



The Shofar

December, 2020

Congregation House of Israel

15 Kislev - 16 Tevet, 5781



Happy Hanukkah

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The Shofar

Published monthly by:

Congregation House of Israel

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Submissions due the 15th of the prior month.
Distributed free to members, prospective members, local clergy and other interested parties.

December is Fun

By Sherrill Nicolosi

December is an interesting and fun month, whether you are Jewish or Christian. While this year will be a very different holiday season, with few of the traditional shopping malls and stores bustling with excited shoppers, there will still be the beautiful Festival of Lights and Christmas events that make Americans of all faiths smile.

Some believe that Hanukkah is the Jewish response to Christmas gift giving. Not so. The history of Hanukkah is so much more than gelt and gifts, just as Christmas is a sacred celebration for Christians, well beyond presents.

The story of Hanukkah began centuries ago, when the Syrian-Greeks oppressed the Jews and attempted to force them to abandon their traditions and practices, such as the observance of the Sabbath, circumcision, and the study of

Torah. They destroyed and desecrated the Holy Temple, defiling it with pig's blood. While the Jews suffered greatly for their devotion to Jewish practices, some, including the "rag tag" army of Mattathias and his sons, fought and defeated the Syrian-Greeks. That the leader, Judas Maccabaeus, one of the sons, was able to achieve the military victory, is one of the miracles of the holiday. That the Temple was rebuilt, and the little bit of pure oil left to re-light the Menorah lasted eight days instead of one, is a second miracle.

The joy and fun of Hanukkah celebrates these miracles, reminding us that we are here, today, to observe the Festival of Lights due to the great devotion of our ancestors.

Reb Shelly's Desk



Fidel Castro and Chanukah

It's common knowledge that after the 1959 revolution in Cuba, about 90% of the Jewish population fled the country. It wasn't that Fidel Castro was anti-Semitic, but in keeping with the spirit

of Communism, he definitely was anti religion in general. It wasn't until the fall of communism in the Soviet Union in 1991 that Cuba changed its policy and allowed citizens to once again affiliate with their respective religions. And no surprise, Jews slowly began returning to their synagogues and rebuilding the Jewish community.

But Castro himself had no connection with the Jewish community. In 1998, Adela Dworin, president of the Patronato Synagogue in Havana, approached Castro at a public gathering and asked him why he hadn't visited the synagogue. Fidel answered: "Because no one invited me!" Mrs. Dworin immediately invited Castro to celebrate Chanukah with the Jewish community. Unfamiliar with the holiday, Fidel asked "What is Chanukah?"

Thinking quickly, Mrs. Dworin said: "It is a celebration of the victory of a group of rebels who revolted against their government and brought about a revolution."

Castro's eyes lit up – what could be more relevant to a revolutionary leader than Chanukah? That year Fidel Castro came to the synagogue and celebrated Chanukah with the Jewish community for the first time.

Castro's query, "What is Chanukah," is not unfamiliar to us. In fact, the question first appeared in the Talmud five hundred years after the Maccabean revolt. The sages asked, "What is Chanukah" and proceeded to tell the story of the oil that burned for eight days.

It is surprising that the sages had to ask why we celebrate this time-honored holiday. And yet the reason for Chanukah seemed to be something of a

mystery to our ancestors.

The truth is, there are many faces to Chanukah depending who you ask and where they live.

For Castro, Chanukah was all about a revolution.

For some American Jews, Chanukah is the holiday that occurs at the same time as Christmas.

For others it is a celebration of the freedom loving Maccabees who fought for religious freedom.

For Zionists, Chanukah is a celebration of Jewish might and valor – Jews defending themselves.

And for still others it is a commemoration of God's miraculous presence in history.

So which interpretation is correct? I would say all of them -- and none of them. Chanukah is a prism through which we interpret our place in the world and our values as a Jewish community. Because it doesn't appear in Scripture, there is more room for an imaginative interpretation of this holiday.

It is hard for us not to see the celebration through the prism of modern-day Israel. The Maccabees were the original IDF, the Israel Defense Forces. We are proud of the mighty Judah Maccabee who fought back and routed the Syrian Hellenists from the land of Israel.

And yet the sages chose to ignore this aspect of the holiday. They felt that it was inappropriate for the Jewish people to be celebrating a military victory. Instead, by telling the story of the oil (which may or may not have actually happened), they imply that the real hero is not the Maccabees, but God.

The sages never mention the ferocious battles; they speak only of the rededication of the Temple and the lighting of the Menorah. The rabbis were not interested in depicting the Maccabees as soldiers.

This is hardly the image of the Maccabees we have today! If we were writing a passage for our liturgy today about this holiday – we would depict the mighty Maccabees.

Think about it; if it weren't for the Maccabees, we wouldn't be here today.

So spin your dreidel, and have a wonderful Chanukah 2020. Hopefully, next year, we can celebrate together.

Sisterhood



“Libate ‘n Learn”

Something new for us in the lockdown world.

Since there’s very little going on with Sisterhood (or anything else, for that matter), we’ve come up with a minor project which will hopefully give

us all a little respite

Rabbi Shelly has put together a series of presentations for Sisterhood, which we originally thought of as Lunch ‘n Learn. But then we thought it would be better if we could accomodate more people, and we’re moving the monthly Sisterhood meetings from 11 a.m. on the 1st Monday, to 5:00 p.m. And instead of just Sisterhood, the Zoom invitations will go out to the entire congregation. The topics will be on various subjects relative to Jews and Judaism, and will be presented by Rabbi Shelly and various guests.

The initial presentations are as follows:

- Dec. 7: “Are You Now or Have You Ever Been; the Hollywood Blacklist, it’s Jewish Victims and Enablers.” Presented by Rabbi Shelly
- Jan, 4: “Oy, Oy, Oy and a Bottle of Manischewitz: Jewish Pirates and Seafareers.” Presented by student Rabbi Heftsibah Jen Cohen (see her brief bio in the next column)
- Feb. 1: “Yiddish Theatre: From Purim to Posterity” Presented by Rabbi Shelly

Presentations will average 35 - 40 minutes, preceded by a VERY brief Sisterhood meeting if there’s anything to discuss.

We’re still agonizing over the name for these sessions; another has been “Wine and Wisdom. If you can think of something, please get back to me with your suggestion. And if you have a topic you’d like to cover or have covered, please let us know. Don’t forget to bring your libation.

Patti

Heftsibah Jen Cohen



Heftsibah “Jen” Cohen is a wife and mother of three children, currently living in Riverside County in Southern California.

Previously serving in the United States military as a Naval Flight Officer, she also served in the Royal New Zealand Navy, where she specialized

in suicide intervention training.

Hefsiba (as she prefers to be called) is currently a rabbinical student with JSLI (Jewish Spiritual Leaders Institute), and will probably be ordained by the time of her presentation on January 4.

Today she enjoys serving her community passionately through the context of Judaism.

Editors note: I watched her presentation on JSLI several weeks ago, and couldn’t have been more delighted. I reached out to her and she agreed to repeat it for us. It was great fun and I’m sure will be enjoyed by all. SK



Shelly Baron and President Elect Joe Biden during a visit with her brother Adam, who serves on Joe’s team.

ARZA - World Union

This week's parasha begins with the death of Sarah. After Sarah's death, Abraham insists on purchasing a burial plot. He is offered one for free by Ephron the Hittite, but insists on paying for it himself. Sometimes the Torah skips over years and even decades in a few short verses, but here the narrative spends an unusual amount of time and verse to the negotiation of the purchase of this burial plot. This raises the question as to why Abraham insisted on owning the cave himself. It seems clear that Abraham needed to pay for it and not receive it for free because he wanted to be a legal owner among the locals, to create a legally recognized entity, and not be an alien-stranger borrowing space in their private graveyards.

Abraham may have feared that had he taken Ephron's offer the giver may have meant for it to be a *matanah al menat lehaizir* (a gift made on condition that it be returned— as mentioned in the Talmud (Sukkah 41b). He thus requests Ephron to take his money first (Genesis 23:13), and only afterwards will he bury his dead.

Whether or not those were the real reasons behind this transpiring of events in the story, Abraham demonstrates vision and leadership. He understood the critical importance of his actions as they would pave the way for the future.

This week the world lost a truly great sage. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l served as the Chief Rabbi of Great Britain (1991-2013) and was one of the greatest and most prolific writers and teachers in contemporary times.

Commenting on Genesis, Rabbi Sacks brilliantly points out that there were two promises repeatedly made by God to Abraham: one was the promise of all the land of Canaan; the second was that he would be the father of many nations. But, as Rabbi Sacks explains in his book *Lessons in Leadership*:

“God promises, but we have to act. God promised Abraham the land, but he had to buy the first field. God promised Abraham many descendants, but Abraham had to ensure that his son was married, and to a woman who would share the life of the covenant, so that Abraham would have, as we say today, ‘Jewish Grandchildren.’”

That is what leaders understand. This is what made Abraham the first Jewish leader. Leaders take

responsibility for creating the conditions through which God's purposes can be fulfilled. They are not passive but active – even in old age, like Abraham in Parashat Hayei Sarah.”

Rabbi Sacks was one of the great teachers about leadership and morality. He taught that “Leaders see the destination, begin the journey, and leave behind them those who will continue it. That is enough to endow a life with immortality.” He surely has left a tremendous legacy behind him having inspired innumerable leaders and thinkers – Jews and non-Jews alike. Many in our movement have strong feelings about his legacy because of his refusal to attend the British Jewish pluralistic conclave known as *Limud*, and having said quite challenging things about the Reform Movement. However, his scholarship and lessons have much to offer us nonetheless.

Rabbi Sacks taught us that leaders must recognize that it is upon them to change the status quo, take responsibility to lead a transition of priorities, and adapt to changing circumstances.

There are some who regard Abraham's purchase of the Cave of the Machpelah in present-day Hebron as the critical foundation for our people's connection and presence in the entire Land of Israel. Because of Abraham's initial purchase of land, Jews have sustained a presence there for 3600 years.

Others see the situation in today's reality and believe that, despite our biblical narrative and ancient connection, our presence there presents a conflict with our values. Therefore – however painful it may be – we have to prioritize our values of a Jewish and democratic State over the importance of fulfilling God's promise that we occupy all of the Land.

In his 2009 book *Future Tense: Jews, Judaism, and Israel in the Twenty-First Century*, Rabbi Sacks articulated a clear understanding of the purpose of our existence as a Jewish People and our lasting legacy.

“Judaism is, to use Nietzsche's phrase, a sustained transvaluation of values. It is the code of a nation that would be called, through its history, to show that civilizations survive not through strength but through the care they show for the weak, not by wealth, but because of the help they give to the poor. Nations become invulnerable by caring for the vulnerable. These are deeply paradoxical propositions, and the only thing that can be said in their favour is that they are true. The people of the covenant were

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Birthdays & Anniversaries

December Anniversaries

Nate and Tina Bernstein	Dec 7
Brad and Elaine Wolken	Dec 26

December Birthdays

Sophie Fleischner	Dec 7
Sherrill Nicolosi	Dec 20
Kim Baron	Dec 22
Frances Iverson	Dec 30

Refuah Shelemah

The following people are in our thoughts and prayers:

- Ken Baim
- Annette Baim
- Bill Ginsburg
- Jeannie Sheets
- Ira Brand
- Kay Fleischner

Please offer prayers that they all have a full and speedy recovery.

If you are aware of anyone needing spiritual or any sort of assistance, please let Carol Kleinman know. Our Caring Committee is here to help all of our members in any way we possibly can.

December Yahrzeits

Kaddish Recited December 4

Barbara Schlesinger

Member of CHI

Alyce Brand

Sister of Carol Kleinman

Sharona Grenman

Wife of Oded Grenman

Warner Kass

Husband of Lynda Kass

Kaddish Recited December 11

Sherrill Bernstein

Father of Nathan (Nate) Bernstein

Bernice Waxler

Mother of Michael Waxler

Naomi Tanenbaum

Mother of Jerry Tanenbaum

Kaddish Recited December 18

Lynn Raines Kirsch

Wife of Steven Kirsch

Nellie Sheets

Mother of Mary Klompus

Kaddish Recited December 25

Hyman Robins

Grandfather of Betty Feir

Dora Taxer

Mother of Sheldon (Shep) Taxer

Condolences

We mourn the passing of Earl Hudson, the father of Madeline Bull, who died October 20 following a long illness.

ARZA - World Union

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never numerous. The Holy Land was never large. The Israelites, later known as the Jews, were attacked by the greatest empires ever to have bestride the narrow world like a colossus, and they outlived them all. The superpowers of history disappeared into the pages of history while Jews continue to sing Am Yisrael Chai – ‘the Jewish People lives’. None of this I believe was for the sake of the Jews alone, or Judaism alone, but to give hope to the hopeless, dignity to humanity, and moral meaning and purpose to the human story.”

One could say that the story of the Jewish People began with Abraham’s embrace of the covenant and his entering into the Promised Land. One could also state that the story begins this week, in chapter 23, when Abraham stakes a claim to our Land. What I find more interesting than the debate about where our story originated is who will write the next chapter of our people’s history and which values will lead with hope, dignity, and moral meaning.

Mazel Tov

Mazel Tov **Dana Grenman** and **Matt Nickerson** on the impending birth of their first baby.

Proud and VERY excited grandpa is **Oded Grenman**. This will make grandchild #9 for Oded. How wonderful for the entire family.

Happy Birthday Birdie



Happy Birthday to Birdie Burge, granddaughter of Yossi and Kim Baron, seen here with her father David during her lockdown birthday party.

Lot’s of cupcakes.

Weekly Parshah

December

Vayishlach

December 5, 2020

Jacob returns to the Holy Land after a 20-year stay in Charan, and sends emissaries to Esau in hope of a reconciliation, but his messengers report that his brother is on the warpath with 400 armed men. Jacob prepares for war, prays, and sends Esau a large gift (consisting of hundreds of heads of sheep and cattle) to appease him.

That night, Jacob ferries his family and possessions across the Yabbok River; he, however, remains behind and encounters the angel that embodies the spirit of Esau, with whom he wrestles until daybreak. Jacob suffers a dislocated hip but vanquishes the supernal creature, who bestows on him the name Israel, which means “He who prevails over the Divine.”

Vayeishev

December 12, 2020

Jacob settles in Hebron with his twelve sons. His favorite is 17-year-old Joseph, whose brothers are jealous of the preferential treatment he receives from his father, such as a precious many-colored coat that Jacob makes for Joseph. Joseph relates to his brothers two dreams he has which foretell that he is destined to rule over them, increasing their envy and hatred towards him.

Shimon and Levi plot to kill him, but Reuben suggests that they throw him into a pit instead, intending to come back later and save him. While Joseph is in the pit, Judah has him sold to a band of passing Ishmaelites. The brothers dip Joseph’s special coat in the blood of a goat and show it to their father, leading him to believe that his most beloved son was devoured by a wild beast.



Mikeitz

December 19, 2020

Joseph’s imprisonment finally ends when Pharaoh dreams of seven fat cows that are swallowed up by seven lean cows, and of seven fat ears of grain swallowed by seven lean ears. Joseph interprets the dreams to mean that seven years of plenty will be followed by seven years of hunger, and advises Pharaoh to store grain during the plentiful years. Pharaoh appoints Joseph governor of Egypt. Joseph marries Asenath, daughter of Potiphar, and they have two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim.

Famine spreads throughout the region, and food can be obtained only in Egypt. Ten of Joseph’s brothers come to Egypt to purchase grain; the youngest, Benjamin, stays home, for Jacob fears for his safety. Joseph recognizes his brothers, but they do not recognize him; he accuses them of being spies, insists that they bring Benjamin to prove that they are who they say they are, and imprisons Simeon as a hostage. Later, they discover that the money they paid for their provisions has been mysteriously returned to them.

Vayigash

December 26, 2020

Judah approaches Joseph to plead for the release of Benjamin, offering himself as a slave to the Egyptian ruler in Benjamin’s stead. Upon wintensing his brothers’ loyalty to one another, Joseph reveals his identity to them. “I am Joseph,” he declares. “Is my father still alive?”

The brothers are overcome by shame and remorse, but Joseph comforts them. “It was not you who sent me here,” he says to them, “but G-d. It has all been ordained from Above to save us, and the entire region, from famine.”