

The Eleven Nights of Chanukah

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The Star of David made out of popsicle sticks on the white lit Christmas tree says it all. It was made by our son Matt when he was five and helps sets the tone for the holiday season. Yes, it's that time of year again... Out comes the Jim Brickman Christmas jazz albums and Alan Jackson country. Lesser known to Jackson's audience are a few Jewish favorites like "Honkey Tonk Nights on the Golan Heights" and the ever memorable "The Second Time She Said 'Shalom', I Knew She Meant 'Goodbye.'" Let's start with the fact that some 42 plus years ago I married the Preacher's kid. And so, when you have two people from different religious traditions coming together; we've been known to freely improvise when approaching some holiday traditions.

Take last year, for example. Two days had passed and my wife Casey made the executive decision that we would celebrate the first evening in what should have been the third day. The Chanukah days and nights quickly passed. But by the 8th day, we were running out of candles to service our two ancient menorahs passed down through the generations from ancient Babylonian times; ok maybe a little bit of an exaggeration. Casey and I looked at each other. Would there be enough light to last us these additional days? At any rate, too late to call Amazon for same-day delivery. And so, Casey further improvised. All available candles in the house were called into service. They came in a variety of sizes and shapes; from romance and intimacy to fire emergency utility candles tucked away in the basement. The sheer number and variety spread out across the dining room table transformed the space into what can only be described as the Festival of Lights health spa and massage parlor.

The whole Gershon crew adapted to recite the ancient blessings to commemorate the annual Jewish festival which celebrates the rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. Two prayers are said and Casey has been known to ad-lib a few words here and there such as "awesome" in the middle of the Hebrew prayer that reads:

**Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh ha'olam, She'ahsa "awesome" neesim
lavotaynu bayamim haheim baz'man hazeh.**

The word Chanukah means dedication in Hebrew and the festival lasts for eight days and eight nights. But on this special evening it was the 11th.

My son Matt grew up in a household where we celebrate both traditions. Now I freely admit, that there have been some noticeable gaps in his Jewish education. I realized it some years later when as a young teenager, he would sometimes mistake

Hebrew and Klingon from the series Star Trek. They both share that same guttural ch sound as in L'chaim (Hebrew) and Kerplach (Star Trek). To be sure, the exploits of Juda Maccabee and Worf-the-Klingon are easy to confuse in the mind of a young soccer star in training.

Afterwards, we adjourned to the living room. Over the years, my mother-in-law (the minister's wife) would give us the type of Christmas presents that gives real meaning to the phrase "the gift that keeps on giving." Such as, the Christmas clock that chimes different Christmas Carols on the hour. Nothing like being awakened to the sounds of *Silent Night* at 3AM. There were of course the routine fruit cakes that tasted like artillery shells.

On this particular evening I sat down with my eight-year old grandson Oliver and showed him a dreidel. He looked at it quizzically and said what is this?

Doc It's a dreidel.
Oliver What does it do?
Doc It's a tradition (*vestiges of Fiddler on the Roof*, TRADITION!)
 It's like a top; it spins.
Oliver And what else?
Doc That's it. There's a game to be played. Let me show you.

Oliver gave me a blank stare. He was singularly unimpressed; being someone who likes to play *Minecraft* on his Nintendo switch. Casey looked at him with some degree of sympathy and understanding, as only his grandmother-guardian angel can. She kindly said, pointing to the dreidel, "They were having an off day that year." They, of course, was referring to the ancient Jews of Hellenistic Greece who invented the game. "Clearly, this is not the stuff of Einstein, I pointed out, but this is the 11th day of Chanukah."

And so in the tradition of Christmas, Chanukah and the Festival lights, we wish you a joyful holiday season.