

BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

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for Beginners,
by Beginners

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בראשית

MY PERSONAL MIRACLES

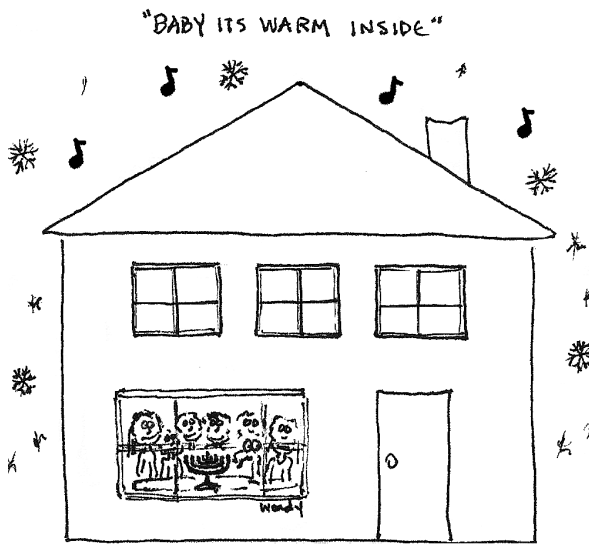
Sarah Rochel Hewitt

It gets dark early in Montreal. It's darker and colder than anywhere I've ever lived before. At Chanukah time, however, my home has never had so much light.

I got married later than I expected or hoped. I had believed that just by living an observant lifestyle, I would find a husband one-two-three. While I had attended day school as a child, I only began a serious involvement in traditional Judaism when I was in college. During my junior year of college I attended Hebrew University in Jerusalem, where I met many wonderful families who guided me, learned with me and inspired me. But as much as I chose to live a life that included Torah and mitzvot, I must admit that a great part of the attraction for me was the family life I witnessed.

Naively (I was only 20), I believed that all I had to do was let people know that I wanted to get married, and I would be introduced to "him" within the year. I was certain that I would be married by 25, but my 25th birthday found me alone, crying on my pillow. Fortunately, I met my husband shortly before I turned 29.

(cont. on p. 2)



OF FIRE AND WATER

Chava Blumenthal

Despite being a classic Pisces, I was always fascinated by fire. As a matter of fact, not only was I a fish out of water in any aquatic environment, I was a complete and total hydrophobic.

Chanukah was always my second most favorite holiday in the world. (Passover always assumed first place, as I was born a week before the Seder.) Chanukah had all the right components. Food drenched in oil was not only allowed, but actually encouraged. I received *Dmey Chanukah* (Chanukah money) with which I always added at least one new dreidel to my ever-growing collection. Living in Israel, I finally had eight whole days off from school (after two long vacation-less months). Most important of all, I was allowed to light fire--and add additional fire each night of those eight magical days.

On any given night of Chanukah, if you were to fly at a slight distance over Jerusalem, you would have seen--just as Antoine de Saint-Exupery's pilot did the lamplighters of Earth--the beautiful dance of the Chanukah lights. One by one, as if by cue, thousands of flames would light up the Jerusalem night.

Closing in on a narrow street of a small old Jerusalem neighborhood, you would have found me standing next to my parents, just outside the door of our modest apartment. My father would be getting ready to light the wicks, floating on top of the oil in small shot glasses, all placed in a lovely house-shaped Menorah box made of aluminum and glass. The *shamash* (serving candle) had the esteemed upper 'window' position, overlooking all this fire, as if to make sure that it does not get out of control.

Every year, children and passers-by would gather by our front porch to enjoy my father's strong voice, beautifully singing out the blessings. I would follow suit by lighting my color-coordinated candles in my own Menorah (or *chanukiya*, as Israelis would have it).

(cont. on p. 2)

MY PERSONAL MIRACLES (cont. from p. 1)...

I now understand that the period of six or seven years of dating I went through was relatively short. But when I was in the thick of it, it felt like forever. What is ironic about my years of waiting and searching, however, is that while I was busy visiting families for Shabbat, involving myself with the community, learning and growing, my *bashert* (intended partner), wasn't even Jewish yet. As I was learning in seminary in Israel, he was just starting to think that maybe he wanted to be Jewish. As I started my position at a national Jewish organization, he was dipping himself in the mikveh to complete his conversion. And even if we had met back then, when he first converted, it wouldn't have been the right time. Neither of us would have been able to see each other clearly.

Some people call Chanukah the "Festival of Light" and assume that it is merely a celebration intended to brighten the dark nights of winter. I guess if the holiday had originated in the dark, cold north (in a place like Montreal) that would be reasonable. But the miracle we celebrate on Chanukah happened in the Land of Israel (much closer to the equator). The darkness that was eradicated at Chanukah was not physical darkness, but the Jewish people's inability to see that the ways of the Syrian-Greeks, the Hellenistic life style that had been presented so benignly to them, was poisoning their relationship with G-d.

While Chanukah is a particularly nationalistic holiday, it also has much to teach the individual. Most people go through a period of darkness at least once in their life. These are the times when we let ourselves believe that things are too difficult and that the lives of others are easier. Sometimes we even feel as if G-d has abandoned us, as I can imagine some Jews felt when the Syrian-Greeks were enforcing the laws that prohibited Torah study and Shabbat. Certainly some of the non-combatants who suffered the wrath of the Syrian-Greek occupying forces must have felt this way ... but the suffering was as important, and as Divinely ordained, as was the miracle.

The Jews in those ancient times could be divided into three camps. Some Jews were drawn to the Hellenists, who wanted to assimilate and therefore assumed Greek names and a lifestyle to suit. Other Jews fought the Syrian-Greeks and ignored the prohibitions against learning Torah and observing the mitzvot. And then there was everyone else in-between, the people who did not dedicate themselves one way or the other. It was this third group of people who needed to behold a miracle.

And there wasn't just one miracle but a series of miracles. It was a miracle that the Syrian-Greeks were pushed back by the Maccabees. It was a miracle that even one small cask of oil was found. It was a miracle that the menorah flames continued to burn for eight days. Each of these larger miracles was the result of many smaller miracles as well.

That's life. Most of us are focused on day-to-day living rather than the greater ideological battles of our time. Certainly, I know I am. I also know that I've had my own times of darkness, times where I wondered where G-d was in my life. As the adage goes, hindsight is always 20/20. Today, when I see the end results, the miracles, I see clearly that my life really was being guided the whole time.

I finally met my husband the week before Chanukah in 2002. (Oddly enough, thinking back, that year I was visiting my mother on Chanukah and I was so distracted--probably thinking about my upcoming second date--that I actually forgot to light the Chanukah candles on the first night!) For seven and a half years now we've shared our lives together and, in many ways, he is my *shamash*, my helper-candle, who always helps me to see the Divine light in every situation.

This Chanukah, our house will be full of light as we share the true tale of Chanukah, the story of the strength of a people who emerged victorious against incredible odds, with our four beautiful children, each of whom is our own little miracle.

Sarah Rochel Hewitt, the editor of Bereshith and author of NJOP's popular JewishTreats.org, lives in Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

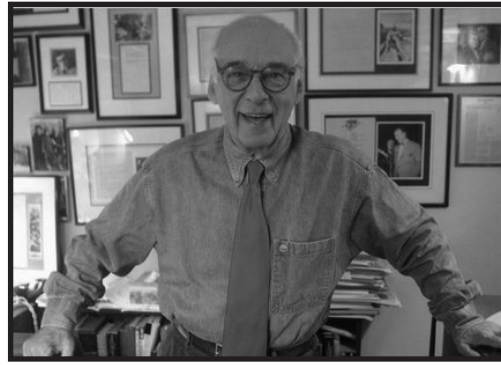
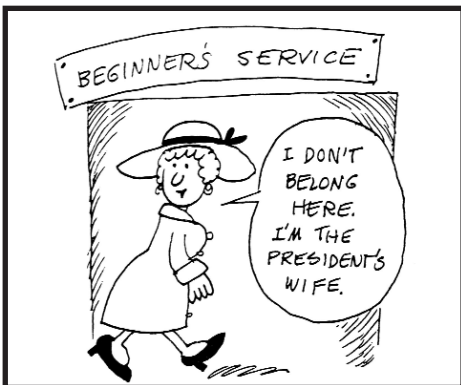
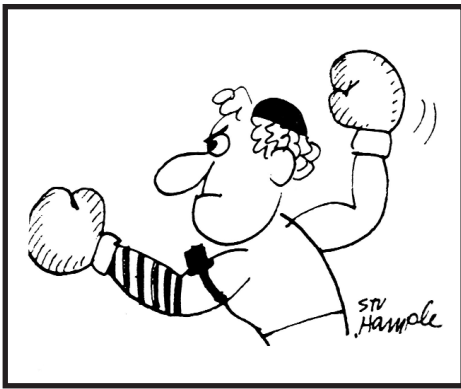


OF FIRE AND WATER (cont. from p. 1)...

But on the first night, my father, the strong-character, third-generation Jerusalemite and an Israeli macho, would break down in tears--albeit for only a few seconds--while reciting the third blessing, *Shehechyanu* (the blessing for having been kept alive). He was overwhelmed with joy and gratitude to G-d for having merited to play an active part in the miracle of the birth of the State of Israel, and to witness its prosperity. Yes, the little Yankel Blumenthal, my tough father, who grew up in bitter poverty, was a part of the few that beat the many--just like the Maccabees in the miracle of Chanukah. "You delivered the strong into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few" (*Al HaNissim* prayer). And that cannot be taken lightly!

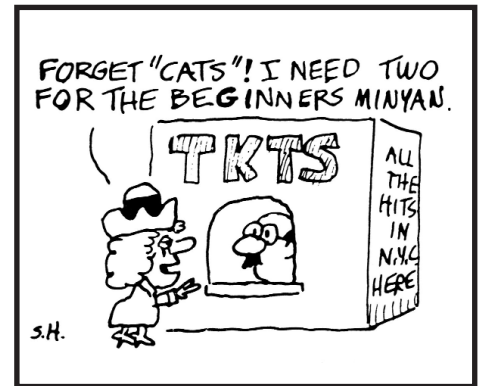
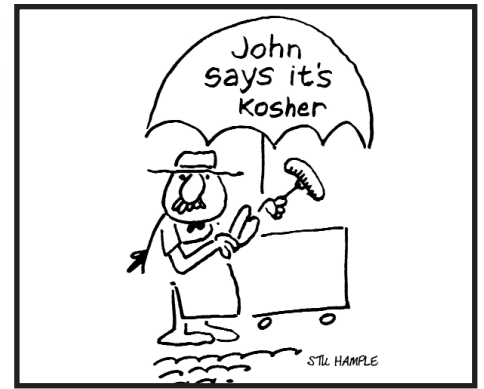
Over the years, Chanukah was always in strong contention to become my most favorite holiday, not just because of the physical fire, but mostly for "the little oil can that could," and for the inner flame (cont. on p. 4)

STU HAMPLE



Stuart (Shloimie) Hample was a renowned humorist and cartoonist who passed away on September 19th 2010 at age 84. His good friend, the award winning writer/producer Allen Leicht, introduced him to the Beginners service. Despite his protestations about the existence of G-d, he became an early and vocal participant at the service. Few of his ideas about the deity ever changed. Yet, despite his skepticism, he spent many Tuesday mornings discussing Judaism with the rabbi of the Beginners service that resulted in a non-published book entitled *The Reluctant Jew*.

From 1976-1984 he wrote and illustrated the syndicated column strip, *Inside Woody Allen*. But more significantly, he became the illustrator of the Beginners Service newsletter, *Bereshith*, drawing cartoons and illustrations from 1980-1987. Some of them are published here, others can be seen online at <http://njop.org/stu-hample/>. He was the co-author with Eric Marshall of a bestselling book, *Children's Letters to G-d*, which was later produced as an off-Broadway play. We will miss him. Condolences to his wife, Naomi, and his children, Rabbi Joseph, Henry, Martha, and Zack. (His *New York Times* obituary may be seen at <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/24/arts/24hample.html>)



OF FIRE AND WATER (cont. from p. 2)...burning strong in the hearts of the Maccabees, the underdogs, that drove them to launch an almost impossible battle against the vast Greek army.

Being an outsider for most of my life, as well as an underdog, and--inspired by my father--a non-conformist, I found Chanukah to be uplifting, because it celebrates little oil cans that surprise everyone by burning consistently for eight days, and a small army of rebels who beat many enemies--and validates them by granting them an honorable place in the Jewish calendar.

My swimming teacher, Rivka, was a fiery redhead, who possessed the ability to perfectly balance her burning flame of "failure is not an option" with a calm (and forever smiley) assurance that it is never too late to learn, and that each person has their personal timetable. I was 32, and for the first time in my life, as I let her help me float, breathe underwater and swim while holding her hands and listening to her encouraging words, I actually celebrated the true spirit of Chanukah.

Much to my surprise, Rivka's fire has had a tremendously positive ripple effect on every aspect of my life outside the beautiful Jerusalem pool where we had our lessons.

On Friday, October 29th, three years after I first waded into the water with her, and about a month before Chaunkah, Rivka's fiery, optimistic and rebellious battle against cancer was over. I was at my desk at NJOP, when I read the devastating news posted on her blog by a friend. Through the tears and indescribable pain, I made a conscious decision to continue to be inspired by Rivka's fire and ensure that my inner flame will be nourished and kept lit by happiness and optimism, as long as I merit to be alive on this earth.

"Many waters cannot quench love,
neither can the floods drown it..." (Song of Songs 8:7)
In honor and loving memory of Rivka Matitya's flame.

Chava is a fourth generation Jerusalemite on her father's side, currently living in Monsey, New York. She is a regional program coordinator, and a Hebrew Reading Crash Course teacher at the NJOP office in Manhattan. She can be contacted at chava@njop.org.




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Torah
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Bereshith: "In the Beginning" is edited under the direction of Sarah Rochel Hewitt of the National Jewish Outreach Program. 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 NJOP programs, please contact us: 989 Sixth Avenue, 10th Floor, New York, NY 10018, 646-871-4444, e-mail info@njop.org or visit www.njop.org.

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