fact, they didn't even spill out the Menorah oil that they found. What the Syrian-Greeks *did* do, according to the Gemara, was contaminate all of the oil in the *Heichal*, the place where the *Menorah* stood. But, the Gemara also says that the oil was not kept in the *Heichal*, but rather in a storage room in another part of the Temple. (cont. on p. 4)

OLIVE OIL (cont. from p. 3).. The Kohanim (Jewish priests) would bring it from the storage area whenever it was needed.

So, what, then, does the Gemara mean by saying "...to contaminate all of the oil in the *Heichal*?"

To prove their point, the Syrian-Greeks brought the oil from the storage room to the *Heichal* and contaminated it *there* in order to make a statement: that the very idea of holy oil was, to them, ridiculous. By altering the quality of the oil, these pagans sought to eradicate the uniqueness of being a Jew, to take, so to speak, the Jew out of Judaism.

How do we deduce this from contaminated oil? After all, oil that is contaminated looks just like oil that is not contaminated. The difference between the two is completely spiritual. In Judaism, oil represents holiness. In the Holy Temple, vessels were anointed with *shemen hamishchah*, a particular holy oil, before they could be used. Likewise, kings of Israel were anointed with this holy anointing oil before they took office. In fact, *mashiach* (often mistranslated as messiah/savior) literally means, "the anointed one," because the future redeemer of Israel will be anointed with holy oil. What makes oil holy? When an olive is squeezed, its innermost part, the oil, is revealed. So too, a Jew's very soul, a Jew's innermost being, is his oil, the part of him that is connected to G-d.

The essence of Judaism is based on G-dliness, the internal, and that is why all of our holy concepts and deeds have not changed or been affected by the outer world for more than

three thousand years. Despite all of our years in exile, neither the Torah nor its commandments have changed. Some externals may have changed, but externals are not the essence, they are not Torah. This was the battle of Chanukah. Chanukah was the story of the Jews fighting a foreign, *external* way of life which desired to purge Judaism of its religious essence and inherent holiness.

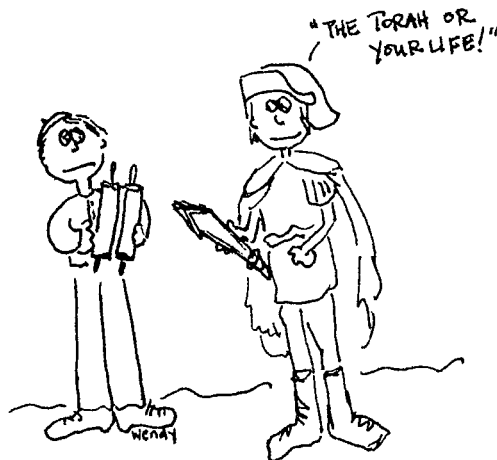
We celebrate Chanukah for the miracles G-d performed for the Jewish people: that a small band of Jews defeated the great Syrian-Greek army, that one jar of *pure* oil was left with which to rededicate the Temple, and that the Jews did not succumb to a new, external kind of Judaism, a totally Hellenized, rational and cultural Judaism devoid of G-dliness. Instead, the Jews committed themselves to living by G-d's Torah, to showing everyone the greatness of a holy way of

life, filled with mitzvot and opportunities to connect with G-d.

On Chanukah, as we commemorate the war won "in those days," let us light our menorahs for all the world to see. May each of us remember to bring a little light into the life of another Jew, to dispel the darkness and give him/her the opportunity to see what Judaism is all about, who s/he is and where s/he came from. Just one candle can melt the darkness away. Think what forty-four* can do!

Cheryl Rosenberg is a journalist from Teaneck, New Jersey. This article is based on information found in Through the Eyes of a Woman by Nechoma Greisman of Jerusalem.

** There are 36 actual Chanukah candles and 8 shamashim, lighters.*



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: 989 Sixth Avenue, 10th Floor, New York, NY 10018, (646) 871-4444, e-mail info@njop.org.

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