

ברשת

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BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

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HANUKKAH CANDLES: THE MEDIUM AND THE MESSAGE

by Rabbi Adam Mintz

We live in an age of public relations. The focus today is no longer on the message that one is trying to convey, but rather on the manner in which it is conveyed. A product is not judged on the basis of its effectiveness, but by the quality of its advertisement. A politician is not evaluated on the basis of his actions, but by his ability to present a positive impression.

In Judaism, on the other hand, the focus is still on the message. While fulfillment of a religious obligation is considered praiseworthy regardless of how it may look to others, Jewish tradition also understands that the manner in which a mitzvah is performed is equally important. It enhances the beauty of the religious act and creates a positive impression upon all those who witness the performance of this mitzvah.

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THE TRUTH LIES HERE

by Edwin Dramer

Happy Chanukah!

I am a 49 year old man who approached an Orthodox synagogue for the first time in his life just one year ago. I attended at the invitation of the B'nai Israel Congregation, in Norfolk, Virginia. You might say I came from as far away as a Jew could come. My family was not observant, or even concerned, and sadly, I can point to uncles and aunts who have left Judaism altogether. However, my family has one thing in common with those new people that I have met here, they asked the same question: "Why did you do that? What drew you to Orthodox Judaism?" The reality is, I did not intend to come here. In the beginning, I did not intend anything at all. Let me explain.

During the decade of the 70's, I experienced a long series of personal reversals that almost destroyed me. How I managed to survive, I can not say. Like many people who find themselves in a life boat or a fox hole, I looked for a deeper spiritual meaning within

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ALONE AND OUT OF PLACE

by Judy Zambardino

When I spoke with Mat Hoffman this evening, I told him how I felt so out of place; so awkward sometimes at our services. I felt that I was the only person in the room who was not an observant Jew ... everyone seemed to know each other.

I explained how those feeling were confirmed when after services my car wouldn't start and someone mentioned (with good intention,) that I was not likely to be able to get help jump starting it, nor could I use the phone to call for assistance since it was the Sabbath. I was devastated ... I was truly alone. To my great surprise and relief, someone else who had driven to services helped me.

Mat has assured me that every person in the room that day has his or her own story, and that many people drive to services; many people are not observant and don't know the ropes. That, he explained, is why our group was started. He told me how often my feelings are mirrored by others in the group.

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THE TRUTH LIES HERE (cont. from p. 1)

myself, only to find that none existed. So I began to search. I started to look for the truth. Armed with only one principle, *If it works keep it. If it doesn't set it aside.* I began to read, and all through that turbulent period in my life I read. I investigated every '...ism' and '...ology' that existed in history. I went through a wall full of books on religion -- Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Christian. I looked into Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. I dabbled with astrology and the occult. I studied the history of art and poetry. I read the philosophers from Socrates to Hume. On one magic occasion, I read the Torah.

I say to you who were born into the Orthodox tradition, who never felt compelled to leave it: I know you have been told since childhood that you are on the correct course to G-d. I am here to confirm that for you. With my unique perspective, as one who has read everything else, I can clearly see just what it is you have. Every ontological system that I encountered, intrigued me for a time, but ultimately, they all failed. Only one path has at its core enough depth and meaning to answer every question. For nearly ten years now, I have slowly plodded in your direction, and I have watched as one-by-one, all those other dead-end diversions fell by the wayside.



At Chanukah we invariably begin to discuss the re-emergence of the Jewish spirit after so many decades of decline. We talk about the indestructible Jewish religion. But few people ever get down to the 'why' behind it. I know the 'why,' because I have lived the 'why.' I hear of so much concern expressed about the dwindling traditional population, and about the loss of Jews in general to all those appealing alternatives. To all this, I reply: Don't worry. Be happy. If there is one thing that Chanukah teaches or that my example clarifies, it is that the truth does not lie out *there*. All those Jews who left, will return. If not now, then a few generations from now. Because the truth lies *here* and only *here*. Therefore, I encourage you to keep going. Keep trying. Don't let the numbers discourage you. Most of all, thank you, for being here for me.

Edwin Dramer is a member of the Beginners Service at B'nai Israel Congregation in Norfolk, Virginia, and works in personnel at Metro Machine Works.

STANDING AT THE DOOR: AN UNSPOKEN DIALOGUE

Doors open. Enter or not. Just standing there. Knowing that what's inside is comforting, belongs to me through the corridors of time. It's now up to me to claim my just place amongst those multitude of my own who have shared this heritage throughout many millennia.

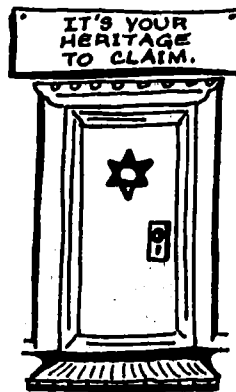
So what are you waiting for? Seems like such a dummy, this paralyzed soul. In my heart I know it's good and wise and peaceful and smart, and just what has always been the "missing" part in the otherwise overwhelmingly successful existence.

So why hesitate? What's holding you back? Don't speak the language ... just a meager excuse, when learning it is the least of your worries. So what else is holding you back? Sounds very alien, yet very tribal, familiar ... have heard these sounds my whole life, but don't know how I'm connected to it?

So why not enter? What's holding you back? Do I belong here? And why not ... The warmth, acceptance, wisdom and trust, the belonging ... the Jewishness of it all ... the family.

This is your heritage to claim. Open to you without charge. Only catch is -- you must claim it yourself (with the help of friends of course), but yourself. No substitutes. Can't send a stand-in. Can't send your housekeeper, secretary, chauffeur, sister, brother or aunt. Nope. Just you yourself.

So what are you waiting for? They won't like me ...



Anonymous that's not why. You can enter. So out with it! But I'm a woman, and they never get to have a say. Maybe. Maybe not. Depends. "Say" about what? Learning. Dialogue. Discourse. Participation. These are open to all, and besides, with your brains and your voice, do you really think anyone could quiet you when you have a mind to speak?

And what if it's too hard? Or I don't like what I hear? Or they demand too much? Well, first you have to learn enough to form an opinion.

If you stand outside the door, how will you learn enough to form an intelligent opinion? Have to start somewhere. Can't do it alone. Come in. It's warm inside. There is light in here. Outside it's cold, and dark, and sometimes, very lonely. Inside there are friends and family. Joyous times. Many wonderful things to learn and experience. Then you can choose.

The road has been traveled before. Others have left their mark to share their experience with you. Surely some of this will make your personal journey on this road richer, fuller, more enjoyable. Happier. Consider the options, then enter the door.

Any questions? None? Many? Well then, what are you waiting for? Come on in ... I'll see you inside and introduce you to many who have come before, and then you will be there for those who come after ... whatever your opinion. Join us. It's an invitation only you can accept.

ALONE AND OUT OF PLACE (cont. from p.1)

The group ... that's the problem. Other congregations have the opportunity to socialize; they live in the same neighborhood; their kids go to school together. But our group, typical of our people, is composed of many "tribes"; scattered about, separated from other Jews, nor necessarily by choice; alienated from the Jewish community. So, here we are, all adults, free to make our own choices. And what have we chosen? To spend an occasional Saturday morning together, and a few hours during the week trying to find the direction we long for.

I want to know with whom I pray. I know from whom I am learning, since Mat, Joe, Bob and Michael give of their energies and knowledge so freely. Finally, I've decided that someone has to open this can of worms, so here goes!

My name is Judy Zambardino and I am a Jew who got lost (as often times we have been known to do in the past.) I married an Italian who believes there is G-d but does not care for organized religion and the political entanglements he has observed within the Catholic church.



We have two year old twins, Allison and Joshua. Alli was named by my father in the synagogue, and we had a bris for Josh in our home. They are Jews, and will be raised as such, to the degree that I am able, without alienating my husband from our spiritual lives.

I was raised, for the earlier part of my life, as an observant Jew, and enjoyed going to synagogue with my father occasionally on the Sabbath, and on the holidays. Both my parents were raised in observant homes, but my mother had little interest in keeping a traditional Jewish home. I attended a Yeshiva for two years before transferring to a public school.

After my grandmother's death, severe financial strains took hold of our family, and we were unable to join the synagogue near our new neighborhood. Dad really didn't want to join anyway, since the only one within walking distance was reformed (G-d forbid, we should be seen in such a place!). So we never went back to synagogue. There was no longer a sense of joy on Passover; memorial prayers were said at home, and the family idled thru the other holidays as well.

Now I am a mother. I miss that sense of community; with G-d; with my culture. One day, I was driving past a beautiful church in Rye. I thought to myself, how easy it

would be to convert and raise the children as Catholics. We already have a strong, loving base within my husband's family ... it would be so simple. That evening, I read about Hoffman's Religious Bandwagon on Rosh Hashanah and I remembered my Dad saying to me "Honey, we don't have a choice. This is what we are. You were born a Jew and you will die a Jew. This was G-d's choice." Now, since I have begun working with "Hoffman Boys," I have begun to pick up the pieces, and understand why I am trying to come back. It's because I am a Jew, and I will surely die as one.

It's not easy to speak about where you come from, particularly to strangers. But, I would be very grateful to any of you who feel comfortable enough to share your feelings with the rest of us. For we are, truly, a people being reborn, on Saturday morning, every so often, the best we can ... a little at a time.

Judy Zambardino is a medical secretary and a member of The Flame's Westchester Alternative Service in Scarsdale New York.

HANUKKAH CANDLES... (cont. from p. 1)

An example of a positive commandment in which the manner of observance is especially significant, is the lighting of Hanukkah candles. The Talmud writes that merely lighting the Hanukkah candles for eight nights is not sufficient. They must be lit in a place where they are visible to others. In Israel, many people light their Hanukkah candles outside the front door so that they can be seen by all those who pass by. In other countries, such as the United States, where lighting the candles outdoors is not feasible, we light them in the window that faces the street so that they are visible to others. This public display of Hanukkah candles serves to enhance the celebration of the holiday by including people whom we don't know, and will never meet in the fulfillment of this mitzvah. In addition, this public display allows us to impart the message of Hanukkah to others.

What is that message of Hanukkah that we try to teach though the public display of the candles? The answer can be found in the blessings that we recite before we light the candles each night. The first blessing praises G-d, "Who has commanded us to light the Hanukkah candles." This blessing transforms this simple act of lighting candles into the fulfillment of a religious obligation. We light the candles to commemorate the victory of the Jews over the hellenizing Syrians in the second century BCE and for the subsequent miracle of the cruse of oil that lasted for eight days.

On Hanukkah, however, we do not suffice with merely remembering the events of the past. We see this event as representative of G-d's continuing relationship with the Jewish people. Therefore, the second blessing that we recite, blesses G-d "Who has performed miracles for our forefathers in those days at this season." G-d who performed miracles for the Macabees over two thousand

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years ago, brings salvation to Jews in every generation, and is still performing miracles for the Jewish people today. Hanukkah candles are lit outdoors so that all people will see that Hanukkah is not only a celebration of the historical event, but also a symbol of G-d's continuing relationship with the Jewish people.

The third blessing, which is appended to the first two blessings on the first night of Hanukkah, thanks G-d for "sustaining us, and bringing us to this moment." We acknowledge on the first night of Hanukkah how fortunate we are to be a part of this continuing relationship between G-d and the Jewish people. The message of Hanukkah is

transmitted to others not only through the lighting of the candles, but also by the reflection of this message in our everyday lives as Jews. Through our daily commitment to the laws of the Torah, we proclaim to the world that we are continuing in the path established by the previous generations and that we too are part of the ongoing miracle of the Jewish people.

Rabbi Adam Mintz is the Associate Rabbi of Congregation Kabilath Jesburin in Manhattan, with responsibilities that include the organization and supervision of the Beginners' programs.

*Illustrations by
Florie Freshman*

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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