**Shabbos Stories for**

**chanukah 5781**

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**The Concentration Camp Chanukah Menorah**



Photo of Hannukah Lamp made in Theresienstadt concentration camp (courtesy of The Jewish Museum, New York)

 We will now tell a story of a Yid who was religious before the war but dropped everything after the war. Once again, we don't judge him; it is impossible to judge him.

 After the war, he moved to a small village in the southern United States. He and his family may have been the only Yidden living there. They didn't know; religion wasn't something they discussed. His third generation American wife was very distant from religion, and their only son was being raised like that as well.

**Americans, Not Jews**

 When people inquired about their faith, their response was, "We're American." They didn't want to remember their Jewish heritage. Nevertheless, when their son turned thirteen, the father told him, "The thirteenth birthday is a special day for Jews. We will travel to the city, and you can choose any present you desire."

 They were prosperous; money wasn't an issue for them, and the father was prepared to buy anything his son wanted. They went to various stores, but the boy didn't find anything he wanted. Then they passed a Judaica store, and the boy, suddenly enthusiastic, said that he wants to go in.

 The father replied, "There's nothing there besides for antiques that you won't appreciate and religious items you don't need."

 The father was worried that his son might be showing interest in Judaism, something he was trying to escape from for so many years. But the boy insisted that he wants to go into this store, so the father obliged. The boy walked around the store with his eyes opened wide. It was like he couldn't see enough.

**A Chanukah Menorah Made from Clay**

 And then he saw a Chanukah menorah made from clay. It was old, but by the intricate artwork, it was evident that the creator made it with a lot of devotion and care.

 "That's what I want," the boy said.

 The father replied, "I will buy you anything you want, but not that."

 The boy replied, "We went to many stores, and I didn't ask for anything. This is what I want."

 The father asked the store owner to tell him about the menorah. The owner said, "This precious menorah was found in a concentration camp, shortly after the war. Obviously, in the camps, there weren't Chanukah menorahs. This inmate created this one, concealed from the eyes of the S.S. soldiers so that he could light the Chanukah lecht."

 When the boy heard the story of the menorah, he wanted it even more. The father and the store owner agreed on a (very high) price, and the boy left the store very proud of his present. The son spent many hours looking at the menorah as he tried to imagine the conditions under which it was constructed. He also wondered about the craftsman who made it: Is he still alive? What is his life like now? How was his life back then?

**The Son’s Interest Frightened His Parents**

 At first, the son's interest and intrigue frightened his parents. Eventually, they figured it was just a phase their son was going through, and he would soon drop his attraction to Yiddishkeit. But when Chanukah was approaching, the boy took out the menorah. He wanted to light it, but the menorah slipped out of his hands and broke in many parts. The boy was devastated.

 The father said, "Don't worry about it. We will try to put it back together again." As they worked on the menorah, a piece of paper fell out of one of the hollow branches, and the father fainted.

 When he was revived, he explained, "This paper, written in Yiddish, tells the story of the person who built this menorah. I'll read it to you: 'I have to work fourteen hours each day. At night, I abstain from sleep so I can build this menorah that says on it ואנוהו קלי זה .In a few months, it will be Chanukah, and I will light this menorah. If chas veshalom I don't live until then – because no one knows what the morrow will bring – I request that whoever finds this menorah should light the candles on Chanukah, and thereby, my neshamah will also have an aliyah… The letter is signed…" and the father read the signature.

**Came Back Home with Hashgachah Pratis**

 It was his own name. He had made this menorah years before, during the Holocaust. With hashgachah pratis, it came back home. The father never did teshuvah, but the story touched his son's heart, and eventually, he did teshuvah sheleimah. Today he has a family, all of them following Torah and mitzvos. In the camps, the father built a menorah with mesirus nefesh. And when one serves Hashem with mesirus nefesh, blessings will come from it.

*Reprinted from the Parhas Chaya Sara 5781 email of Torah Wellsprings: Collected Thoughts from Rabbi Eli Biderman.*

**My Last Line of Defense**

**How Chanukah Kept Me Jewish When All Else Failed.**

**By** [**Ross Hirschmann**](http://www.aish.com/authors/48865932.html)



Growing up, there was not much about Judaism that I loved, or even liked for that matter. Passover was a bust (the Four Questions was the only acting gig I met that I didn't like), and don't get me started on Yom Kippur (can you say, "Starvation without meaning"?).

With my father making me miss high school football games and dances for something he called "Shabbos," you can pretty much guess how I felt about Judaism by age 16. *Hated it!*

But there was one Jewish thing that I connected with from the time I was a kid: Chanukah. I know it sounds so cliche to say that the only Jewish holiday a secular Jewish kid from Walnut Creek like me enjoyed was the one that occurred close to Christmas, but it's true. I've always *loved* Chanukah. In fact, it was Chanukah that probably saved me from giving up on Judaism all together.

As a kid, my house was not the place to be for the holidays. *Any* holiday. There was always so much pressure to have the "perfect holiday" that usually everyone ended up very tense and unhappy by the day's end.

My father was always particularly tense around Rosh Hashana, but not without some justification. It was tough trying to get five little kids into the car so we could all get to temple on time to celebrate the festive New Year. But since we were always running late, (inevitably someone's shoe was missing or hair wasn't just right) we usually brought in the New Year in a manner that was, well, let's just say "less than festive." Yom Kippur was the same situation, different holiday, but with the added "wildcard" of a fast mixed in.

**Reliving the Yom Kippur Fast on Thanksgiving Day**

Thanksgiving did not fare much better either. The turkey always took longer than the "meat guy" at Safeway said it would (which led to us reliving the Yom Kippur fast), the yams weren't as good as the year before and the true pain of having to sit through yet another Detroit Lions football game on TV all added up to, well, not much fun.

But Chanukah was different. Maybe it was because my dad lost steam after all the tension of the "big" holidays, or maybe it was because nobody had grand expectations of making a "Chanukah to Remember," or maybe it was because no one particularly cared. I don't know. Whatever the reason, Chanukah was relaxed and even fun.

And it wasn't because of the presents. Believe me, with five kids to shop for there weren't a lot of presents.

As a boy Chanukah had particular appeal because well -- let's face it -- Chanukah is a really good war story. It's like D-Day for the Jews. My father was a decorated B-25 pilot during WW II and I grew up hearing his war stories. They captivated me. The battles, the heroics, beating the odds, successfully completing the "mission impossible" -- my father had done it all. But he did it as a part of the United States Army.

**The Story of Overcoming the Odds**

Chanukah told the story how the *Jewish* Army overcame the odds and beat the stuffing out of the Syrian Greeks. The Chanukah story had everything dad's war stories had: battles, heroics, beating the odds and completing successfully the "mission impossible."

But Chanukah had something more: it had G-d. The story of Chanukah not only gave me a sense of a proud and even "tough" lineage as a kid, but it also taught me what my mom always told me: You can always rely on G-d to take care of you.

Every night after we lit the menorah, we'd sing Rock of Ages. Even as a kid, my eyes always welled up with tears when we sang the verse, "And Thy word broke their swords, when our own strength failed us." The thought that G-d, with just one of His words, could break an enemy's sword and defeat him for us was overwhelming to me. Somehow it got through to me that alone we're helpless, vulnerable, defeatable. But with G-d's help we can do anything, overcome anything, accomplish anything. Even when we believe we can't.

**Finding Even More Profundity in the Chanukah Story**

Now that I am a religious adult, I see even more profundity in the Chanukah story. It's still a great war story, but now I also realize that it's a story about my own battles: first against Judaism when I was growing up, and now my present struggle to preserve Judaism within in my family.

Growing up, I was surrounded by the world of Walnut Creek, a world that encouraged me at every corner to assimilate into the general, American, Christian culture. As a kid I thought, "Well, that sounds good to me!" I mean who wants to stand out as "odd guy out" or worse as "Jewish Guy Out"? Not me. I was no Judah Maccabee. In fact I was just the opposite -- I was my own Syrian-Greek. I encouraged myself to assimilate as much as possible.

But just like with the Maccabees, G-d saved me from losing Judaism all together. The odds against this happening were great: all of Walnut Creek and secular culture versus G-d saving one Jewish soul. The Almighty had to come up with something good, something powerful. And He did. He gave me a holiday I could enjoy, something Jewish that I could cling to. He gave me Chanukah.

Having that allowed me to say, "Well, maybe I won't chuck all this Jewish stuff just yet. Maybe it's okay to be Jewish -- just a little bit." In the end, as in the story of Chanukah, G-d won. Judaism survived in me.

**The Tough Battles When Becoming Religious in Your 30s**

When you become religious in your 30's, however, you also face some pretty tough battles -- against yourself, against society, even against some well-meaning family members -- in order to preserve Judaism in your life and your family's life. Sometimes it seems that the battles are overwhelming and the enemies too much to handle.

But even in the face of all of that I realized that the battle has to be won because my wife and I, and our two little daughters are the last strong links to Judaism in both our families. We're the last line of defense.

So during the tough times, I think back to that verse in Rock of Ages and remember that G-d can help us overcome anything, that He can help us save Judaism in our lives just as he helped the Maccabees so many years ago. My eyes still well up with tears when I think of that verse or sing it.

Chanukah reminds me that God is always there for us, and that if we just allow Him to help us fight our battles -- whatever those battles may be -- His word will indeed break our enemy's sword. Maybe it's that powerful reminder of G-d's love for us that makes Chanukah my favorite holiday. And maybe it's that powerful message of G-d's love for us that kept me from abandoning Judaism during all those years I was so far from it.

**The Little Boy Who Discovered His Holiday Light**

**By**[**Mina Gordon**](https://www.chabad.org/search/keyword_cdo/kid/16639/jewish/Gordon-Mina.htm)



**Art by Chana Helen Rosenberg**

 Menorahs seem to be popping up everywhere this time of year. It’s hard to miss them.

 In shopping malls and parks, in front of municipal buildings and community centers, at busy intersections and near highways, they stand proudly. Their fiery arms lifted towards the heavens, these menorahs shine brightly against the night sky.

 Joshie was only 10 years old, and although his father was a rabbi, he did not attend the private Orthodox school that his siblings went to. Joshie was born with certain challenges, and he needed a school with highly trained specialty staff.

 One frosty morning in December, the children from Joshie’s class were led to a bus and dropped off with their teachers in the busy downtown area of their city. The children looked in wonder at the crowds of shoppers passing by, the long lines of honking cars impatiently waiting for pedestrians to finish crossing and the tall buildings blocking the winter sun. After making sure that every child was accounted for, the teachers led their group down the street. Their goal was to show the children the holiday season’s displays and the intricately decorated shop windows.

**Standing at the Periphery**

 As most of the children *oohed* and *aahed*, Joshie remained silent. He stood on the periphery, somehow knowing instinctively that he would not find anything familiar in those tinsel-framed windows.

 The little group continued on their way, most of the children chattering excitedly. A teacher noticed that Joshie was uncharacteristically quiet and fell in step with him.

 “Joshie, don’t you like seeing the holiday decorations?”

 “Holiday?” He repeated, looking confused. After a moment, he shook his head. “No, not looking like my holiday.”

 The teacher had no answer to give and walked silently alongside Joshie, his heart going out to this little boy.

 The group turned a corner and found themselves at the edge of a large plaza. All eyes were drawn to the enormous fir tree decorated with hundreds of yards of shiny tinsel—all eyes, that is, except one pair. Little Joshie was looking a bit further to the right, at the giant menorah. A smile lit up his face as he pointed to the familiar object and cried out: “THAT’S MINE!”

**A Deep Message in the Boy’s Words**

 When Joshie’s father heard what happened on the excursion, he found a deep message in his son’s words. He said: “Today, there are many Jews who are ‘religiously challenged’ and don’t know much about their heritage, but when they see the public menorah, something within lights up with Jewish pride, and they feel it, knowing, ‘That’s Mine.’ ”

 *This true story is based on an incident mentioned by Rabbi Moshe Soloveichik in an article published in the Chicago Jewish Image.*

*Reprinted from the Chabad.Org website.*

**The Story of Chanukah**

**By Dr. Nissan Mindel**



**Under Syrian Rule**

 More than 2000 years ago there was a time when the land of Israel was part of the Syrian-Greek Empire, dominated by Syrian rulers of the dynasty of the Seleucids.

 In order to relate the story that led up to Chanukah, we shall start with Antiochus III, the King of Syria, who reigned from 3538 to 3574 (222-186 B.C.E.). He had waged war with King Ptolemy of Egypt over the possession of the Land of Israel. Antiochus III was victorious and the Land of Israel was annexed to his empire.

 At the beginning of his reign he was favorably disposed toward the Jews and accorded them some privileges. Later on, however, when he was beaten by the Romans and compelled to pay heavy taxes, the burden fell upon the various peoples of his empire who were forced to furnish the heavy gold that was required of him by the Romans. When Antiochus died, his son Seleucus IV took over, and further oppressed the Jews.

**Grave Perils that Threatened Judaism from Within**

 Added to the troubles from the outside were the grave perils that threatened Judaism from within. The influence of the Hellenists (people who accepted idol-worship and the Syrian way of life) was increasing. Yochanan, the High Priest, foresaw the danger to Judaism from the penetration of Syrian-Greek influence into the Holy Land. For, in contrast to the ideal of outward beauty held by the Greeks and Syrians, Judaism emphasizes truth and moral purity, as commanded by G‑d in the holy Torah. The Jewish people could never give up their faith in G‑d and accept the idol-worship of the Syrians.

 Yochanan was therefore opposed to any attempt on the part of the Jewish Hellenists to introduce Greek and Syrian customs into the land. The Hellenists hated him. One of them told the King’s commissioner that in the treasury of the Temple there was a great deal of wealth.

 The wealth in the treasury consisted of the contributions of "half a shekel" made by all adult Jews annually. That was given for the purpose of the sacrifices on the altar, as well as for fixing and improving the Temple building. Another part of the treasury consisted of orphans’ funds which were deposited for them until they became of age.

 Seleucus needed money in order to pay the Romans. He sent his minister Helyodros to take the money from the treasury of the Temple. In vain did Yochanan, the High Priest, beg him not to do it. Helyodros did not listen and entered the gate of the Temple. But suddenly, he became pale with fright. The next moment he fainted and fell to the ground. After Helyodros came to, he did not dare enter again.

**The Madman: Antiochus**

 A short time later, Seleucus was killed and his brother Antiochus IV began to reign over Syria (in 3586 - 174 B.C.E.). He was a tyrant of a rash and impetuous nature, contemptuous of religion and of the feelings of others. He was called "Epiphanes," meaning "the gods’ beloved." Several of the Syrian rulers received similar titles. But a historian of his time, Polebius, gave him the epithet Epimanes ("madman"), a title more suitable to the character of this harsh and cruel king.

 Desiring to unify his kingdom through the medium of a common religion and culture, Antiochus tried to root out the individualism of the Jews by suppressing all the Jewish Laws. He removed the righteous High Priest, Yochanan, from the Temple in Jerusalem, and in his place installed Yochanan’s brother Joshua, who loved to call himself by the Greek name of Jason. For he was a member of the Hellenist party, and he used his high office to spread more and more of the Greek customs among the priesthood.

 Joshua or Jason was later replaced by another man, Menelaus, who had promised the king that he would bring in more money than Jason did. When Yochanan, the former High Priest, protested against the spread of the Hellenists’ influence in the Holy Temple, the ruling High Priest hired murderers to assassinate him.

 Antiochus was at that time engaged in a successful war against Egypt. But messengers from Rome arrived and commanded him to stop the war, and he had to yield. Meanwhile, in Jerusalem, a rumor spread that a serious accident had befallen Antiochus. Thinking that he was dead, the people rebelled against Menelaus. The treacherous High Priest fled together with his friends.

**The Martyrs**

 Antiochus returned from Egypt enraged by Roman interference with his ambitions. When he heard what had taken place in Jerusalem, he ordered his army to fall upon the Jews. Thousands of Jews were killed. Antiochus then enacted a series of harsh decrees against the Jews. Jewish worship was forbidden; the scrolls of the Law were confiscated and burned. Sabbath rest, circumcision and the dietary laws were prohibited under penalty of death. Even one of the respected elders of that generation, Rabbi Eliezer, a man of 90, was ordered by the servants of Antiochus to eat pork so that others would do the same. When he refused they suggested to him that he pick up the meat to his lips to appear to be eating. But Rabbi Eliezer refused to do even that and was put to death.

 There were thousands of others who likewise sacrificed their lives. The famous story of [Hannah and her seven children](https://www.chabad.org/holidays/chanukah/article_cdo/aid/429014/jewish/Chanah-and-Her-Seven-Sons.htm) happened at that time.

 Antiochus’s men went from town to town and from village to village to force the inhabitants to worship pagan gods. Only one refuge area remained and that was the hills of Judea with their caves. But even there did the Syrians pursue the faithful Jews, and many a Jew died a martyr’s death.

**Mattityahu**

 One day the henchmen of Antiochus arrived in the village of Modiin where Mattityahu, the old priest, lived. The Syrian officer built an altar in the marketplace of the village and demanded that Mattityahu offer sacrifices to the Greek gods. Mattityahu replied, "I, my sons and my brothers are determined to remain loyal to the covenant which our G‑d made with our ancestors!"

 Thereupon, a Hellenistic Jew approached the altar to offer a sacrifice. Mattityahu grabbed his sword and killed him, and his sons and friends fell upon the Syrian officers and men. They killed many of them and chased the rest away. They then destroyed the altar.

 Mattityahu knew that Antiochus would be enraged when he heard what had happened. He would certainly send an expedition to punish him and his followers. Mattityahu, therefore, left the village of Modiin and fled together with his sons and friends to the hills of Judea.

 All loyal and courageous Jews joined them. They formed legions and from time to time they left their hiding places to fall upon enemy detachments and outposts, and to destroy the pagan altars that were built by order of Antiochus.

**The Maccabees**

 Before his death, Mattityahu called his sons together and urged them to continue to fight in defense of G d’s Torah. He asked them to follow the counsel of their brother Shimon the Wise. In waging warfare, he said, their leader should be Judah the Strong. Judah was called "Maccabee," a word composed of the initial letters of the four Hebrew words *Mi Kamocha Ba’eilim Hashem*, "Who is like You, O G‑d."

 Antiochus sent his General Apolonius to wipe out Judah and his followers, the Maccabees. Though greater in number and equipment than their adversaries, the Syrians were defeated by the Maccabees. Antiochus sent out another expedition which also was defeated. He realized that only by sending a powerful army could he hope to defeat Judah and his brave fighting men.

 An army consisting of more than 40,000 men swept the land under the leadership of two commanders, Nicanor and Gorgiash. When Judah and his brothers heard of that, they exclaimed: "Let us fight unto death in defense of our souls and our Temple!" The people assembled in Mitzpah, where Samuel, the prophet of old, had offered prayers to G‑d. After a series of battles the war was won.

**The Dedication**

 Now the Maccabees returned to Jerusalem to liberate it. They entered the Temple and cleared it of the idols placed there by the Syrian vandals. Judah and his followers built a new altar, which he dedicated on the twenty-fifth of the month of Kislev, in the year 3622 (139 B.C.E.).

 Since the golden Menorah had been stolen by the Syrians, the Maccabees now made one of cheaper metal. When they wanted to light it, they found only a small cruse of pure olive oil bearing the seal of the High Priest Yochanan. It was sufficient to light only for one day. By a miracle of G‑d, it continued to burn for eight days, till new oil was made available. That miracle proved that G‑d had again taken His people under His protection. In memory of this, our sages appointed these eight days for annual thanksgiving and for lighting candles.

**After Chanukah**

 The brightness of the first Chanukah light had dwindled down. But the holy fires on the altar burnt again in the Beit Hamikdash, from morning to morning, as prescribed by the Law. The priests were again busily officiating in the old customary ways, and day in, day out they prepared the offerings. Order and peace seemed established.

 The Jewish farmer longed to return to his land after two years of hardship, privation and danger in the victorious Jewish army. It was high time to break the ground and to till the soil, if the barley was to grow and ripen in time for "Omer-offering" on Passover. The Jewish farmers had left their ploughs to rally about the heroic Chashmonaim.

 The first victories had drawn even the hesitant into the ranks of the enthusiastic Jewish rebels, led by the sons of Mattityahu. Farmers had forsaken their land, merchants and tradesmen their stores and shops. Even Torah students had emerged from the four walls of the Bet Hamidrash to join the fight against the oppressors.

 But the songs of victory, which had filled the reclaimed Holy Temple with praise and gratitude for the merciful G‑d, had ceased. The goal of the battle seemed reached, and Torah again was supreme law in Israel.

 One man, though, realized that the time for a return to normal living had not yet come. Israel could not yet afford to relax; it would have to stand ready and prepare to carry on the fight against the overwhelming odds of the enemy. This man was Judah Maccabi. His name was upon everyone’s lips and in every Jewish heart.

**A Man with the Heart of a Lion**

 He was admired as a hero, as a man with the heart of a lion and the simple piety of a child; as the one whose mighty armies fought and conquered, yet who never failed to pray to G‑d, the Master of all battles, before he entered the fray.

 It was not the spirited warrior’s joy that made Judah Maccabi stay in camp. His heart, too, longed to return to his former peaceful life, to Modiin, the quiet town of priests, which held the grave of his adored father. Bloodshed and battle meant a hard and unwanted profession for the men of Judea, who preferred peace to strife.

 Yet this was no time for relenting. Not only had he to stay, but with all the persuasion of his magnetic personality he had to hold back his comrades-at-arms. His own reasoning and his two wise brothers, Shimon and Yonatan, told him that only the first phase of this war of liberation had passed. Hard and desperate times were yet to come. Clever enemies merely needed an extended lull to prepare new assaults with more troops and better equipment. And there were enemies all about Judea, besides the defeated Syrians.

**Hated by the Neighboring Countries**

 The neighboring countries begrudged the dazzling victories of the small Jewish armies. They would much rather have seen the people of Judea oppressed and humiliated, than armed and spirited, a threat to their own lands. Whence had come the sudden source of strength, courage and fortitude? What was there in this nation that made history in proud seclusion and isolation from other nations? Old hatred was revived. The descendants of Edom (the Idumeans), the Ammonites, the Philistines and Phoenicians, they all revived their ancient jealousies.

 Messengers arrived from Gilead. The pagan people joined forces to destroy Judea. From Galilee came the bad news of similar evil intentions and active preparations in Ptolemais, Tyre and Zidon. The messengers found Judah Maccabi already at work. Fortifications had to be thrown up around Zion. Towers, walls, battlements and moat had to be constructed opposite the fort still held by their worst enemies, the Hellenistic Jews, under the leadership of the false priest Menelaus.

 These hated everything Jewish, and lived in the hope of the return of the Syrian masters. Judah Maccabi prepared Jerusalem against them and against imminent assault by the troops of Antiochus. Under his supervision the Jewish people worked feverishly to refill their arsenals and turn the whole country into a stronghold.

 Once this most important task was accomplished, Judah Maccabi led his freshly trained troops to the aid of the regions and villages harassed by the spiteful neighbors of Judea. He drove the Idumeans from Hebron, which they had annexed, and he punished the people who had acted with hostility towards the Jewish settlers.

**Led His Army Across the Jordan River**

 Then he led his army across the Jordan River against the Ammonites. Their capital fell before the furious onslaught of the Jewish troops, and so did their fortress, Yaeser. Judah’s brother Shimon led an army north to aid the plagued Jews of Galilee. He defeated the enemy and cleared the Jewish land. At his urging, a great many of the Jewish settlers who had fled to Jerusalem, returned to rebuild in safety what had been destroyed during the years of weakness.

 Judah Maccabi and Yonatan joined forces and marched against Gilead, where they were met with the toughest resistance. By Shavuot, this campaign was successfully concluded.

 Judea was again free, and all parts captured by the neighboring nation had been recovered. Celebrations and festivity transformed Jerusalem and the Holy Temple, hardly half a year after the victories over the Syrian armies. The Jewish people expressed their joy and gratitude to G‑d in the form of psalms and offerings. For He had restored glory and liberty to the Jewish land.

*Reprinted from the Chabad.Org website. Excerpted from*[*The Complete Story of Chanukah*](https://www.chabad.org/1523047)*by Dr Nissan Mindel, published by Kehot*