

Prayers Help Console During Traditional Chanukah

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Jewish families the world over are celebrating Chanukah, the Festival of Lights, this year from sundown December 4th through sundown the 12th, 2007. Chanukah celebrates the first recorded war fought to preserve religious freedom. This holiday recounts a miracle: the Temple's dedication celebration as a reminder of a Maccabean victory over the Syrians in 16B 8.C.E. Wanting to rekindle the Eternal Light in the temple, the people could only find a flask of pure oil which would last one day. According to rabbinic story, this one flask miraculously burned for eight days.

The traditional candle lighting of the menorah with one candle for each night for eight symbolic nights, takes place in a loving traditional family setting with a small gift for a child every night, and a larger one for the last night of Chanukah. Ours, a doting family, was truncated in 1968. The first Chanukah without the children's father, who died of cancer, I blessed our children: Paul, the 11-year-old and Brant, our 6-year-old. Together we said the Chanukah prayer as the candles were lit. We routinely did this for eight nights, a candle and its helping candlelight for each night.

They were sad nights, my boys without a father, I without the husband I loved. My wound was eased when I saw the smiles on the kids' faces as they opened the wrapped presents I so carefully picked at the 5 and 10 cent store for the seven nights. The "biggie" present they received the eighth night. I shared in their joy. And I so proudly received their Sunday School Chanukah decorations, which decorated first my refrigerator, and when there was no more room they spread throughout the kitchen and dining room walls.

They also played the traditional dreidel game of chance, which uses a four-sided top with Hebrew letters. When the "gimel" spins to a halt, there is candy or pennies for the winner. "Gimel" means miracle, and the miracle for me was to have lived to have the family I always wanted — but it was not complete. Prayers consoled me then: "Blessed is the flame that burns in the heart's secret places."

Prayers would also have to help me when my son Brant died in a freak accident in Maui in 1994. Chanukah is a symbol of joy, and I was consumed with sadness. The flame of the Chanukah candles never again would have joy for me. In my mind I lived and relived the past Chanukahs when we were a complete family.

Dozen years after my husband died, I remarried. Harold Dickstein is another miracle in my life, a good most supporting husband. My son Paul, Harold's children and grandchildren will be with us often. Yet Chanukah will never symbolize a Festival of Limits for me since two lights were burnt out in my life. The prayers must forever console me as I say Chanukah's lines of prayer:

Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the splendor of the Lord shall dawn upon you.