

A CHANUKAH STORY

In that long-ago time when I was a boy, Chanukah was different. The Sheehys across the street had a beautiful tree in their living room, and their whole house was decorated from the beginning of December until just after New Year's Day. Chanukah was just some menorahs, for us! And they weren't anything fancy, not like today. I would get the menorahs at my Hebrew school. They were brass-colored tin that was thin enough to bend and fold this way and that. The candles were bright orange. That was it. Orange. No other color candle was available. When they were burning, especially toward the end of Chanukah, the heat from the candles would make the shamash candle droop and bow like boy bowing after a performance in assembly. I would look out of my window at the Sheehys' brightly-lit house and I felt that I was missing out on something. I hadn't yet learned. I did not yet understand.

Back then, we didn't get gifts on all the eight nights of Chanukah. I got a quarter from my grandmother. For charity, she said. And I put the quarter in the blue Jewish National Fund box. A quarter then was like five dollars is today. And I knew that my friend Pat got all kinds of toys and good stuff on Christmas. And I felt that I was missing something. I hadn't yet learned. I did not yet understand

We'd light the candles, sing Rock of Ages in Hebrew and English, put money in the JNF box and go do our homework or play or listen to the radio. My mother and grandmother would make latkes. In Hebrew school I learned about the miracle of the oil and the Maccabees. Still, Chanukah just didn't seem that special. I hadn't yet learned. I did not yet understand.

When I was about ten, my father's cousin Beryl came to live with us. He was thin as a pencil and his English sounded like another language. "Be very nice to him," my mother said. "He was in the camps." I thought, why should I be nice to him for being in the camps? I'd like to go to camp, too. I hadn't yet learned. I did not yet understand.

Dad's cousin stayed with us for quite a while. He was always so quiet it was scary. Sometimes he would sit in the kitchen with a glass of tea, smoking a cigarette, and tears would run down his cheeks. He never cried aloud. He wore sadness like a shirt; it was always with him. One day, I noticed numbers tattooed on his arm and I asked my mother about them. "The camps," she said. I hadn't yet learned. I did not yet understand.

Chanukah that year, around the third night, Cousin Beryl began to speak. "In the camps," he said. And everyone stopped moving. "In the camps, Chanukah we had to bentch Chanukah licht. No candles. No oil. What could we do?" We stood in silence. "We stole potatoes and cut them up to make a menorah. We saved the margarine they gave us for oil, and for wicks, we pulled threads from our clothes. My friend Shloime was caught stealing potatoes, and they beat him bad. Every night of Chanukah, late at night, some of us would get up and creep to a dark corner of the barracks and bentch our Chanukah licht. We whispered the prayers and stayed up until the lights had burned out. Those lights gave us hope. They gave us strength to stay alive." I had begun to learn. I started to understand.

Today, I tell my grandchildren, we Jews light fifty-foot high menorahs in the middle of New York, Paris, Moscow, and other places all over the world. Beautiful menorahs shine in our windows. But we must never forget, we must always remember. The miracle of the Maccabees and the single jar of oil that burned for eight nights and days must be remembered. We must also remember that the lights of Chanukah have burned in beautiful homes and in shacks. They have burned in apartment buildings and in army camps. They glowed where the world could see them bear witness to the great miracle that happened there. They flickered behind closed

doors and in the darkness of the extermination camps. For more than 2,000 years Jews have gathered together on Chanukah to light the lights. Sometimes in joy, sometimes in sorrow, sometimes in fear. But always, the lights were kindled. That, too, is a great miracle. My grandchildren look at me. I give each of them a dollar. "For charity," I say. And they put the dollars into the little boxes. Then they rush to open their gifts. Sometimes they remember to kiss me. Someday they will learn. Someday they will understand.