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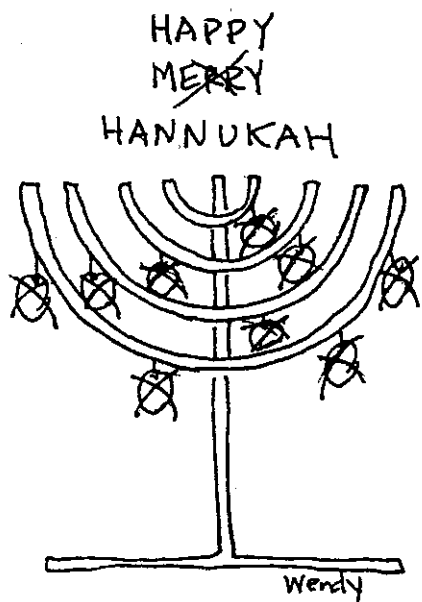
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BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

Kislev 5757/November 1996

HOW MERRY IS HANNUKAH SUPPOSED TO BE?

by Rabbi Joel M. Finkelstein



The perennial challenge for us as American Jews is to see if we can find enough fulfillment in Hannukah to counteract the lure of Christmas. Part of the difficulty in doing so is that Hannukah doesn't seem to be one of our greatest holidays, it's rather a minor holiday, with few practices and rituals. We can try to make Hannukah more joyous, festive, or fun, but the real question is, how merry was Hannukah really meant to be?

In evaluating how happy a holiday Hannukah really is, we first need to establish what true happiness is and then evaluate to what extent Hannukah fulfills the criteria of happiness. I have identified three main features of happiness: which I think you'll agree are a good basis for judging happiness; 1) Ideal happiness is sustained. 2) Ideal happiness involves the total mind or self, and 3) Ideal happiness involves something of meaning, importance or value.

1) Ideal happiness is sustained. Fleeting pleasures are clearly not ideal happiness. Isaiah the prophet says that one day the redeemed of Israel will return to Zion, "and an everlasting happiness will be on their heads." The state of happiness we look forward to is everlasting.

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OY, MY SON HAS PHYLACTERIES!

by Stuart Hample

Rabbi Buchwald's Beginner's Service at LSS is not a testing situation. There are no markers on how you're doing, no tests, no grades. Thus no one has ever "flunked." Except me. I tried, honest, I tried like crazy to learn how to be a religious Jew. I lowered my dukes, stuck out my chin, and invited the rabbi to take his best shot. But the rabbi, famously no slouch at imbuing the fallen away (or never were) with the tenets of the faith, never laid a glove on me. I finally gave up. Effie, sedulous as the Masada crowd, never has. If I say, "Sorry, Effie, you haven't convinced me to daven, he replies, "Not yet." As far as my having any connection whatsoever with Jewish religious faith, the man has lost touch with reality.

But so, maybe, have I. Here's the story; you be the judge. I never had a Bar-Mitzvah. When I was 13, Hitler was at his height, and in the little Pennsylvania town where I lived, the Jews kept a rather low profile. What's more, my father, with an Orthodox upbringing, had long since swung over to assimilation, and, indeed, delighted in mocking the religion.

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MASTERING THE ART OF GETTING IT

by The Jew Named Patrick

A century ago, my great-grandmother decided not to be Jewish anymore. Her husband had passed away, there was anti-Semitism where they lived, and it seemed the safest road to travel. She stopped living as a Jew, changed the family's last name, and assimilated into the nations.

Although her daughter, my grandmother, had an awareness of being Jewish, she never directly mentioned it to my mother. As a high school student, my mother came home to a daily query of, "What did you learn today?" On this particular day, history class had included the Wright Brothers.

"And who were these Wright Brothers?" my grandmother asked.

"Why, they invented the airplane," responded my mother.

In a heated and loud voice, my grandmother responded, "They most certainly did not invent the airplane! The airplane was invented by your Great-Uncle Stein in Germany."

My mother suggested that Stein was a (cont on p 2)

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Jewish name; to which my grandmother responded, "Not necessarily, and I don't want to talk about it further."

Of course, things Jewish do not die easily in the heart of any Jew and my grandmother had a number of unique habits. For example, on Fridays, she cleaned the house thoroughly and baked egg bread for the evening meal. She bought her meat and fish products from Jewish butchers, refused to mix meat products with milk products, separated eggs, and taught my mother the principles of family purity.

Although two generations of my family were lost to Judaism and never had an opportunity to experience the beauty and wonder of being Jewish, 100 years later, the great-grandson of the matriarch who chose to assimilate into the nations has returned to traditional Orthodox Judaism closing the circle opened a century ago.

Lessons in Getting It

The path leading to that return held twists and turns, hurdles and set-backs, and a multitude of valuable lessons on how to acquire an observant life. Perhaps the greatest lesson of all is the art of "Getting It". Although *Getting It* means adapting to new levels of observance, it has greater meaning than that. It means incorporating new aspects of a *frum* life into one's very being so that these become valuable and wonderful keepsakes, like the Torah itself, to be treasured and protected.

At an early point in my discovery of Judaism, I met a man by the name of Steve Lang. He, like myself and others, attended the weekly Chumash class sponsored by Chabad of Southern Nevada. One week, a person asked about the many "hows" of living an observant life. Steve said something that stuck with me and helped me realize how to live as a Torah Jew.

He said, "There is an old Yiddish saying that translates as, 'What comes like the wind, goes like the wind.' In other words, take everything one step at a time -- as you sense you are ready to progress upward. When you do that, you'll incorporate everything (kosher, Shabbat, and so on) for a lifetime."

With that formula, I was able to make the transition from a non-religious lifestyle to that of observance. The habits have stayed with me, and become a host of riches. At times, I now wonder how I ever lived without Shabbat. How could I have worked through each week, month after month, without having that one day of total rest? Recently an acquaintance who is not Jewish, asked me, "How can you live with all those restrictions?" Without thinking, I responded, "What restrictions? Shabbat does not have any restrictions. Shabbat is total and complete freedom." Once incorporated, once made a part of a person's life, Shabbat becomes that -- a 25 hour period of total and complete freedom from the world, its cares and problems. After all, during Shabbat, there is nothing we can do about those problems anyway -- might as well stop worrying and enjoy the freedom. Afterwards, we are 100% rejuvenated and refreshed.

When I heard the phrase about the wind, I was still very new at everything. Just the same, the Yiddish saying has stayed with me and supported me throughout my journey home. Each step is just that -- a step. And *getting it* usually means taking three steps forward, a step back, four forward, two back. It also means learning to accept and cherish the backward steps as much as the forward, and learning to accept ourselves as we are. It means learning to love

ourselves as people, family members, a part of the Nation of Israel. After all, with something so vast as Judaism, there is no way to "get it" all at once; if at all.

Judaism - Religion of Positives

One of the most beautiful aspects of Judaism is the positive mitzvot. Much of what we do is positive in nature as opposed to prohibited. Positive mitzvot are bonus opportunities, that when observed, elevate us to a better understanding of Judaism. Not too long ago, for example, I met a person who said, "My idea for improving this year is to make the blessings whenever I eat something." There is no direct penalty for not saying these blessings. However, by saying them, the person gains a bonus, an elevated sense of experiencing the spiritual side of Judaism.

With the High Holy Days behind us, I can say with pride that, for the first time, I prayed Selichot each morning. While doing so one particular morning, two things hit me. The first is something I've understood from early on but neglected to think about; the second was new.

A JEW NAMED PATRICK?



"Jewish observance" has a unique quality to it. We begin to take hold of it, understand it, and apply it to our lives in meaningful ways. At the same time, observance begins to take hold of us. In other words, it is as if G-d recognizes our efforts and commitments and, in so doing, gives additional meaning and significance to our actions. With this additional sense of importance, we experience Judaism on a new, higher spiritual level that becomes uniquely personal in nature. When Judaism takes hold of us in this way, it is almost as if G-d is saying, "You have come home to Me and I can't let you go, nor will I let you fall or fail."

The second idea is similar to the first. When we take Judaism to heart and make it a valuable part of our physical, emotional, family, and spiritual lives, we are making a commitment to it, our people, and G-d. With that commitment comes support and encouragement from Hashem. Let me put this in more practical terms. If someone had told me, a year ago, that I would be getting up at 5:30 every morning during the Ten Days to pray Selichot with a minyan, I would have told them they were mistaken. A year ago, I could not imagine praying with a minyan on a daily basis, let alone taking on additional responsibilities. I believe that Hashem has provided me with the wherewithal to do these little extra things that make my practice of Judaism more fulfilling and satisfying in every way. In other words, the blessing, "*Baruch ata Hashem Elokenu melech olam ozebr Yisrael bigvurah* (Blessed are You, L-rd our King of the Universe, who girds Israel with strength)," is realized in little things as well as big things. Hashem gave me

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OY, MY SON... (cont from p 1)

His recital of the Hebrew alphabet began, "Aleph, bet, gimme dollars, halves, quarters, dimes and nickels." As a kid I shrunk from being identified as a Jew. Of my three sons, only one had a Bar Mitzvah, the son of the title. Belongs to a shul in San Francisco. Reformed. Whereas shuls, to me and my other three children, are inimical. So fine. Joe should attend his shul and be happy. But then, a month or so ago, his brother, Henry, mentioned *en passant* that Joe had acquired phylacteries. I sent Joe a note which said, "Where have I failed?"

He wrote back: "Dad, I sense you're puzzled by my ever-increasing Jewishness. You haven't demanded an explanation, but I'll try to offer one.

"As you know, lots of Jews experiment with New Age or Oriental religions. I used to know a Yoga teacher ... one of my recent Israel travel companions (who) calls herself a Jew-Bu. These seekers probably think someone else's god will be more lenient with them than the G-d of Israel. I think they're mistaken.

"For my part, I'm approaching Judaism as a seeker, fascinated by its mystical ambiance and exotic mumbo-jumbo. But I feel less silly laying tefillin than squatting on a straw mat reciting a mantra. The knowledge that my ancestors believed in it makes it easier for me to believe in it.

"It was Orthodox acquaintances in cyberspace who persuaded me to buy tefillin. I dislike Orthodoxy for its reactionary politics, but I think laying tefillin is an interesting and colorful part of the Jewish heritage. Why should only the Orthodox get to experience it?



"Well, that's the best I can explain it, and I trust you've stopped wondering where you went wrong."

I wrote to tell him his feelings both touched and impressed me. He wrote back: "I was flattered by your praise for my last letter, but it was as brief as it was flippant, hardly more than an epigram. Dare I elaborate? Oh, well, if you insist.

"It was from your lips that I first heard the word 'Jew.' You were laughing with Mom about an acquaintance ... I seem to recall ... who had correctly guessed your origins.

"It was also you who taught me to be proud of my heritage. You spoke often of the Jew's suffering under oppression, the Jew's zeal for justice, the Jew's special perspective on the mainstream we could never quite join.

Norman (pseudonym for Joe's high school friend who converted to Episcopalianism and became a priest) wouldn't be a Christian if you'd been her father.

"True, you gave synagogues a wide berth, and mocked

the Passover Haggada. (Note: I once read a passage in the voice of Groucho Marx) ... But even laughing at Judaism, is a style of Jewishness. Goy dads don't read the Four Questions in funny accents.

"I long cultivated that same facetious Judaism, singing Allan Sherman songs and doing guilt schtick. If a friend apologized for anything, I'd say, 'That's all right, my people are used to suffering.' Somehow, though, my timing was never as good as yours or maybe my California crowd didn't know enough of Judaism to get the joke. I needed another way of being Jewish.

"It took me many years ... to find my way (to shul) and start attending. But once I did ... I knew I'd come home. My temple committees are often as frustrating as my day job. But at the office I gripe that they don't understand; at temple I lament that we don't understand.

"Judaism is many different things to me: an intellectual hobby, a nostalgia trip, a way to be different, something to believe in. The last is probably the hardest for you to understand. I think believing in G-d is like falling in love: it may not have any rational basis, but that rarely stops anyone from doing it.

"Our religion is full of disturbing elements. For example ... the Talmudic ban on women rabbis, ignored by Reform Jews on the ground that it has no basis in the Torah. How could it? The rabbinate is a post-Biblical institution. I hate any idea of G-d's judging people by their gender or ancestry. Who could believe in a G-d that shallow?

"In the last analysis, we form our own idea of G-d's will, and we try to live by it. We talk to G-d, frequently or occasionally in ancient formulas or in our own words. And we live for the hope that G-d will respond, that G-d will say something to us. I'm not sure G-d has said anything to me, but last night He seemed to murmur something after the silent prayer. I thought I heard Him say, "There, there. *Everything's going to be all right.*"

Can my son be referring, in certain places, to me, the man Effie - for all his brilliance, effort, and love - couldn't lure into the fold? Or, at least, not yet.

Stuart Hample is a writer-cartoonist who occasionally made cameo appearances at the LSS Beginners Service. His most recent book is "Childrens Letters to G-d," and "My Grandma, My Grandpa" will be coming out in Spring 1997.

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the strength to get up and daven, thus making the High Holy Days all the more meaningful.

In reality, at this point, I cannot imagine doing anything different than what I now do. When it is time for Shacharit, Minchah, and Maariv, I am in the synagogue praying with a minyan. After all, at those times of day, where else would I be? Of course, the truth is that Hashem has been helping me do a little more than what I expected of myself all along. It just took getting up at 5:30 AM every morning for me to notice.

Patrick Mazor is a successful business-person, writer, and lecturer. With his return to Judaism, he invests time writing and speaking about how to experience the joy and wonder of an observant life. Patrick, his wife Sarah, and their son live in New York City.

HOW MERRY IS... (cont. from page 1)

Hannukah's joy has certainly been sustained. Not only have we continued to celebrate Hannukah all these last 2,000 years, but as Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch points out, the message of Hannukah, that G-d dwells in our midst and is concerned with our history, has sustained us through the worst of times. Passing pleasures fade with time, but the candles of Hannukah grow only brighter with the days. This is why, over the objections of certain great Rabbis of ancient times, we light more candles on the eighth day than on the first.

2) Ideal happiness involves the total mind or self. Some activities are a pleasure for the palate but a pain for the stomach, good for the heart, but the legs take a beating. John Dewey wrote, "Happiness is the feeling of the whole self, rather than some aspect of self." John Paul Sartre wrote, "Happiness is absolute engagement," feeling fully engrossed in what we love.

The Shaloh, a great 16th century mystic, writes that since the Greek-Syrians wished "*levatlam Toratecha*" - to obliterate the Torah, we have to dedicate ourselves to "*batmadat HaTorah*" - the constant preoccupation with Torah, the opposite of what the enemy wished upon us. This "total engagement" should be the highest form of happiness.

The Sefat Emet writes that the opposite of "*lehasbkicham Toratecha*" - making us forget the Torah, is to remember the Torah. Therefore, we are told that ideally, where appropriate, we should light the *bannukiah*, the Hannukah menorah, next to the mezuzah, that little box on our door posts. In this way, as we enter our homes to live our lives this week of

Hannukah, with the mezuzah on the right and the *bannukiah* on the left, we won't be able to forget the Torah. If Max Frisch, the Swiss author could write that "Happiness is consciousness set on fire," then our consciousness of the Torah during Hannukah should bring great happiness.

3) Finally, ideal happiness involves something of meaning, importance, or value. The rabbis spoke of "*simcha shel mitzva*", happiness of, or relating to, a good deed or commandment. Even Aristotle wrote that "Happiness lies in virtuous activity." We may feel very happy relaxing all day, but after a time, a certain emptiness overcomes us. What does Hannukah celebrate? Hannukah stands for much more than a mere military victory. It stands for the re-establishment of our dignity, our faith, our ability to perform circumcisions, eat kosher food, and celebrate Shabbat, all of which were in great jeopardy under Greek-Syrian rule. When we celebrate our ability to perform the very essence of our religion, the happiness it entails is deep and long lasting.

Is Hannukah a time of true happiness? Yes, and its message is one of achieving happiness through total engagement in our Torah and its study, over a long period of time, through deep and meaningful activities. How merry is Hannukah supposed to be? It should be very merry if we understand the meaning of true happiness.

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Illustrations by Wendy 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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