

BERESHITH

"IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter
for Beginners,
by Beginners

Vol. XXV No. 2

Kislev 5772/December 2011



בראשית

THE CHANUKAH CONUNDRUM

Liran Weizman

Chanukah is coming! You might get confused if you walk outside your home and see the lights and Christmas trees, and the celebration of a holiday completely different than our own. But do not fear, I will show you that the *kedusha* (holiness) of Chanukah is all around us. We just have to make an extra effort to feel it.

The Sages of the Talmud record a dispute concerning the lighting of the Chanukah menorah. Beit Shammai argues that on the first night one lights eight candles, and each subsequent day, the number of candles is reduced by one (i.e. on the second day there are seven, and etc). But, Beit Hillel offers the opposite opinion, saying that on the first day one lights a single candle and on each subsequent day the number of candles is increased by one (i.e. on the second day there are two, and etc.).

Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler (1892 - 1953) uses this dispute to offer a deeper understanding of the meaning of Chanukah and how we the Jewish people experience Chanukah.

On the weeks preceding Chanukah, we are beyond excited! We buy our dreidels, prepare our latkes, and make our jelly doughnuts!! We're ready for eights nights of undiluted happiness and fun! When (cont. on p. 2)



SOUL SURVIVAL

Rabbi Moshe Mirsky

Chanukah and Purim are noted as the two best known post-Biblical holidays. But, there is an interesting Halachic (Jewish legal) difference between the two. On Purim, there is a mitzvah to partake of a feast; however, there is no such special obligation to eat a festive meal on Chanukah.

Rabbi Mordechai Yoffee in his *Levush Mordechai* offers an historical explanation for this difference. Haman, the antagonist of the Purim story, attempted to *physically* annihilate the Jews. Thankfully, G-d performed a miracle through Mordechai and Esther and Haman's plan was thwarted. We therefore celebrate this miracle in a physical way by eating and drinking, thereby nourishing the very bodies that Haman sought to destroy.

On Chanukah, however, the Syrian-Greeks did not seek to kill the Jews per se. Their objective was that the Jews give up their Jewish observances and beliefs. To be sure, physical harm was used as a means to this end, and (cont. on p. 3)

LIGHT IS LIGHT IS LIGHT

Chaviva Galatz

A few years ago, when I was living in Connecticut, I found myself in the elevator of the Science Center on December 24, surprised by the normal nature of the day. In the elevator was a sign: "Science Center closes at 3 p.m. today in honor of the holiday!" In my head, all I could think was how weird it is that although a majority of Americans celebrate Christmas, the day had become just like any other day for me -- someone who had once counted down the days to the holiday every year, someone who had cherished the songs and melodies, someone who had especially looked forward to the strings of light draped along the lines of homes and the naked branches of trees. But that's before I was Jewish.

Every year, when December rolls around, I can't help but reflect on how, once upon a time, I was a Christmas Super Fan. I loved the songs, the trees, the (cont. on p. 2)

CHANUKAH CANUNDRUM (cont. from p. 1)...the first night of Chanukah arrives and we're ready - we express the most intense feelings of happiness by lighting the menorah. We're so excited to say the blessing, light the candles, give presents and play the dreidel.

Then comes the second night, the third night, etc.--we're still excited, but not quite as excited as on the previous night. It's all just a little less thrilling. I am certain that this revelation is nothing new to you--it is felt year after year...

When you do something repeatedly, eight times in a row, there comes a point where it doesn't mean as much. It becomes something that you have to do. Then, perhaps, you might run out to go bowling or to hang out with your friends, and forget to light the candles...

The intensity of the feelings decrease each day. With this understanding, we can really begin to understand what Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel were saying.

Rabbi Dessler says there are three levels of the soul: *nefesh* (the lowest), *ruach* (the middle) and *neshama* (the highest).

Nefesh and *ruach* are the most basic levels of the soul.

When people look at Chanukah only through *nefesh*, they miss the significance of the holiday and are more likely to skip lighting the candle for one night in order to go hang out with friends, or perhaps feel that they have had enough of Chanukah by the fifth night. Even when people look at Chanukah through *ruach*, they might feel the highs of Chanukah, but after too many nights of beauty and holiness, it often becomes easy to take some of those spiritual highs for granted.

The *neshama* is the highest level of the soul. When Chanukah is celebrated each night via the *neshama*, it makes a lasting impact, allowing the joy of Chanukah to leave an indelible mark of holiness on one's soul. The experience is so deep that when a person is on this level, he/she can take the feeling, tap into it at all times and build on it. It is through the *neshama* that we see each increasing flame as an opportunity for growth.

Now that we understand the different levels of the soul, we may internalize what Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel are referring to:

Beit Shammai is saying that the law of Chanukah should be structured for the person who sees only through *nefesh*. In such instances, it makes sense to start off with eight candles and decrease the amount each day by one. In this way, the first night would be the height of the mitzvah and the inspiration. Through each passing night, it would become less intense, more routine, and therefore the diminution of the brightness of the candles will accommodate those feelings.

According to Beit Hillel, the law itself enables individual Jews to reach their potential. A Jew doesn't necessarily have to experience Chanukah on the most basic *nefesh* level, since it's within each person to reach the *neshama* level. One just has to strive for it.

Beit Hillel therefore argues that as each night increases in intensity, we can feel the beauty of Chanukah increasing by the increase in light.

Looking a bit deeper, we may understand that Beit Shammai's position allows people to only reach their most basic potential and not ask for more than that. Beit Hillel stands adamantly against this point of view, focusing on the beautiful opportunity to open up and maximize our inner potentials. Each of us has a dormant spiritual quality that's waiting to come out, if only we act on it this Chanukah.

Jewish law follows the opinion of Beit Hillel, because when we increase the light each night, we demonstrate our increasing potential. By doing so, we recognize the potential within ourselves. We need to ask ourselves "What am I doing that I shouldn't be doing?" and "What am I not doing that I should be doing, that really reflects my potential to be the best I can be?"

Let us hope that on this Chanukah we all grow more spiritually than physically despite the amount of calories we will consume from all the deliciously fried food of Chanukah. May each of us reach our potential, actualize it and realize that nothing is beyond our reach.

Liran Weizman, an 18 years old student at Stern College, is originally from Hong Kong. She loves spending her time making people happy and helping them reach their full potential. She tries to be a Kiddush Hashem her every waking moment.

LIGHT IS LIGHT IS (cont. from p. 1)...lights, the food, the celebration. In my parents' house Christmas was the kind of day where everyone sat back and watched TV, played with their new gadgets and gizmos, and ate Christmas classics. The aura of the day was beautiful. The only reason to leave the house on Christmas in our house was to see the lights.

Those lights are something that has carried with me as I became Jewish and began celebrating Chanukah. I bought my first menorah at a Walgreens in Lincoln, Nebraska, and lit it in my small apartment for the first time, watching the flickering light up the room. Something that has always stood out to me about Judaism is the embrace of light--the command in Isaiah (cont. on p. 4)



SOUL SURVIVAL (cont. from p. 1)...Jews, such as Hannah and her seven sons (who refused to obey the Greeks' decrees) were put to death. However, the battle of the Maccabees was basically intended to preserve the *spiritual* identity of the Jewish people. The Jews risked their lives so that they would be able to study Torah, observe Shabbat, eat kosher food, and openly profess their belief in G-d. As a result, we celebrate their miraculous victory in a spiritual way by lighting the candles, singing praises to G-d, and expounding on the Torah. But, there is no special mitzvah to make a Chanukah feast unless one is making a separate mitzvah feast (like a *brit milah*, wedding or a *siyyum*, celebration of the completion of studying a section of Torah).

Here is a fun way of remembering the difference between Chanukah and Purim: On Chanukah we play the dreidel, a special top whose handle faces *upward* toward heaven. On Purim, we use a grogger, a noisemaker, to drown out the name of Haman. The handle of the grogger faces *downward* toward the earth.

Growing up in an observant home, Chanukah was always a special time for me and my family. Yes, there was good food, playing dreidel, parties and Chanukah gelt, but there was also a deep sense of celebrating our Jewishness. The passing last year of my maternal grandmother, the matriarch of our family, sparked in me memories of Chanukah at her home. Bubbie lost most of her family in the Holocaust. Yet, she prided herself that her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren remained loyal to their Jewish faith and heritage. When we lit the menorah, we were declaring that even if we as a people should be on the brink of despair or

destruction, G-d will show us the light and give us the strength to continue our sacred mission on earth.

As a congregational rabbi, I have worked with NJOP almost since its inception. With NJOP's great programs, publicity, guidance and support, I have seen people come to a Hebrew reading class not only to learn a language, but to reconnect with their Jewish roots. Others have come to Shabbat Across America and have expressed to me how surprised they were that a synagogue service could be so joyous and welcoming. Others have changed their lives in small, meaningful ways. Last Passover, a non-Jewish family came to our Passover Across America program. This was their very first encounter with a synagogue. They are currently on the path to conversion. The parents have already rearranged their work schedules so that they do not have to work on Shabbat.

At the time of this writing, we are planning our annual synagogue Chanukah party. My wife is busy arranging the entertainment and the logistics. My young son has prepared a Chanukah word search puzzle. I am trying to publicize the event as much as possible. It is a time that we often see unaffiliated Jews, particularly with small children, come into the shul. I look forward to lighting the menorah with them.

It is my prayer that as we light our Chanukah candles, we will spiritually ignite the flame of the Jewish soul inside each of us, so that, together, we may take another step upwards toward God.

Rabbi Moshe Mirsky is the spiritual leader of Congregation Beth Israel of Schenectady, NY.



LIGHT IS LIGHT IS (cont. from p. 2)...to be a light unto the nations, to stand out as an example of how to live and how to carry yourself as a shining brightness. Chanukah, to me, enhances that light a million fold.

I was blessed to be in Jerusalem for Chanukah last year, and I was reminded of my previous life in Nebraska and Missouri when my dad would drive us around as a family to look at the varied and unique displays of lights in every neighborhood around town. But there was something more simple, more special about walking down small streets and streets-turned-alleyways in Jerusalem seeing light at every turn, bright with the lights of the menorah. No gaudy plastic santas or lights synced to classic holiday tunes--just bright bits of light, their flames swimming toward the sky. But still, there's something universal about the lights of the holiday season.

A few years back, my mom sent me a photo of one of her oldest ornaments that she has put on the tree since the 1980s. It's made of mirrors, much like all of her early ornaments, and her comment with it was, "Did you know

that one of the mirror ornaments is a six-pointed star ... we must have known way back then that it would represent you." I'm now the proud owner of this family Christmas relic with a Jewish twist.

Every year around this time, I try to flesh out my feelings about holidays gone by and how they impact my experiences now, as a Jew. It's impossible to wash them away or even to wish them gone. In fact, I think the fact that I have positive memories of that time of my life is good--they're all a part of who I was, and inevitably have shaped who I am and will shape who I become.

A full-time blogger at www.kvetchingeditor.com, Chaviva is a social media and website management maven, editor, writer, and consultant on all things social networking. She lives in Denver, Colorado, where she aspires to finally make it to the mountains.



**Rabbi Buchwald's
Weekly
Torah
Message**

Words of Torah for everyone!

To receive Rabbi Buchwald's exciting and provocative weekly e-mail message, please send an e-mail to: ezbuchwald@njop.org

To receive a juicy bit of Judaism, daily, from Jewish Treats, please send an e-mail to: jewishtreats@njop.org



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.

Readers: This is your newsletter and we'd like to hear from you. Article contributions are always welcome.

Illustrations by Wendy Dunn



**989 SIXTH AVENUE, 10TH FLOOR
NEW YORK, NY 10018
1-800-44-HEBRE(W)
www.njop.org**