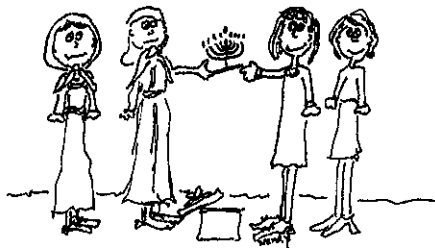


## CHANUKAH GIFTS OF LIGHT

Mim Senft

In a class that I took a number of year ago, the Rabbi led us why we light candles on Chanukah. One person answered, "to fulfill the mitzvah." Another responded, "to remember the miracle in the Temple." The Rabbi liked both answers but was looking for something else. He suggested that the reason we light candles on Chanukah was to create a light in the darkness. He then asked us to think about what that meant. Last year, when I made my second visit to the Jewish community in Lviv, Ukraine, I felt that I came a little closer to understanding what the Rabbi had in mind.



I've been involved in relief/outreach work with the Jewish community in Lviv since 2001. When visiting last December, just a few weeks before Chanukah, I was again reminded of the physical and spiritual darkness of this part of the world. Since my previous visit there had been during the summer, and even though I had seen the poverty and terrible living conditions of many of the Jews there, I had not experienced the bitterness of the cold, dark winters. The harsh starkness of the environment made the contrasts between my life and the lives of the Jews of Lviv even sharper.

Visiting people who have managed to hang on to their Jewish identities through the Holocaust, the Cold War, and spirit-grinding poverty, is an enlightening experience. I was deeply touched when Naftali, a 93 year old man, shared with us a little about his life. He has no living relatives and is solely supported with food, medications, and care that he receives through the Jewish outreach program organized by Meylakh Sheykhet, a leader in the Lviv community. As we sat in his fifth floor, walk-up apartment with erratic heating and little, if any, insulation, Naftali spoke of his driving dedication, and how he still walks to synagogue each Shabbat, about a mile from where he lives.

Naftali told us that during the Stalin years he and others in the community had a matzah maker that they kept hidden, moving it from basement to basement any time they thought the police were suspicious. They started making matzot as early as October in order to ensure that everyone in the community would have enough for Passover. Had they been caught, they would have been arrested...or worse. For Naftali, holding on to tradition and his Jewish identity had been well worth the risk.

Just before we ended our visit, Naftali asked to sing with us, so we stood together in his kitchen and shared a few *niggunim* (songs). That moment brought home to me just how important community is, not only for providing food, clothing and medication, but for providing a spiritual family. I will never forget the light in his eyes as we sang together.

Naftali is just one example of the hundreds of people in Lviv who are trying to stay connected to their Judaism while struggling with day to day life. Certainly, by serving as a conduit and bringing supplies and funds to help support members of the Jewish community, Jews like Naftali, our group was attempting to create a light in the darkness of poverty and isolation. It's not hard to see how writing a check or visiting a sick friend or collecting food to be dis-

tributed to the hungry can make someone else's life a little brighter. What we often miss seeing, however, is that in so doing, we are also given the opportunity to see more of ourselves. We only have to look.

Since my involvement with the Lviv community, I've become aware of this double miracle. Giving to others lifts the darkness between people—it allows us to see the *kedusha* (holiness) in both them and ourselves.

Chanukah is also considered a holiday of education, and I know that this trip provided me with a most humbling lesson, as I witnessed how even small contributions can make such a big impact. To watch someone receive a coat—not a fur coat, not a designer coat, just a simple, practical warm coat—as if it is a treasure, can make one pause and recognize the experience as a chance to learn. That warm coat, for those Jews living in poverty in the Former Soviet Union, is a matter of survival. It is a dramatic contrast to life in the United States, where many of us have closets full of clothes we don't even wear. This contrast makes me reflect on the consumerism and extravagance that creates a darkness that we must overcome and illuminate in our own lives. The light we create by giving is an opportunity to bring more equality into the world by sharing our blessings with those who are in need.

Just as the lights of Chanukah increase each night, so too the light of giving expands with each act. I went to Lviv to give, and in Lviv I learned about giving. The generosity of the people in Lviv is remarkable. Despite their poverty, every person who hosted us did their best to make us feel welcome by offering us a cup of tea, a slice of apple, something from the little they had. One woman, a 90 year old Holocaust survivor, insisted that we each eat a banana, even though it was probably the only fruit she had in her home. Not only did the Jews of Lviv honor us with their stories and family photos and their interest in us, but, despite the fact that they have so little, they were determined to be gracious hosts. The light of their generous spirit inspired me, and I resolved to work at being a better hostess, to continue to be more open to people of all backgrounds, and to find more ways to treat neighbors and strangers as I want to be treated.

During this year's Festival of Lights, I will be thinking of my friends in Lviv. I am continually thankful for the different "lights" that we have shared with each other, and for the light that they continue to bring into my life. I hope that all of us take the time to bring some of that symbolic light from our menorahs into the world in the coming year—each in our own way, a donation to a worthy cause, a smile to a stranger, a day spent volunteering at a shelter or soup kitchen, an hour spent delivering food to a shut-in...or whatever mitzvah opportunity is presented to us by Hashem. Unlike other gifts, this gift of light does not come wrapped in paper and ribbons, and will never be lost or broken or outdated. It will always shine.

*Mim Senft, a member of the Lincoln Square Beginners Service, works in private equity investment. She would like to add a special thank you to Shlomo Ben-Yaacov.*

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Coventry Road, Livingston, NJ 07039

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