

Chanukah, You Light Up Our Lives

By Rabbi Bernard S. Raskas

One name for Chanukah is "chag urim," the Festival of Lights. The Maccabees, after defeating the Syrian Greeks, came to rededicate the Temple. When they kindled the Eternal Light, they found only enough pure oil for one day. Nevertheless, they lit the lamp and a miracle occurred: the light burned for eight days, until a fresh supply of oil arrived.

The Eternal Light is part of the central structure of every synagogue. It is called the Eternal Light because it symbolizes the presence of God, which is eternally with us. And it reflects the brightness of Jewish tradition, reminding us that Judaism is a continuing process, a flame that can never be extinguished.

The Biblical passage describing the lighting of the Menorah in the sanctuary contains an interesting lesson. After all the instructions are given, we are told, "And Aaron did so: he lighted the lamps...as the Lord had commanded." (Numbers 8:3)

Rashi, the greatest Jewish commentator on the Bible, adds, "Aaron deserves praise for doing exactly as God had commanded him." Why should Aaron be praised for doing exactly what he should have done?

The answer is that on the day of the dedication of the sanctuary, Aaron, of course, would want to kindle the Menorah. However, as time went on and it became a routine task, he still continued with the same dedication as on the first day. For this, he deserved praise.

It is natural to begin an activity with enthusiasm.

Usually, this enthusiasm cools. But someone who is dedicated understands that real satisfaction is found not in beginning an activity but rather in working at it regularly until results are achieved. This requires devotion, commitment and concentration. People who do these things deserve our praise.

When the first Americans were permitted to visit Cuba after years of embargo, one of the members of the official delegation was a Jew. One night he had a yahrzeit. He asked for a synagogue and was told there was one left in Old Havana. To his dismay, it was in a state of neglect and disrepair, with the minyan made up of elderly Jews.

As the service began, the bulb in the Eternal Light went out. Of course, one can pray without an Eternal Light, but the members of the congregation were very upset. It was evening and all the stores were closed.

The visitor, a typical enterprising American, told them to wait a minute. He went out to the street, looked up and down, and noticed a movie house which displayed a large, well-lit sign. The American went up to the manager and offered him money for one of the colored bulbs in the sign.

The manager shrugged and pointed out that if he was crazy enough to climb up and get it, he could have it. The man did, but he burned his fingers before he could finally unscrew the light bulb. He returned to the synagogue and inserted the bulb. The Eternal Light glowed warmly and the congregation finished its prayers.

If we want the Eternal Light of Judaism to glow in our lives, then we must take its message into the

marketplace of ideas.

The Biblical instruction to create an Eternal Light can find meaning in our time in the words of the classic rabbinic exposition on this commandment: "Anyone who performs a mitzvah has kindled a candle before God and by doing so one revives one's own soul." (Exodus Rabbah 36:3)

What this beautiful and sensitive passage tells us is that the Eternal Light is not to be taken literally but symbolically, as an inspiration to do what is right, proper and good. When we do these things, our acts are as sacred as if we had lit a candle in the Sanctuary and presence of God.

On Chanukah, the lights of the Menorah are kindled by the shamash, the lead or service light. Every Menorah has such a special light, whose sole purpose is to provide the spark for others.

The importance of the spark can be seen in the following story:

A young man who had become an apprentice to a blacksmith learned during the course of his training how to hold the tongs, how to lift the hammer, how to smite the anvil, and how to blow the fire with the bellows. Having finished his apprenticeship, he was chosen to be employed at the royal smithery.

But the young man's delight at his appointment soon turned to despair when he discovered that he had failed to learn how to kindle a spark. All of his skill and knowledge in handling the tools were of

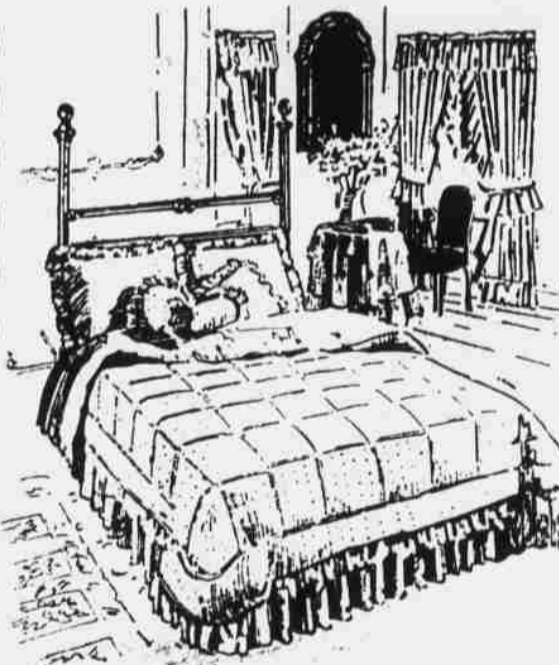
(Continued on page 9)

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