HANUKKAH GREETINGS
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Chanukah: A Time for Praise & Thanksgiving

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Miracles aren’t what they used to be – if they ever were

"Do you believe in miracles?"
– Al Michaels, 1980

ALAN D. ABBEY
SPECIAL TO THE CJN

The term “miracle” is used in so many commonplace ways that it is little more than a catchphrase, an advertising slogan for a photocopier, or the title of hundreds of mundane or cliched pop songs. One song I surveyed in my research attempted to rhyme miracle with spiritual and visible.

In the Jewish world, Hanukkah sparks popular use of the Hebrew word for miracle, “nes.” Everyone who has ever spun a dreidel has seen the letter nun on one of its four sides, part of the mnemonic for, “Nes gadol hayah sham” (A great miracle happened there) in the Diaspora, with “po” (here) replacing “sham” (there) in Israel. Despite its ubiquity at Hanukkah, and the word’s contemporary Hebrew meaning of instant coffee (“Nes”-café), I prefer to reserve the term “miracle” for special events and ones with Divine involvement. The question, of course, is when one can tell an event is a miracle.

The great medieval thinkers Nachmanides and Maimonides, often referred to as the RaMBaN and the RaMBaM, disagreed on when and where miracles occurred and what they showed about the nature of God. In short, and here I am paraphrasing Rabbi Prof. David Hartman, the Ramban says God has the power and the will to operate independently of the world’s structure and patterns. This view encourages Jews to feel free from the orderly designs of nature. For Nachmanides, the Exodus from Egypt shows God’s ability to transform the world in order to fulfill God’s promises to the Israelites.

The rapper and singer Matisyahu, who went through a religious phase sparked by Chabad, could be said to have represented the Nachmanidean point of view in his 2010 song, Miracle.

Bound to stumble and fall but my strength comes not from man at all
Do you believe in miracles
And am I hearin’ you
Said am I seein’ you
Said eight nights and eight lights
End these fights, keep me right
And bless me to the highest heights with your miracles

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Matisyahu is trusting in God to give him strength and refers to Hanukkah’s eight nights – the song was released on a holiday season EP – as evidence that miracles come from God and are desired by humans.

The Rambam, on the other hand, says God is revealed in the regularities of nature, not its irregularities (i.e. its miracles). God willfully limits God’s own powers, to empower people to elaborate on and expand the Torah. In a famous midrash, one prominent rabbi says that “we pay no attention to a heavenly voice, ’because God gave the Torah at Sinai. In attempting to counter that point, another rabbi consults the prophet Elijah, who answers that God laughed upon hearing the statement. “My sons have defeated me,” Elijah quotes God as saying. In other words, the Torah is not in heaven, but in human hands - for better or worse.

Now that I’ve had the gumption to associate a rapper with a sage, let me once more exhibit hubris by describing Leonard Cohen as a Maimonidean. His 1992 song, Waiting for the Miracle, co-written with Sharon Robinson, turns the title on its head.

The sands of time were falling
From your fingers and your thumb
And you were waiting
For the miracle, for the miracle to come
Ah baby, let’s get married
We’ve been alone too long
Let’s be alone together
Let’s see if we’re that strong
Yeah let’s do something crazy.
Something absolutely wrong
While we’re waiting
For the miracle, for the miracle to come

The singer is tired of waiting for a miracle and proposes action – however crazy it may be. He wants to act, to take his beloved into his arms.

Not only have these differing views on miracles run as themes in Jewish thinking throughout our history, they add to the difficulty we face in identifying these events when they occur. Can we, in fact, see a miracle when it is in front of us? Or do we understand events as miraculous only in retrospect?

Were the eight days of light from one day’s worth of oil in the rededicated Temple a miracle? The rabbis of the Talmud, removed from the event by only a few hundred years, downplayed the miracle of the oil.

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Perhaps it was because the chances for Jewish sovereignty in Eretz Israel were slim to none in their era. Or perhaps they were too close to the event to see it as a miracle.

The Torah bursts into rare song in “Shirat Hayam” (Song of the Sea) after the Israelites complete their “miraculous” trek across the divided Sea of Reeds. The “song,” far better than today’s pop tunes about miracles, is one of only two Torah sections written in poetic stanzas. It is so central to Jewish thought and belief that it is repeated in daily prayer services in melodies ranging from Israeli pop, to Moroccan, to Yemenite, Kurdish, among many others.

One perhaps must accept that the Torah was written long after this event passed into folk memory to account for why it is so widely canonized as a “miracle.” I prefer to look at Godly interventions in the natural world as events in the mythic past as a way to keep “nessim” (miracles) at the exalted heights they deserve.

I don’t care to devalue the term by crediting them to contemporary occurrences. When people talk about the “miracle” that someone missed being hit by a terrorist attack, because they were slow in arriving to an event, I immediately think about those killed in the attack. To people who speak of such miracles, I say, Why weren’t the others spared?

These thinkers don’t let the harsh facts of life disturb their need to feel that there is divine - even miraculous - guidance in their lives, to quote Rabbi Hartman once again: “In this worldview, the conditions of the world are not interesting; what’s interesting is the break in the ordered framework of the world.”

What’s interesting and important to me is the condition of our world and how we act in it.

Therefore, to answer Al Michaels’ iconic question – uttered at the moment an underdog U.S. hockey team defeated the mighty Soviet Union at the 1980 Winter Olympics - I say that I believe in the miracles we create through our kindness, our goodness, and our hard work. To quote the non-Jewish sages Bob Weir and John Barlow, in this world, “I need a miracle every day.”

Alan D. Abbey is the media director of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem.

Warmest Holiday Greetings to all our clients, friends and family.

— Bunny Berke & Larry Lusko
Your rabbi can offer support, but not personal miracles

RABBI CATHARINE CLARK
SPECIAL TO THE CJN

My two-volume rabbi’s manual contains instructions for delivering a get, a writ of Jewish divorce, rituals for welcoming a baby girl into the Jewish people, and prayers for healing. Nowhere in its more than 500 pages is there ritual or instruction on how to work a miracle. Many times, in my career as a rabbi I have wished that there were. Beloved congregants suffer from mental illness, cancer, accidents, or infertility, and I wish that I could say just the right words in just the right order, wave around a Havdalah candle, and fix their problems. But I cannot, and, within our tradition, my skill-set should not be otherwise.

The sages were skeptical about personal miracles, no matter who worked them. They record instances of healing in response to the prayers of particular scholars and other interventions on behalf of individuals, but these accounts are sometimes accompanied by criticism of the person who called for the miracle.

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One such talmudic story is from Ta’anit 24a: Rabbi Yossi from Yokrat hired day labourers to work his field. As their employer, Rabbi Yossi was responsible for bringing them food, but he was delayed while fulfilling a mitzvah. When the workers grew too hungry, they appealed to Rabbi Yossi’s son, who said, “Fig tree, fig tree! Yield your fruits and feed my father’s workers!” The fig tree obeyed the command, and the workers ate. However, when Rabbi Yossi from Yokrat returned from performing his mitzvah, he criticized his son for bothering his Creator.

The bias against miracles is emphasized by Rabbi Yossi’s next words, in which he curses his son that just as he caused the fig tree to yield fruit before its time, so too he will die before his proper time. The point is driven home by the story’s final words that the rabbi’s son did indeed die young. The sages are more approving of the miracles worked by God on behalf of the nation, rather than the individual. In a midrash from Bereishit Rabbah, Rabbi Yo-chanan states that, at the time of Creation, God imposed the condition on the sea that it would split for the Israelites when they fled Pharaoh’s chariots. Likewise, in a mishnah from Pirkei Avot, seeming miracles on behalf of all Israelites are worked into the fabric of the natural order of Creation. Such boons to the nation as Miriam’s well that watered the Israelites in their desert wanderings and the mouth of the earth that swallowed Korach and his fellow rebels against Moses’ divinely-ordained leadership are said to have been created on the eve of the first Shabbat. These events are miracles, but they are miracles paradoxically arising out of the natural order and miracles on behalf of all Israelites, rather than to the benefit of one person in need.

The Hanukkah miracle is another wonder worked for the nation. When the Maccabees defeated the Syrians and recaptured the Temple, they had enough pure oil for only one day. The miracle was that this one cruse of oil lasted for the eight days necessary to rededicate the Temple, the seat of the Jewish forces’ national aspirations.

One detail from the Hanukkah story, as it is recorded in the Talmud at Shabbat 21b, is important to the point that rabbis are not, and should not be, miracle workers, whether on behalf of all Jews or to the benefit of one Jew in need. The Talmud says, “A miracle occurred, and they lit the menorah from it for eight days.” We are not told who worked the miracle. The verb is in the passive voice, leaving us to infer, rightly, that God is responsible for the miracle.

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Moreover, we are not told which priest lit the lamps. If we knew this information, we might be tempted to think that this individual was the instrument of a miracle. Even worse, if this priest’s name were recorded for posterity, he might have been tempted to regard himself as the one who worked the miracle.

This level of ego is dangerous among clergy, be they Temple priests or modern rabbis, imams, and ministers of any faith.

A few months ago, I participated in a panel of clergy members speaking to residents at the local teaching hospital about end-of-life pastoral issues. Two clergy members from other faiths told stories in which they claimed that their rites or prayers had revived stillborn babies. I was speechless. We serve God, not the other way around. To think that our acts or words bring God’s power to work a miracle into the life of a congregant is to think that we control some aspect of God. Clergy who confuse themselves with the divine in this way are capable of causing great harm.

In addition to serving God, clergy must serve our congregants, a task we fail to fulfill if we think of ourselves as miracle workers. If we revive the stillborn baby of one congregant, why don’t we do it for another? The answer, of course, is that we have nothing to do with it, but the congregant whose suffering was not relieved might take the omission personally. How then could we ever again be in relationship with that congregant?

Thinking of ourselves as miracle-workers constructs another obstacle to serving our congregants. A rabbi’s pastoral education trains her to offer comfort through steadfast presence and total willingness to hear all of a congregant’s pain, fear, and anger.

We learn to offer prayers as a way of helping someone who is suffering pour himself out to God. If we present ourselves as capable of another purpose, we rob the congregant of the help we can give. Holding out false hope for a miracle will prevent the congregant from expressing his suffering and us from hearing it. It will get in the way of the sufferer’s connection to God.

At Hanukkah, God worked a miracle for the nation. When you suffer, your rabbi would love to offer you a personal miracle, but she cannot – and should not. Rather, she will be present, listen, and pray with you. Anything else is up to God alone.

Rabbi Catharine Clark is the spiritual leader of Congregation Or Shalom in London, Ont.

SeeJN | Eager anticipation

A young boy looking at Hanukkah candles on the fifth night of the Hanukkah holiday last year in Efrat, in the West Bank.

GERSHON ELINSON/FLASH90 PHOTO
chag sameach

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peace and light

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How wonderful it is to share our family’s miracle! Her name is Clara Imregh. She is not Jewish, not born in Canada and not related by blood, but all generations in our family agree that Clara is our treasured miracle.

I have chosen Clara as my miracle because, for me, Hanukkah suggests wonderful messages of survival against odds and respect for religious pluralism.

Clara, now 91, is a Hungarian refugee from the Second World War. On Christmas Eve, 1944, Clara, then an 18-year-old Catholic teenager, fled from her home during the Siege of Budapest, as Soviet and German troops exchanged deafening gunfire over her small village. Thinking she would be away from home for a few days, she left in haste with no extra clothes, boots or a winter coat – and no food or water.

The reality was a 50-day-long encirclement by Soviet forces that cut off her ability to return home. A few days became a twisted, chaotic journey, that covered over 800 kilometres of freezing country roads, with no food, surviving on snow and raw potatoes dislodged from frozen fields. As enemy planes strafed the frightened, freezing and starving escapees, Clara somehow had the will to survive.

The siege claimed the lives of about 38,000 civilians through starvation or enemy fire. Eventually Clara arrived at the American air base in Berlin, where she volunteered to work as a cleaner.

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Clara Imregh in her younger days.

In Canada, Clara worked for a year with no pay. Why, you ask? Russian soldiers broke into her family’s home, forcing her parents and siblings to live in a damp basement. Her sister contracted tuberculosis and without funds, the family had no access to medicine after the war. Clara exchanged her paycheque for medicine to send home. Sadly, she never learned if the medicine was delivered, and her sister died. Clara, who had completed several years of university and was almost qualified as a Hungarian school teacher, became a nanny for neighbours living next door to my cousins. Her contract had ended, and my cousins, recognizing what an incredible woman Clara was, sang her praises to my parents, Cecille and Alex Fisher. Although Clara had accepted another job, my mother was instantly taken by how special Clara was, and moved mountains to persuade her to choose our family – just as my sister was born. It was ‘bashert’!

Clara lived with our family for 36 years as the nanny for myself, Roy, Joan and Frank Fisher. She was an awesome cook (combining Jewish and Hungarian delights), our “in-house psychologist,” most trusted confidante, mediator, most loved friend, and centre of our family life. She is a “woman of valour” – warm, loving, wise, compassionate, full of intellectual and spiritual curiosity, welcoming to everyone, even-tempered, optimistic, and more. When she retired our relationship was enriched.

It is a Jewish tradition to name newborns after a blood relative, someone Jewish, and someone who is no longer alive. But Clara is so special that our family broke the traditional rules and most female grandchildren bear some version of her name – Clara, Kiera – and she is now everyone’s first choice as a companion for cultural, political, religious, or social events.

Of course, we have to find a space in her incredibly full calendar of events. Clara regularly attends lectures at Temple Emanu-El, weekly courses at Glendon campus (comparative world religions, neuroscience and the brain, astronomy, etc.) – and did I mention a Toronto Symphony Orchestra series, her beloved Metropolitan Operas, and world-class theatre. Not to forget that Clara is the long serving chair of her apartment building’s senior’s club – and a devoted bingo and card player.

Why is Clara our miracle? Because she is an inspirational role model. Clara embraces life with kindness and enthusiasm. She always chooses the path of optimism and constructive action in the face of adversity.

Her interpersonal skills, warmth, deep friendship and caring applies to everyone, regardless of social status, religion, colour or culture. Everyone feels like her most important and cherished companion. Despite many life challenges that would justify defeat or depression, Clara wastes no energy on regret or self-pity. Her attitude is infectious and she has had the deepest influence on my life. When my husband, Sy died, Clara filled an important void and provided a road map for dealing with adversity.

As she heads for her 92nd year (and counting!) Clara’s survival and exemplary life, is our Hanukkah Miracle – she is a blessing for our family that cannot be measured or extinguished.

Barbara (Fisher) Landau is psychologist, lawyer and mediator.
Jewish Community Organizations, Synagogues and Schools join our brothers and sisters in Israel in wishing the community a Happy Chanukkah

Adath Israel Congregation
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Bernard Betel Centre
Beth David Synagogue
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May love and light fill your homes & hearts and may this Festival of Lights bring peace to Israel and her neighbours.
Understanding Hanukkah’s miracle through the ancient prism of horrors

JONATHAN KAY
SPECIAL TO THE CJN

Artist Alan King once famously remarked that the story behind every Jewish holiday can be summarized as “They tried to kill us, we won, let’s eat.” But that template doesn’t do justice to Hanukkah—which marks the period during the 2nd century BCE when Jewish guerrillas, led by Mattathias the Hasmonean and then his son Judah Maccabee rose up successfully against the Seleucid Empire (and its Hellenized Jewish supporters). This was a successful Jewish military campaign, not the usual passive attempt to survive external aggression.

Judah’s men were not gentle souls. At Hanukkah, we linger on the reportedly miraculous way in which a small supply of sacred oil lasted for eight days during the rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. But the fanatics who launched this campaign were more concerned with smashing idols, forcibly circumcising children, and slaughtering Seleucid troops. (The war ended in 160 BCE, after the Jews forged an alliance with Rome, and the Seleucids eventually gave in to the Maccabees’ demands for increased religious freedom.)

Unlike Passover, which is centred on the detailed recitation of a complex narrative, Hanukkah usually goes light on history’s cut and thrust. When I was a child at a Jewish elementary school, the main points of focus were the heroism of Judah’s plucky fighters, and the miraculous Temple story, which we all understood to be a metaphor for the Maccabees’ unlikely triumph.

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A SickKids Hanukkah card does more than share greetings to friends and family during the Festival of Lights. It also represents a donation to SickKids. So every time you send a SickKids card, you’re funding the fight at SickKids. Find your card at sickkidsfoundation.com/shop/cards.
While this educational tradition comes with a shaky pedigree (the miracle of the burning oil didn’t appear in historical sources until the compilation of the Talmud, centuries after the fact), it now is firmly embedded in Jewish culture. To this day, the holiday marks the time when many believers contemplate the nature of miracles.

That word comes to us by way of the Latin *miraculum*—object of wonder. In English, “miracle” is defined as “an unusual and mysterious event that is thought to have been caused by a god because it does not follow the usual laws of nature.”

The idea that God sometimes creates miraculous events is central to all three Abrahamic faiths. And the Old Testament alone contains hundreds of them (though the number depends on how broadly you define the term), many falling neatly into two categories: (1) God miraculously slaying enemies of the Jewish people or wayward Jews, and (2) God acting as a last-ditch supplier of sustenance and salvation to dying or besieged Jewish communities. Which is to say: most of God’s miracles served either to inflict horrendous suffering, or deflect it.

Many of the miracles in the first category were strange and gruesome. This is most obvious in the list of sadistic plagues that God rains down on the Egyptians (right up to the slaying of the firstborn in Exodus 12—which is hard to see as anything except full-on divine terrorism).

But there also are many more obscure examples. When Uzziah, a king of ancient Judah, got too big for his britches, God miraculously afflicted him with leprosy. In the Book of Samuel, another similarly obscure biblical figure gets struck dead when he innocently attempted to prevent the Ark of the Covenant from tipping over.

Even some of God’s seemingly benevolent miracles come with a horrifying epilogue—including the parting of the Red Sea, which was followed by the annihilation of the Pharaoh’s soldiers (“There remained not so much as one of them”) despite the fact most of these men presumably were impoverished conscripts and slaves.

It is the second category of miracles – by which God saves people instead of killing them – that more closely aligns with our belief that God exists as a fundamentally benign force in our lives.

The bargain by which Jews are saved in exchange for doing right by God is made explicit in Exodus 15, in which we find the Jews wandering through the desert wilderness, seeking potable water. In the faux-oasis of Marah, they imagine they are saved—but, alas (as Hebrew speakers will guess from the name of the place), the water proves “bitter.” Then a desperate Moses “cried to the Lord. The Lord showed him a tree, and he threw it into the waters, and the waters were made sweet. There he made a statute and an ordinance for them, and there he tested them; and he said, ‘If you will diligently listen to the Lord your God’s voice, and will do that which is right in his eyes, and will pay attention to his commandments, and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you, which I have put on the Egyptians.’”

There are exceptions to these two categories, of course. When God miraculously turns Moses’ rod into a serpent—which, while it is a world that you and I would experience as a lifelong horror movie. But go down the list of miracles contained in the Bible (the Internet is full of such compilations), and you’ll notice that most reflect the climate of tribal warfare and personal horror that ancient Jews (and everyone else) experienced. This was an age when even small skirmishes between neighbouring sects could result in the slaughter or enslavement of whole towns. A plague or drought could easily result in mass extermination. The average lifespan was about 35, because random infection or plague was around every corner.

Consider the fate of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the Seleucid king who held power during the campaign against the Maccabees. According to the (deuterocanonical) Second Book of Maccabees, Antiochus’ death (depicted in the accompanying illustration, an engraving by 19th century French artist Gustave Doré) came when, by divine miracle, he “was seized with a pain in his bowels, for which there was no relief, and there he tested them; and he said, ‘If you will diligently listen to the Lord your God’s voice, and will do that which is right in his eyes, and will pay attention to his commandments, and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you, which I have put on the Egyptians.”’

Cobra-style, then eats the court sorcerers’ own rods-turned-serpents—the effect is purely for showmanship, proof that Moses is actually an agent of divine will.

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Even if you weren’t murdered by God, this is just how people died back in the day. The world of miracles that our ancient ancestors knew, in other words, was a world that you and I would experience as a lifelong horror movie—in which the conceit of divine intervention was used as a means to both glorify the (desperately longed for) annihilation of one’s enemies, and to invest longshot hope in the idea that one’s own death might be divinely forestalled through prayers and rituals.

It is tempting to say that if this exercise in time travel were reversed, and Antiochus and Judah Maccabee were to come recite the Shehecheyanu in our modern homes, they’d regard our advanced medical science, lengthy lifespans and dependable food and water supplies as being “objects of wonder” in the full, miraculous sense. But I’m not sure they’d possess the ability to understand how such a radical transformation in the human condition had taken place since classical antiquity.

Ancient Judea had a negligible rate of technological growth, and so the notion that scientific invention could radically improve the human condition—a foundational element of western modernism—would have come off to Antiochus and Judah as the babblings of a demented sorcerer. That’s why our forebears fixated so strongly on the workings of the divine consciousness: According to their primitive world view, this was the only available path to civilizational self-improvement.

The truest miracle, if it may be called that, lies in the 22-century-long process that brought us to the far humane world we now inhabit—a world in which we no longer live by the caprice of God and nature, and so can focus our spiritual energies on the celebration of faith and family for their own sake.

Jonathan Kay is the Canadian editor of Quillette. Follow him on Twitter @jonkay
Forty years and eight miracles later

ELLA BURAKOWSKI
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This past year marked my 40-year anniversary working at The Canadian Jewish News. Over 4,000 papers later, I sit here reminiscing and wondering where the time went. How could a job that was supposed to be a short stint of a few months stretch out to a lifetime? It’s funny how life’s journey takes you on a road you never thought you’d travel.

Strangely, it all began on a crowded street in Tel Aviv in 1978. The driver of the Egged bus I was on came to an abrupt stop, narrowed his eyes and glared in my direction. I froze. He proceeded to yell at the guy beside me who was spitting gartim, sunflower seeds, all over the bus floor. I had to laugh; What a place this was. After living in Israel for a year, the country had a hold of my soul. It was at that moment I knew where I belonged, but I needed a plan.

I would go home to Toronto, go back to school, save some money and make aliyah.

I would go home to Toronto, go back to school, save some money and make aliyah.

After being accepted into a tourism program at Ryerson (then a Polytechnic Institute), I had five months to work and save before school started. Sitting at my kitchen table, I scanned the classified section of the Toronto Star. The tiny word ad jumped off the page. The Canadian Jewish News was looking for a receptionist. Could it get any better than that? Growing up, The CJN arrived weekly in my mailbox. It was a familiar staple in our home. Coincidence or Miracle #1?

Armed with a resume, letters of reference and the gift of gab, I walked in for my interview and walked out with the job. I started work the following Monday, Aug. 28, 1978.

The newspaper business was exciting. There was the sound of the reporters pounding the keys on their typewriters, cigarettes smouldering in ashtrays and the telex machine spitting out messages from our Montreal office. A huge headliner machine thumped out long strips of type on developing paper which went through a waxing machine to get pasted up on broadsheet cardboard flats. We had boxes full of point-liner tape for borders, and lots of people to put it all together carrying dangerous-looking Exacto knives. The energy and intensity was infectious and I wanted to be part of it.

My dream of living in Israel faded. I didn’t need to be a travel agent. I found a fabulous, exciting career with hands-on training and a pay cheque right here.

Over the years editors and employees came and went, but I was surprised how much of the staff stayed for what seemed like forever. Despite other job offers, I became one of those people. We called ourselves “lifers”. The CJN became more than a job, it was my second family.

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We shared every stage of life: marriage, divorce, pregnancies, children, grandchildren, illness, goodbyes and death. Working with the same people for decades, you hear every detail, every vacation, and every High Holiday or Passover drama. You share wedding plans, holiday recipes, lots of vacation photos and family drama. You laugh together, rejoice in every simcha and support each other through sorrows. We worked hard but had fun doing it.

Sometimes. But other times it was tense. You know that feeling when the blood drains out of your face and little cold sweat beads form on your forehead? It’s the feeling we got when the papers came back from the printer and we gathered around one of the desks to gawk at the horrible typo we could do nothing about, knowing the phones would soon be ringing off the hook (no email back then and yes, phones had a hook).

Some of the more memorable typos were: “Jewish Pubic Library”, “short sleeve sh-ts”, “kosher chocolate mouse”, “Kedem rape juice”, and my all-time favourite – a classified ad to sell a cottage that was tucked away in the woods printed as f--ked away in the woods.

My advice column, “Ask Ella” was first published in 1995. Since I was dubbed the “Dear Abby” of the office anyway, Paul Lungen, a reporter and fellow “lifer”, suggested to our then-editor Mordechai Ben-Dat that I become the advice columnist in The CJN. Miracle #2.

People in the community got to know my face from the photo that ran with the column. I’ve been asked advice in the strangest places; bathroom lineups, TJFF lineups, United Bakers, the doctor’s office, Bathurst Street, parties, weddings, funerals, shivahs, – just about everywhere.

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Writing Ask Ella also led me to write a Holocaust book. Miracle #3.

The book was nominated by the Ontario Library Association in their annual Forest of Reading program and today Hidden Gold is in schools across Ontario being used to teach kids of all religions and cultures about the Holocaust, about tolerance and acceptance. Miracle #4.

It was April 2013 when the rug was pulled out from our existence. Donald Carr, then president of The CJN’s board of directors, announced that we would be shutting down operations. The last paper would roll off the press in June. The print newspaper industry was hit hard and papers were shutting down everywhere. It was the end of an era. How could this happen? How could a paper that had been part of the Canadian Jewish landscape simply no longer exist?

Word traveled fast – very fast. Within the hour, the phones rang from Toronto, Montreal, other parts of Canada, Israel, and the U.S. The emails poured in from subscribers and advertisers. Our community was not letting this paper go down without a fight. Miracle #5.

Many hard decisions had to be made and our CJN family was torn apart for the greater good of keeping a Jewish voice alive for our communities. The staff was cut in half, we moved to much smaller offices, we went from Canada Post delivery to door-to-door drop off. Elizabeth Wolfe, stepped in as president of the board, a position her father Ray Wolfe held when I first started at the paper. Ben-Dat stepped down as editor stating that it was time for a younger person to take over.

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Yoni Goldstein came on board and changed the direction and look of the paper. It needed to speak to a younger audience if it was going to survive. With the Internet and social media taking over, news was instantaneous and free. Gone were the days when The CJN was a “news” paper. Goldstein had to address the challenges the Jewish communities of today were facing.

He needed to keep the original, loyal subscribers happy, while bringing in new, fresh ideas to engage a younger, growing, Jewish audience. The CJN needed an online presence.

Today, from the time of its inception in 1960, The CJN continues to be a major part of the Jewish landscape. Miracle #6.

There are weekly relevant features, excellent columns, editorials, controversial political stories, recipes, entertainment, an events calendar and it’s still a great place to compare prices for gefilte fish before the holidays. There’s something for everyone. It’s inspiring to see a younger staff as engaged and excited as I was when I first started.

As for the old gang, some have passed on, but their legacy and their writings live on. Some have retired and are exploring new adventures and enjoying time with grandchildren. So many of us are still friends. Facebook and Instagram have allowed us to continue to be part of every milestone of our original CJN family. We’ve never lost touch. We continue to rejoice in each other’s simchas and support each other through difficult times, and we’re still comparing brisket, turkey, kugel and dessert recipes for the High Holidays. Miracle #7.

This year as I mark my 40th anniversary at The CJN, I’m now the operations manager and continue to write “Ask Ella.” About 20 per cent of the current staff are CJN “lifers.” I still subscribe to the paper and receive my CJN on my front porch every Wednesday morning. I love seeing it on my kitchen table. I still love my job, it makes me feel connected, exactly like it did when I was growing up, part of a vibrant, active, Jewish community. Once a family, always a family. Miracle #8.

Ella Burakowski in 1978, her first year working at The CJN

Ella Burakowski is The CJN’s operations manager, advice columnist and an original lifer.
The miracle of Franz Rosenzweig’s Star of Redemption

RABBI AUBREY L. GLAZER
SPECIAL TO THE CJN

When was the last time you spent hours after a riveting conversation with your best friend alone in your room, pistol in hand, face to face with the “Nothing” of existence? Believe it or not, one of the most daring and original Jewish thinkers of the 20th century, Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929) did just that.

All of us have had a conversation that altered the course of our lives, maybe it was even an all-night conversation—but could it be construed as causing a minor miraculous moment of our lives?

I suggest that this is what was happening in 1913 while Rosenzweig finds himself in Leipzig as he continues to follow his passion of philosophy while also studying math and law. His quest for all types of knowledge was insatiable, so that in his law lectures, Rosenzweig becomes close friends with his lecturer in jurisprudence, Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy.

As passionate, budding philosophers these two begin schmoozing regularly over the following question: how can our radical selfhood be reconciled with our grasp of the world? And how must the divine be conceived such that it be understood as grounding and unifying both selfhood and worldliness?

The nature of deep friendship is that when you’re in it, everything around you looks different, and so amidst this life-changing relationship, Rosenzweig begins questioning everything he once believed in and held near and dear, especially that as seeking beings we find fulfillment in the world by joining together to unify and worship in the zeitgeist “the God revealing itself in the here and now.”

This questioning the ground of his own belief system is what keeps Rosenzweig up at night after night, so much so that by the summer of 1913, he is even considering that the only true way to realize one’s selfhood, and ground that selfhood in a relation to the divine is by a radical denial of the world, something the Gnostics before him would have applauded.

But then on that fateful eve of July 7, 1913, Rosenzweig engages in an all-night discussion with his own cousin, Rudolf Ehrenberg and Rosenstock-Huessy and, which Rosenzweig returns to later and realizes it to be a most transformative event in his life.

Over the course of this all-night rap session, Rosenstock-Huessy convinces Rosenzweig to rethink his view of Christianity as inherently anti-worldly to now stress its redemptive work in the world.

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As he becomes more convinced that only a Christian life grounded in revelation and devoted to the mission of redeeming the world through history provides the only compelling path to the reconciliation of selfhood and worldliness, Rosenzweig feels he has only one choice—to abandon Judaism and convert to Christianity.

Imagine you are Rosenzweig at the moment—what would you decide to do? Rosenzweig spends the next hours after the conversation alone in his room, pistol in hand, face to face with the “Nothing.” Rosenzweig does not take his life or the life of another, rather he emerges from the experience determined to convert to Christianity in order to join into this flow of the historical realization of redemption in the world.

Three months later, Rosenzweig reverses his decision. Legend has it that upon returning in October of 1913 to wander the streets of Berlin Erev Kol Nidrei in search of a church ready to convert, Rosenzweig miraculously hears the haunting melody of Kol Nidrei and turns around. The rest is history.

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Something miraculous emerges in the revelation that inspired Rosenzweig’s magnum opus of philosophical theology scratched on postcards. 

uber-heroic efforts while suffering from ALS to continue his thinking, writing, and communal work after succumbing to the paralysis.

And yet, amidst these all-night conversations, something miraculous emerges in the revelation that inspired Rosenzweig’s magnum opus of philosophical theology scratched on postcards that constitute The Star of Redemption. His system seeks to understand the “All” of existence through the cited symbol of the “Star of David” [Magen David] composed of two interlocking triangles serving as the matrix of the entire book.

With this visual in mind, Rosenzweig encapsulates the “All” that pulls him out of the abyss of the “Nothing” he was facing with pistol in hand, to see light in these two triangles that compose the Star as follows: the “Elements” composing the “Everlasting Primordial World” symbolize the lower triangle of Creation-Revelation-Redemption, while the “Path” of the “Ever-Renewed World” symbolizes the upper triangle of God-Human-World. The final “Configuration” that then emerges through the intersection of the triangles forms the Star of David which then also creates a series of three relationships through their vertices—and the one that concerns miracles is found precisely here, at the interstice where God relates to human beings through Revelation.

The close of the first book of the Star that is concerned with Creation paints the following picture: “This becoming-manifest of the everlasting mystery of Creation is the endlessly renewed miracle of Revelation. We stand at the transition—the transition of the mystery to the miracle.”

What Rosenzweig realized through his own minor miracle of missed conversion is the possibility of beginning as a skeptical philosopher who can grow and learn how to overcome the death drive to commit suicide and ultimately embrace life with the openness of a theologian, so that he can conclude the Star with these words of encouragement in the face of eternal anti-Semitism: “To walk humbly with your God—nothing more is asked for here than a wholly present trust...But whither do the wings of the gate open? You do not know. INTO LIFE.”

Rosenzweig continued to appreciate how Christianity could still carry out the redemptive unity in the world, but that was not the full picture. Rather Judaism remains crucial as a player in the world’s redemption. Even more interesting is how through this process for Rosenzweig, the Jewish people and its insular communal life anticipates the ultimate redemption they must ever pursue.

Rosenzweig’s miracle is a subtle grasping of the possibility of reconciliation between the self and the world in history as actually being common to Christianity and Judaism, without feeling compelled to convert, rather he re-commits himself to return more deeply and authentically to the Judaism of his birth.

Rosenzweig’s renown is not necessarily limited to his philosophic magnus opus scratched on military postcards sent home from the Balkan front during the First World War that becomes known as arguably the greatest work of modern Jewish philosophy, The Star of Redemption. Rather it is his miraculous abandonment of a promising academic career in order to live, teach and create Lehrhaus in the Frankfurt Jewish community as a serious centre for adult Jewish learning, and moreover, his.
Experiencing miracles in the everyday

RABBI ASHER VALE
SPECIAL TO THE CJN

The late Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach played a Hanukkah concert at Yeshiva University in New York when I was a student there. In between songs, he told stories and shared Torah insights, all the while strumming his guitar and speaking in a sing-song voice. He talked about miracles, an appropriate theme for Hanukkah.

“When I wake up in the morning,” he began, “it’s a miracle. If I can open my eyes, it’s a miracle. If I stand on my feet…” The singing rabbi continued rhyming off a series of seemingly mundane actions until he said, “If I open a Gemara, it’s a miracle.” There was a sudden pause as both he and the audience – consisting of yeshiva students - realized the double entendre. The house erupted in laughter.

Reb Shlomo was making an important point. We generally think of miracles as supernatural events, such as the splitting of the Red Sea. However, we should be equally amazed by the intricate functioning of the human body and the natural world around us.

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In the Amidah prayer that is said at least three times a day, we thank the Almighty, “for your miracles that are with us every day . . .” Let me ask you something. How many wondrous occurrences do you experience in a typical month, never mind every day? A teacher of mine once explained it as follows: If the sun were to rise over the horizon only one time during your lifetime, you would consider it a miracle. So too, if a human egg was to become fertilized and develop into a living embryo once in a millennium, we would be amazed beyond belief. The fact that these phenomena occur on a regular basis, leads us to see them not as supernatural but as something to be expected. Some people, such as a couple who conceive a baby after many years of being childless, can more readily relate to this idea.

Some natural events are miraculous in the usual sense of the word. The Purim story is a prime example of this. The holiday celebrates the redemption of the Jewish people from imminent annihilation by Haman. But it also commemorates a milestone in their spiritual maturity.

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The Talmud, in analyzing a verse in Megillat Esther, asserts that, “the Jews confirmed on Purim what they had accepted at Mount Sinai.” The divine revelation had been totally miraculous in every way. The mountain shook, thunder was mysterically visible, the sound of a supernatural shofar could be heard, and, amidst it all, the Almighty communicated directly with an entire nation of people. Contrast that with the Purim story, when no such open miracles took place.

However, the Jews of the time realized that what seemed like a series of random occurrences – Vashti getting killed, a Jewish woman becoming Queen, Mordechai foiling a plot to kill the King, etc. – were all part of a divine plan to save the Jews. That recognition of God acting behind the scenes to orchestrate all of these events, revealed that the Jewish people had reached a new level of belief.

There are, of course, the supernatural miracles. The goal of these is not to wow us as much as to teach us something. This can be seen in the holiday of Hanukkah. The container of oil burning for eight days was clearly what can be described as an “open” miracle. Yet it was relatively subtle and low-key as miracles go. It was all the Almighty needed to show. He sanctioned the rededication of the temple.

Maimonides has a very interesting perspective on miracles that seems to put it all together. He explains that the best way to develop a relationship of love and awe with the Almighty is to study and contemplate the universe. When one thinks about the complexity and intricacy of everything God created, it should make one feel relatively insignificant and more appreciative of and amazed by the One who is responsible for it all.

How do miracles fit into all this? Maimonides writes that all of the open miracles that would occur throughout history were built into the cosmos. For example, when the waters were parted on the second day of Creation, they had it in their nature so that they could later on split for Moses at the Red Sea and on other astonishing occasions. Maimonides thus incorporates miracles into the splendour of nature rather than making them an exception to it. One’s belief in the Almighty can be equally enhanced whether food grows from the ground or falls as manna from the skies.

I recently experienced what I consider to be a personal miracle. Shadows floating before my eyes prompted me to visit an ophthalmologist. A series of tests revealed a much more serious condition that needed immediate attention. I asked the doctor if there was any connection between the diagnosis and the shadows. He said they were totally unrelated. I was lucky to have been examined.

To my mind, it had nothing to do with luck. A month earlier, I had attended a Torah study program at a local shul. My usual learning partner was absent and I was set up with a man who is an ophthalmologist. The next day I began seeing the shadows. Normally, I wouldn’t have done anything about it since I’d experienced it before. However, because of our chance meeting, I decided to text my new acquaintance. While reassuring me that it was probably nothing, he arranged for me to see a retina specialist that same day. The receptionist expressed astonishment that I was given an appointment that quickly. Tests were done and without telling me that he suspected something serious, he referred me to another physician. More scans were carried out and I was given the diagnosis.

What may seem like coincidence to someone else, was in my eyes (no pun intended), an obvious miracle orchestrated from above. Had all of these seemingly random events not occurred, the results could have been devastating. It was my own Purim story, just in time for Hanukkah.

Rabbi Asher Vale is the director of the Beis Din, Vaad Harabonim of Toronto.

I recently experienced what I consider to be a personal miracle.
We are collectively living a giant miracle, right now

MOSHE MODEIRA
SPECIAL TO THE CJN

Hanukkah is once again upon us, and we are reminded of one of the most famous miracles in Jewish history, the story of the infamous battle of the Maccabees in their struggle to preserve the fabric and legacy of Judaism in the face of a Greek empire that was hellbent on total assimilation and eradication of our people.

As we are told, there was only enough oil left to light the lamps for a single day, seemingly dooming the Maccabean revolt to failure – instead, the lamps stayed lit for eight days, allowing the small but resourceful band of Jewish rebels a seemingly impossible victory over the battle-hardened Greek soldiers.

What is a miracle? Simply put, it is an event so unlikely to happen that it is previously deemed impossible – and then one day, what was previously thought impossible becomes the possible.

As Jews, having survived over three millennia against seemingly insurmountable odds, we have no choice but to believe in miracles. Whether it be moments of divine intervention, or the herculean efforts of extraordinary leaders, the existence of the Jewish people is irrefutably intertwined with miraculous events.

So ingrained in us is our awe of the miraculous that we have two major holidays that commemorate them – Hanukkah, and Purim. We recite the prayer Al Ha’nissim on both holidays, giving thanks to God for the privilege of having witnessed them. We say a special blessing expressing gratitude: “… to the Lord our God who performed miracles for our ancestors in those days, at this season.”

There is a passage in the Tanakh that always made me pause as child: “You have made man a little lower than the angels, and have crowned him with glory and honour,” Psalms: 8:5.

Long after I learned this passage, I regularly pondered what it truly meant. How could this be? Why are we considered just a little lower than the angels?

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After all, angels, the renowned malakim, are among the most incredibly powerful beings ever depicted in any of the worldwide religious traditions. Angels are often described as benevolent celestial entities, traversing between the heavenly and earthly realms, messengers and emissaries that appear in countless stories and episodes in Abrahamic lore, acting as intermediaries between humanity and God himself.

My personal favourite is the story of the angel that is sent to "wrestle" with Jacob and test his resolve while on a journey back to his home in Canaan, a test we are taught that Jacob ultimately passes and thus gains the respect of God so much that we see the first recorded reference of the word Israel – Jacob is honoured for his endurance by being renamed Israel, loosely translated to "he who grapples with God."

Essentially, to use the parlance of our modern age, angels are kind of a big deal. Thus, I could not grasp during my studies as a child how could we possibly be just a little lower than the angels. How could it be that we human beings, imperfect, heavily flawed, prone to the basest of emotions such as jealousy, cruelty, pettiness and spite – how could we be anywhere close in hierarchy to these awe-inspiring supernatural beings?

The truth, I realized over the years, is that human beings are indeed imbued with the capacity for miracles - from the very moment we begin our existence. The first miracle happens when we are simply born, an event so improbable that scientists famously calculated the odds to be about 1 in 400 trillion.

We forget that the Hebrew word for miracle – nes – come from the root word nisayon, which means test. As human beings, we are constantly being tested, called upon to perform great feats of courage and resilience that may at first glance seem to far supersede our capabilities. In essence, we perform miracles every single day on this planet, feats that truly are almost worthy of being performed by angels themselves.

On holidays like Hanukkah and Purim, we rightfully seek to honour the big miraculous moments because of how perilous and tenuous our history as Jewish people has been - but it is important that we also take stock of how much we all as human beings have accomplished, and have potential yet to accomplish. We are collectively living a giant miracle, right now.

Every time a doctor saves a life, or a scientist has a new breakthrough, or an architect designs a more efficient building, or we release a new piece of software that saves people time on a daily basis so that they can spend more time with their loved ones – these are miracles, and we are miracle-makers.

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Hanukkah and Purim commemorate jaw-dropping moments when ordinary people rose to the challenge of adversity, and achieved the extraordinary. As human beings, we sometimes forget that we all possess the capacity of angels, imbued from our very beginning with gifts of courage, endurance, resilience and faith.

Take for example the story of Purim. We forget that in the text, the name of God is not mentioned once. Instead, it is Esther and her uncle Mordechai who play central roles in saving the Jewish people from absolute calamity. Facing the spectre of genocide, they rise to the occasion and become almost angelic in their actions. They are early examples of my point - that when tested, human beings possess the capacity to emulate God and perform acts of gargantuan impact that would have before seemed impossible.

Though we gather every year on Hanukkah and Purim to seek inspiration from celebrating the joy of the miraculous, let us not forget how powerful we all are. Every single day, with every single improbable breath we take on this crazy rock in the universe called Earth, we are being tested – and every single day, we pass those tests and hurdle onward, performing miracle after miracle until we go to bed – hopeful that God gives a chance to wake up the next day, ready to undertake another series of seemingly improbable tests.

Moshe Modeira is a fashion marketing and digital media executive.
The miracle of community

TEMA SMITH
SPECIAL TO THE CJN

I am on the other side of the world when news of the Tree of Life synagogue shooting breaks. I wake up in my jet-lag haze in Tokyo and look at my phone to check the time. There, in front of me, is the breaking news headline. I sit up and hug my knees. I can feel my heart racing. I feel so alone.

Tuesday morning, over breakfast with a dear friend in Kyoto, I watch the vigil. Despite the distance, despite the time difference, I feel the embrace of my community as I watch thousands of people gathered in Toronto’s Mel Lastman Square, huddled close for warmth. Twitter and Facebook tell me of the call for Jews everywhere to #ShowUpForShabbat, and I know what I need to do.

The Shabbat after Pittsburgh, I board a high-speed train to travel the 300 kilometres from Hiroshima to Kobe, home to one of the three synagogues in Japan, and the only one outside of Tokyo. I had exchanged emails with the rabbi at the Kansai Jewish Centre earlier in the week.

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I need to find myself amidst the familiar sounds of davening – of Jewish prayer – to feel grounded after such tragedy.

The synagogue is in a historic international area at the base of the tallest mountain in the Kansai region, high above the Kobe harbour. At the Shabbat meal following a perfunctory Kabbalat Shabbat service, the conversation is a patchwork of Hebrew, French, Japanese and English. I spot an Australian couple who looked friendly, and we begin to chat.

"Where are you from?" They ask.
"I'm visiting from Toronto," I answer.
They light up. "Toronto!? We lived there for a year a few years ago! Near Bathurst and Eglinton."

Now it's my turn to get excited. "That's my neighbourhood! I work at Holy Blossom."

"Holy Blossom? That’s where we used to go for Shabbat!"

And like that, there, in Kobe, 10,600 kilometres from home, a new friendship is made. As I rush out to catch my train back to Hiroshima, we exchange coordinates to add each other on Facebook, and make offers of hospitality should they find themselves in Toronto, or should I wind up in Melbourne.

As I sit on the train, I am lost in thought. Here I am, the farthest away from home that I have ever been at a time where I crave connection and familiarity, and I meet a couple who had made my community their home while they were far from their own. This, I muse, is nothing short of miraculous.

I find myself back in Kyoto, once the capital city of Japan. Kyoto is dotted with Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines that number in the thousands. My friend reminds me: this was the seat of power in Japan for centuries, and so every sect worth their salt built something here. Kyoto is full of tourists, and at each shrine or temple, you can find people making offerings to the gods, to the Buddha, or to the Boddhisatva. The sound of bells and the smell of incense is entrancing.

As I wander the winding alleys leading away from the temples in the Higashiyama area, I remember that Hanukkah is around the corner. I think of the part of the story that we often choose to focus on as its central theme. The Maccabees, a small but mighty and dedicated army, defy the odds to beat the Syrian army and return to liberate Jerusalem and re-dedicate the Temple. They find the Temple sacked. They fashion a new menorah and find just enough oil to light it for one day. Miraculously, of course, it burns for eight days, giving them enough time to procure more oil.

It is no accident that the story tells of eight days — eight is a significant number in Judaism, symbolizing completion.

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I think of another Jewish moment that involves eight days: the brit milah ceremony, where a baby boy is brought into the covenant and receives his Hebrew name.

That this happen on the eighth day is so important that it even outweighs observance of the Sabbath. Welcoming this new baby into the Jewish community is one of the highest priorities of Jewish life.

I think of all of the ways that Judaism elevates the idea of community — the minyan, the 10 people needed to recite certain prayers of our liturgy; the bar or bat mitzvah ceremony, where a young adult is called to the Torah for the first time in the presence of his or her community; the sheva brachot, where the community celebrates the newly married couple through the week following their wedding; the shivah, where the community gathers for a week to console the recently bereaved immediately following the burial of their loved one. At all of life’s moments, Judaism prescribes a communal response.

The French-Jewish philosopher Jacques Derrida tells of the most basic kind of faith — faith in each other. Any address of another person, any conversation, he writes, “amounts to saying ‘Believe what I say as one believes in a miracle.’” When we speak to each other, when we cohabit the same spaces, we are making a leap of faith at each and every moment. This, for Derrida, is a basic of the human condition. An everyday miracle, as it were.

I return to the Maccabees. What did they achieve by rededicating the Temple? Nothing short of re-establishing a central focal point of Jewish life. We know that the oil burned for eight nights, and we celebrate the miracle. But in telling only of this example of divine intervention, we gloss over the other miracle of this story. The Maccabees restored the central hub of Jewish life — the place where people gathered. Perhaps they knew that it was in a hub like the Temple, lit by holy light, that another miracle would happen — the miracle of community and connection.

And here, on the other side of the world, I at once understand. After Pittsburgh, it is community that buoys me. This is the real miracle — the miracle of community. A miracle at once extraordinary and totally ordinary.

Tema Smith is the director of community engagement at Holy Blossom Temple in Toronto.
The little miracle I’m hoping for this holiday

EMILY CARUSO PARNELL
SPECIAL TO THE CJN

When I see a great card in a stationary store, I buy multiple copies so that I can share the humour (the great cards are usually the funniest) with lots of people. One of my favourites (I still have a few tucked away) says “Happy Jewish Day” on the front and when you open it the message says “Really, who can keep track?” It’s funny because it’s true; there are a lot of Jewish holidays and, in the fall, it can be very hard to keep track.

But of all the holidays we mark and celebrate during the year, I find Hanukkah the hardest one to connect with beyond the surface rituals. My kids love it but I’m always a bit indifferent to their euphoria. The irony that the holiday that most emphasizes the importance of not assimilating falls at roughly the same time of year as the holiday with the greatest assimilationist push is a dynamic that colours how I, as a convert to Judaism, experience Hanukkah. When you’ve left the jingle bells and whistles of Christmas behind in favour of matzah and shofars, I think it’s inevitable that your experience of Hanukkah, in particular, is a bit complex.

We’re taught that once a person converts to Judaism, their status is no different than someone who was born Jewish. I’m Jewish, full-stop. The Jew-by-choice label isn’t supposed to matter. Hanukkah is one time of year when, even after 15 years, it does matter. I don’t think of Passover in relationship to Easter but I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to stop thinking of Hanukkah as the anti-Xmas.

The ubiquity of Christmas makes me cranky; the barrage of tinsel and Santa and carols and lights and parties and trees and advertising and that darn elf on his infernal shelf starts in early November and doesn’t let up until January. While I smile sweetly as the holly and the ivy encroach on my office cubicle, what I really want to do is hide for a couple of months. My friends who were born Jewish, on the other hand, are much more blasé about the whole thing. They go to friends’ Christmas parties, hum Frosty the Snowman and go dashing through the snow completely angst-free. It’s not their circus but they can still enjoy the monkeys. Christmas-mania doesn’t irritate me because I miss celebrating the holiday. It’s actually quite freeing not to have to engage with all the consumerism. On the contrary, Christmas is like a bad ex-boyfriend who I keep running into every day in spite of my efforts to avoid him. I just want to buy my groceries; leave me alone, already! That’s what makes Hanukkah hard; I struggle to connect spiritually to it when I’m always experiencing it through the veil of my inability to escape Christmas.

I like to tell my children (particularly when they’re lamenting our lack of a swimming pool, or some other such trial of an over-privileged childhood) that we live in a safe neighbourhood, in a safe city, in one of the safest countries in the world. To live here is to have won the only lottery that really matters. Given this good fortune, is it fair to ask for another miracle? What chutzpah! If it isn’t too much to ask, however, what I’d really like this Hanukkah is to be able to find my own connection to the holiday, a connection that has nothing to do with that other holiday—that-shall-not-be-named. The miracle I’m hoping for is small, but mighty, kind of like the Maccabees, themselves. Maybe there’s hope for me yet.

Emily Caruso Parnell lives in Sudbury, Ont. She is a teacher and a volunteer synagogue president.
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HADAS PARUSH/FLASH90 PHOTOS
A Hanukkah tale of Chelm

MARK BINDER
SPECIAL TO THE CJN

In the village of Chelm, just before every Hanukkah, the ancient debate begun by the two great rabbis Hillel and Shammai resumed. Do you start the festival by lighting one candle and counting up, or with eight and counting down?

And every year, Rabbi Kibbitz issued the same ruling – do whatever makes you happy.

This year, although the argument was heated, rumour was that Rabbi Kibbitz was bedridden. He was old. Was he sick? He was tired.

It was worrisome that his wife, Mrs. Chaipul, (she kept her name, which is another story,) who owned the only kosher restaurant in Chelm, hadn’t been to work in three days.

Filling in behind the restaurant’s counter, Rabbi Yohon Abrahms, the schoolteacher and mashgiach, was cooking, cleaning and taking orders.

“So, about the Hanukkah candles,” Reb Cantor, the merchant, asked the young rabbi, who was busy refilling cups of tea, “how many on the first night and how many on the last?”

Rabbi Abrahms answered with a shrug. “Rabbi Kibbitz always says, do whatever makes you happy.”

“But you’re a rabbi, too,” Reb Cantor said. “What do you think?”

“Do you want food or a theological dissertation?” Rabbi Abrahms shot back. “Because I can’t do both at the same time!”

The room fell quiet. “Food, of course!”

In Chelm, food was always more important than discussion – until it was gone then discussion.

***

“Channah, you should go to your restaurant,” Rabbi Kibbitz said. His voice was soft.

“No, my love.” Mrs. Chaipul said. “I’ve left it in good hands. I will stay here with you.”

“It’s OK,” he said. “I’m not going to die until after Hanukkah.”

“Don’t say such things.” She made the sign against the evil eye.

“Will you cry when I go?”

“For you? Probably.” She was barely holding back the tears. “But enough. We have years ahead.”

“No.” He sighed. “We’ve had years. Good years. Many, but not enough. Never enough. Now we have only days.”

He began coughing, and she fed him spoonfuls of warm chicken soup.

“Channah?”

“I’m here.”

“Do you know what the problem with sitting shivah is?”

“Too much noodle pudding?”

“True.” The rabbi laughed, then he coughed. “Shivah is meant to comfort the living, but I’ve noticed that most revealed are very uncomfortable.

Mourning is overrated. For a week, everyone visits and talks about the recently deceased. And the family has to sit and listen, no matter how tired or sad... All they really want is their loved one back.”

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“Shaa shaa,” his wife said. “Your shivah is a long way off.”
“No. But I have a request.”
“What is it?”
“During Hanukkah,” the old rabbi said, “let me sit shivah with you, before I’m dead. Then you won’t be so alone.”
She covered her mouth to stifle a sob. What a foolish request!
Then she nodded. “Yes. Yes. Of course.”

It caused quite a stir in the village.
“If he’s not dead, how is it shivah?”
“We’re going to talk about him while he’s lying there in the house?”
“After he dies for real, are we going to have to do another shivah?”
“And what if he doesn’t die?”
This last question was interesting, because no one really believed that Rabbi Kibbitz would ever die. He was a bear of a man, who had been old forever. How could one such as that pass on?
Still, Chelm was a village that embraced the unconventional.
A schedule was made, and on each night of Hanukkah a different group trudged through the snow to light the candles and sit shivah.

The two-room house was small. The table was moved to the side of the kitchen, and extra chairs brought in for visitors. The rabbi’s bed was set in the doorway of the bedroom, so he could sit up or lie down as needed. Mrs. Chaipul’s sewing chair was next to the doorway, so she could sit beside him.

This living shivah turned out to be quite a success, mostly because the rabbi kept his mouth shut and said nothing. Everyone forgot that he was there.

Every villager stopped by and shared stories of how Rabbi Kibbitz had listened, talked, helped, advised or officiated. There had been weddings and brises, funerals and so many sermons.

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Mrs. Chaipul listened to all the praise, and the occasional complaint. She accepted comfort and hugs, and wondered at the frequent comment, “What will we do now that he is gone?”

Strangely, hearing these words while her husband was still breathing didn’t leave her as sad as she’d expected. She found herself reliving their life together. “He never had children with his first wife,” she told everyone.

“And we, of course, were too old. But he always told me that he didn’t need any kinder because the whole village was his family.”

At last, on the eighth night of Hanukkah, by some silent agreement, only the younger villagers came to visit. They all had chosen, with Shammai, to light just one candle.

There was wine and laughter and spirited discussion about the many texts that they had read with the rabbi. Rachel Cohen said that she was proud to have been the rabbi’s first female student.

Her husband, Doodle, agreed that without Rabbi Kibbitz none of his many questions about life and death would have been answered so well.

A hush fell over the room as Doodle mentioned death.

The last few Hanukkah candles sputtered and one by one extinguished. All eyes turned to Mrs. Chaipul, who began to cry softly.

Except for the coals from the stove, the room was black.

“Is he?” someone whispered.

“We should go,” whispered another.

“What will we do now that he is gone?” cried a booming voice. “Am I dead?”

“Why is it so dark and quiet?” came a ringing voice. “Am I dead?”

“Hi, I’m Doodle.” His wife threw her arms around his neck.

Rabbi Kibbitz hugged her close, and thought about the days to come; each of them an adventure to be shared.

One by one, but all at once, the students sneaked out of the house to spread word of the miraculous recovery.

The next morning, when a delegation of elders went to the rabbi’s house, they found it empty.

A note on the kitchen table read, “No, we’re not dead. Yes, we’ve gone. Shalom.”

Mark Binder is an author, storyteller, and the former editor of the Rhode Island Jewish Herald.
The czar’s soldier – a Hanukkah story

CURT LEVIANT
SPECIAL TO THE CJN

This is the story my father, Ya’akov, told me. He had heard it from his grandfather, Chaim, who was there in the Russian shtetl when the event took place, during the reign of the czar:

One snowless early winter’s day, end of November, just before Hanukkah, a solidly built man – he seemed to be in his mid-30s – appeared in our shtetl, Kariukovke. He wore a khaki-coloured greatcoat, a peasant’s hat with earflaps, and he had a knapsack on his back. It was obviously an army uniform but it lacked any insignias or markings. He spoke a rough-edged Yiddish with an equally rough Russian accent. To the first groups of Jews he met, he said he had just finished his obligatory 25 years of service in the czar’s army and he was returning home. He said his name was Dovid.

Judging by the way he spoke, people looked at him skeptically.

“Are you a Jew?”

He laughed bitterly. “What? You think I’m a goy? In the army they sure didn’t treat me like a goy. Ikh bin a Yid,” he added in Yiddish. “I am a Jew.”

But people weren’t convinced. Out of range of his hearing, they murmured that he was not yet 13.

Maybe.

“Now I remember. There was a Rivke married to Motl,” the older man said. “And what’s your mother’s name?”

“Rivke.”

“Wait a minute,” the older man said. “Do you know how many Rivkes we have here?”

“Maybe.”

“Do you know how many Rivkes we have here?”

“What’s your family name?”

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“What do you mean, maybe. How can a man forget his family name?”

“Like I said, they never called you by your family name. Anyway, do we use family names here in the shtetl? You’re called by your first name and what line of work you do. Like Motl Shneider, the tailor. And Avrom Shuster, the shoemaker. And if you’ve been in the czar’s army for 25 years, and your childhood and youth and many of your precious grownup years are wasted, you forget a lot of things. It’s a miracle I remember what I remember.”

We all stared at him. He looked like a goy but spoke Yiddish. He threw in lots of Russian words, and at times it seemed he was translating from Russian into Yiddish. Had you heard him from a distance his language would not have sounded Yiddish because of the turmoil that Kariukovke had experienced, and because Dovid’s parents were no longer alive, there was no one who could remember his kidnapping.

“Have you ever been in the czar’s army for 25 years? Anything, everything, is possible...But I still remember the Shema Yisroel. That they couldn’t wipe away from me. I said it to myself every night. Every night. I didn’t miss a night.” And he brought the palm of his right hand to his eyes, covered them, and recited the Shema fervently.

But even this did not persuade the group of men. They said that they had known Russians who could imitate those words and that gesture too.

But why should a Russian want to pass himself off as a Jew in a land where there was lots of anti-Semitism, both popular and official? The answer is that the Jewish community was known for caring for its own.

The man who claimed to be Dovid was no doubt hoping for a bed in the poorhouse or in the old age home, or a place in someone’s house until he found a job. He was still a young man and would likely find work as a carpenter.

“Ikh bin a Yid,” he kept saying, at times declaring it forthrightly, at times in a tone of complaint. “They snatched me away when I was only 12, a year before my bar mitzvah, and forced me into the army. They wanted to break me, all the anti-Semites, but they didn’t. They couldn’t make me a Christian. I’m still a Jew. Ikh bin a Yid.”

We exchanged glances. He was sounding more and more like a Jew. But what Jew didn’t know his family name? What Jew can’t read from the siddur? But what Jew didn’t know his family name? What Jew can’t read from the siddur?

The ex-soldier, Dovid, claimed that he had spoken only Russian for 25 years. That was probably why the Slavic overwhelmed his Yiddish.

Then someone in our group took out a little siddur and showed it to Dovid.

“Can you read?”

“I haven’t looked at a siddur in 25 years. I forgot how to read?”

“How can a Jew forget to read?”

Dovid came up to the man and looked him in the face. The man, apparently frightened, backed off.

“Have you ever been in the czar’s army for 25 years? Anything, everything, is possible...But I still remember the Shema Yisroel. That they couldn’t wipe away from me. I said it to myself every night. Every night. I didn’t miss a night.” And he brought the palm of his right hand to his eyes, covered them, and recited the Shema fervently.

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Meanwhile, Dovid stood there silently, shifting his weight from one leg to another.

One of the men near me ran into a house and came out with a glass of water for Dovid, which he drank eagerly. “Are you hungry?” Another man asked. Dovid shook his head. Then he said in an upbeat voice, “Is Avrom the teacher still alive?”

We looked at him, bewildered. How did he know the old teacher?

“Why do you ask?”

“Yes, he’s very old.”

“I know. He wasn’t young years ago. Where is he?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“Why don’t you answer me? Stop asking me why. Where does he live?”

“In the old age home.”

“Is he well?”

“For a man in his late 80s, maybe 90s, he is quite well and alert.”

“Take me to him. I want to see him.”

We all walked through the quiet streets to the two-storey community old age home. Inside a few residents sat in the living room.

We walked up to Reb Avrom’s room, knocked on the door, and opened it. Reb Avrom was sitting at his table, studying a text. He was no doubt surprised to see so many people, including one who looked like a soldier. Avrom was a short, thin man, with a wispy white beard and a black yarmulke on his head. He looked calmly at all of us, but stared intently at the ex-soldier.

As soon as Dovid saw the old man he ran up to him and cried out, his voice choking, “Rebbe, it’s me, your student, Dovid. Do you remember me?”

Avrom rose, and with an agility that belied his years, he gave us that heartfelt smile that was an ingrained part of his personality.

“Dovid, Dovid.” Avrom shook his head, his personality.

And Dovid added: “I asked the soldiers, let me at least say goodbye to my father and mother. But they didn’t.”

The ex-soldier’s eyes widened and a glow spread over his dusky face as if he was having a revelation. He looked at Reb Avrom’s face as though he wanted to absorb its essence.

“We were studying the laws of Hanukkah when they barged in.”

Reb Avrom interrupted. “Yes, yes. That’s what I was going over with you. From Joseph Caro’s the Shulchan Orukh, the Code of Law.”

“You were reading what happens if a person doesn’t have enough money to purchase both Shabbos candles and Hanukkah candles....”

Dovid closed his eyes and continued chanting in Hebrew with his rebbe.

And with the tears in his eyes, Reb Avrom came up to Dovid, embraced him and kissed both his cheeks. The tears of both men intermingled.

“Dear rebbe. I always thought of you. You were like a second father to me.”

And Dovid bent down and kissed his rebbe’s cheek.

“Borukh ha-bo, tayerer Yid. Welcome, dear Jew. Welcome home. And a freilach Hanukkah.”

I looked around. Every man’s face was wet; yet every man was smiling. Now all of us also embraced Dovid. And now we all vied as to who would be the first to welcome him and stay with us throughout Hanukkah until he settled in.

And with the return of a Jew to our shtetl after 25 years, it was indeed a freilach Hanukkah in Kariukovke.

Curt Leviant’s most recent two novels are the critically acclaimed King of Yiddish and Kafka’s Son. Coming in December is a new novel, Katz or Cats; or How Jesus Became My Rival in Love.
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