

KHANIKE STORIES

I am pleased that my khaverim at the New England Jewish Labor Committee, the Yidisher Arbeter Comitet, are sharing Khanike stories on line. I have lots of Khanike stories, and have shared them over the years with my friends and family, and even with the Yiddish Book Center. When I participated in their oral history, I revealed that, during the depression, my mother and I did not have a menorah, and were too poor to buy one. Our solution: we took an empty Sanka coffee can, which was about six or seven inches in diameter, turned it upside down, and placed the candles around the outer rim, adding one each night. How is that for innovation? My mother made latkes, I said the prayers and sang the songs I learned in Hebrew school, Maoz Tsur, etc, and we had a freylikhe Khanike, a joyous Chanukah.

I have commented over the years about the different spellings of the holiday. I have recently taken to spelling it as it is pronounced in Yiddish, according to YIVO, but “Chanukah,” is also spelled “Hanukkah” and a few other ways. It really does not matter how you spell it. People will know what you mean. For as far back as I can remember, we always referred to the menorah as the menorah. Recently, I have been hearing it referred to as a Chanukiya (or Hanukkiah). Israeli influence? By the way, another Israeli influence is jelly donuts, or sufganiot. That’s really overdoing the oil business. First latkes and then donuts. How much can our arteries take?

When we lit the candles, it was usually on the dinner table, and we left it there. Jewish community leaders have been urging us to put the menorah in the window, so the world can see that we are proudly Jewish and we are celebrating our holiday. I suspect that they wanted us to compete with all the lights that are part of the Christmas celebration. In fact, when I saw several homes with one electric candle in the window, I thought it was a Jewish home making a modern statement.

In 1979, I moved to Boston from Washington DC, and became active with the Boston Jewish Community Relations Council. The Director, Phil Perlmutter, asked me to join him in a delicate matter: to speak to the head of Boston Chabad, to dissuade him from pressing the city of Boston to allow them to put up a big menorah on city property. Both Phil and I had been brought up believing in the separation of church and state. We fought against the manger and baby Jesus displays on public property. How could we support a Jewish religious symbol being placed there? The Chabad director dismissed our argument and said that the order has come down from the Lubavitcher Rebbe, and that there will eventually be giant menorahs on public places in cities across the country—even in Washington DC. And it has come to pass. And Chabad has even been able to con the mayors of the different cities to take part in the lighting. You win some and you lose some.

I should point out that over the years, my economic position changed, and not only was I able to purchase a menorah, my family and I purchased several menorahs, and were given others as gifts. And for a number of years, Fran, David and I each lit a different menorah. The house was filled with light. Fran made it clear that there is a custom that the woman

of the house does not do any work while the candles are lit. Fortunately, they only burn for a half hour. There has been a change in the candles over the years, as well. When I was younger, the candles were orange and plain. Then, the candle manufacturers came out with multicolored and spiraled candles. They both were five inches long. I enjoyed mixing the colors. We might start with a white “shamas” and a blue first candle; then a red shamas and blue and white candles; then a yellow shamas and red, white and blue candles etc. (A knowledgeable friend kept pronouncing shamas as shamash. Who is right, or are we both right?)

We usually bought our candles, first at the grocery store, and then the supermarket. For a while, a Jewish charity, Telshe Yeshiva, would mail us candles “made in Israel.” Clearly we were obligated to send them a small contribution. They have stopped sending us candles. Perhaps we did not send them a large enough contribution.

We have two Jewish book stores in the neighborhood and they sell much fancier Chanukah candles than the supermarket. They claim to be hand dipped by skilled artisans, and will burn bright and clean for more than one hour. Perhaps that is why Fran insists on buying them. One year, Fran bought a box of “45 Hanukkah Tapers 100% Beeswax Hand Dipped From Naturally Filtered Beeswax... Each taper will burn smokeless and dripless for 75 minutes.” That is even better! Fran places the fancy candles in her menorah. I use the old fashioned kind. These days, both the fancy candles and the old fashioned kind are made in China, and both call the candles bougies, and they can be found in drug stores as well.

I am sure that almost everyone has also progressed from home made latkes to store-bought. As a youngster, I helped my mother grate the potatoes, and then my mother did her magic. Sylvia and I married, we enjoyed her mother’s latkes, and then she made her own. When we separated, I made latkes and invited friends over. There can be no Chanukah without latkes. Moving to Boston from Washington, when Chanukah 1979 came around, I decided to have a latke party. I invited a bunch of people, Fran helped me fry and serve, and when we ran out, Fran jumped in and made some more. A lifesaver then; a lifesaver now. We are fortunate to have a wonderful Jewish food store in the neighborhood—the Butcherie—and they have fantastic “homemade” latkes. I assume families who do not shop at the Butcherie have to settle for frozen.

After the Chanukah meal, I insist that we play dreidl. I always have lots of pennies, and distribute the same number of pennies to every player. In the old days, we got down and dirty. Since I can’t get down these days, we spin the dreidl on the table. I sometimes have to explain the game: Put a penny in the pot; the four letters Gimel, Nun, Hay and Shin, besides standing for “a great miracle happened there,” mean Gimel wins the pot, Hay wins half, Nun wins nothing, and Shin puts in one. When I was a kid, we only had one dreidl, made of lead. Today I have a dozen or more, made of wood, plastic and even glass. After many years of dreidl spinning, I have become quite expert. Some of my spins last for 10 or 12 seconds. I heard somewhere that the record holder is 20 seconds. But it doesn’t matter how long the dreidl spins. It is the result that counts.

Gifts: Growing up, it was my mother's custom to buy (or make) me an article of clothing for each holiday, including Chanukah. That was my gift. No Chanukah gelt, no toys or books. A pair of socks, or if I needed it, underwear, a pair of gloves or a scarf. These days, it seems that most Jewish families feel they have to compete with Christmas, and give their kids lavish gifts. And to outdo Christmas, they might even give their kids a gift each night for eight nights. I have to admit that I have been sending my grandchildren multiple gifts, but never anything lavish. The gifts have to be accompanied by a small packet of foil covered chocolate coins: Chanukah Gelt.

How many times have I heard that Chanukah is a "minor" holiday! That it has grown in importance because it had to compete with Christmas. The December dilemma. Deprived Jewish kids miss out on Santa Claus, and hanging stocking by the fireplace, and the beauty of Christmas trees. A few Jewish families have Christmas trees, which they refer to as a Chanukah bush. And all those lovely Christmas Carols. (Confession: I really did have second thoughts about naming my daughter Carol, but it was the one name that Sylvia and I agreed upon, that came closest to my mother's name.)

So what is the holiday about? It is about the Maccabees standing up to Antiochus who opposed Jewish ritual and desecrated the Temple, and when the Maccabees won and wanted to light the Temple menorah, they found only enough oil to last one day, but it lasted eight days. A miracle! Creative rabbis and parents can turn this into a fight for religious freedom, and the conquest by light over darkness.

I had mentioned Chabad earlier. It has become the most effective promoter of Chanukah of any Jewish organization I know of. It sends out hundreds of thousands of booklets each year to Jewish homes: "Your Chanukah Guide," and it tells you everything you want to know about the holiday. Much more than what I have written, above. In fact, if I looked at it before writing this, I would have realized I covered the same ground, and could have saved myself a lot of trouble. It explained Chanukah is from Kislev 25 to Tevet 2, and it described the Greeks and the Maccabees, the victory of the few over the many, and how a little candle pushes away the monster of darkness. "It can only be attributed to the great mercies of the One Above." It also tells you how to make latkes, how to play dreidl, and how to kindle the menorah.

I also mentioned singing Chanukah songs. That is a big part of the holiday. The songs I learned in Hebrew school, besides Maoz Tsur, were Al Hanisim, Mi Yimalel, and S'vivon. We even learned a Yiddish song, O Chanukah, O Chanukah, A Yontev a Sheyner. Since many kids knew neither Hebrew nor Yiddish, several English Chanukah songs took over, including a few that were translated from Hebrew or Yiddish: I Have a Little Dreidl, Who Can Retell, Rock of Ages etc. Debbie Freidman came through with Not By Might, Not By Power, and Peter Yarrow with Light One Candle. A recent favorite is a Ladino song with a great melody: Ocho Kandelikas. And my all-time favorite: Tom Lehrer's I'm Spending Chanukah in Santa Monica. If you don't know it, here is the closing stanza. (If I am violating a copyright, let him sue me.)

"But in December there's just one place for me.

Amid the California flora, I'll be lighting my menorah.
Like a baby in its cradle, I'll be playing with my dreidel.
Here's to Judas Macabeus, boy if he could only see us,
Spending Chanukah, in Santa Monica by the sea!"

HAPPY CHANUKAH!

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