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**Congregation Etz Chayim
Community News**

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A Package of Possibilities in Synagogue Programming

Before coming to Congregation Etz Chayim as programming and engagement director, last year, Monica Neiman worked in Judaic education and programming in Seattle, Washington. So it's not surprising if she has a few ideas—new approaches to programming—humming quietly with possibility on a backburner in her mind, simmering thoughts about opportunities to gather at *shul*. But she has moved into her role gently, respectfully, not wanting to presume or foist anything on the community, but rather to allow the congregation time to communicate its priorities, needs, and ideas to her.

Listening and Observing

"This still feels very much like a time of rebuilding and I'm still trying to firmly plant my feet in this new place," she says, adding that she doesn't want to impose anything on Etz Chayim.

"Every community is unique and I'm not trying to make Winnipeg Seattle," she states. "I did a lot of just listening, observation (this year), I still am. But I'm also trying to see, where can I try one of these things that I've learned about and let's see what happens."

She's referring to some trends and new approaches to programming with which she has worked or that she had learned about in her former work. And she's looking for opportunities to bring elements of the successes to Congregation Etz Chayim.

One programming approach, which Monica has used herself and seen used successfully countless times, is combining religious or Judaic

studies with something else of interest to the target group.

"Etz Chayim does a good job with the mission statement, to help people find meaning in Jewish life," she begins. "People aren't just doing that through coming to synagogue anymore. That's not necessarily doing it for people. You need to find a way to engage them through an interest they have, and show how it's connected to Judaism," she says.

Electric Chanukah Program

Here's an example: Monica's Chanukah plan for Etz Chayim, scheduled for Monday December 19th, is an electrifying and educational program combining science and Judaic studies: participants will learn how to build a circuit to create a menorah. Special guests from the Electricity Museum of Manitoba will show participants how to create circuits to light up a room. The hands-on nature of this program is another style of program that tends to crowd-please.

"Anything that's experiential, where you're actively using your hands to make an effect or learn something," Monica says, adding that the Chanukah program isn't just for families, and she encourages anyone who is interested to come.

Another example: this past November, for Holocaust Education Month, Etz Chayim hosted a program that brought together Holocaust studies and art. "How are the next generations thinking about the Holocaust?" was a direct outgrowth of a series led by Dr. Avi Rose for Etz Chayim last year, focusing on Jewish art before, during, and after the Holocaust.

The November 17th event, an art gallery evening (in the transformed *shul* auditorium) allowed Monica to utilize another technique she keeps up her sleeve: turning someone else's idea into an event. "That's one of my approaches: listening to ideas from other people and (considering) how can I turn that into something? If so, what? And would people come out for that?" she says.

In this case, it was artist Randie Silverstein who contacted Monica. "She had created a series of artwork after a visit to the Holocaust Museum in Miami and being affected by some anti-Semitic incidents in Winnipeg. I thought, after talking with her, how can we turn this into a program?"

The resulting art gallery event was also "a great way to involve another generation," Monica says, explaining that some students from The Gray Academy of Jewish Education showcased their artwork alongside Randie Silverstein's at the pop-up art gallery.

Focus Beyond the Ashke-Normative Experience

Monica says younger demographics tend to respond well to events that elevate stories of people we don't hear about as often, like stories about Jews by choice or about non-Ashkenazic parts of the Jewish community, such as Mizrahi or Ethiopian Jews. So, Monica has been paying attention to that—what this demographic responds to.

Many people were very triggered by the death of George Floyd, she says. After that incident the Jewish community became acutely aware of the need to continue elevating stories of Jews of colour in our community.



"How are the next generations thinking about the Holocaust?" pop-up gallery, Congregation Etz Chayim

"We need to stop focusing on the Ashke-normative experience," she says. "Most of the Jewish world is not white passing, and we need to stop focusing on that, and start elevating other stories that are not told as often or have not been told."

"If we want to be truly welcoming in our spaces, people need to see themselves in those spaces," Monica says. So she's always on the hunt for inclusive programming opportunities that can represent all Jews.

Chavurah Programming

Another programming approach which has taken off in many Jewish communities is small group or *chavurah* programming.

"People want to connect, not necessarily just because they're Jewish, but based off an additional interest they have. So maybe it's the environment, maybe it's social action, maybe it's something around prayer and ritual. Connecting people with those (similar) interests rather than trying to do big synagogue-wide programming all the time" is the basis of this approach, she says.

A recent attempt at small-groups programming

didn't have the response she had hoped for, and the October *Havdallah* series was cancelled. But Monica remains undeterred. She knows the idea is sound, having witnessed repeated success in other Jewish communities. In fact, "I've already got an idea for how to try again," she says, describing plans for a future small-group program that combines *Havdallah* and participation in one of Winnipeg's Winter events. And she's percolating other small-group ideas for 2023. What's clear is, Monica's on it.

"Sometimes you throw something at the wall, and it doesn't stick," she says. "But it gives you an opportunity to look at it again and then maybe, alright, what if I shift it this way?" ■

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The Family Culture Includes Diversity

For these three Congregation Etz Chayim families, heterogeneity is just part of what is.



Four Jews and an Agnostic Atheist

Melanie Richters was in her 20s when she realized an identity her well-intentioned parents had given her didn't make sense to her. At the same time, she understood that she got to choose her own identity.

Having grown up in what she calls an intermarried family, Melanie says her father, brought up a fundamentalist Christian, himself, "ran pretty far from religion when he left home." Melanie's mother is Jewish. When her parents got married, they decided their children would be "half-Jewish."

The Jewish Half

To nurture the Jewish 'half,' Melanie went to Hebrew school (in Ottawa, where her family is from). "The idea being that the ambient culture would instill in me what I needed to know about the non-Jewish side of me," she says. There was some family discussion of Melanie learning about Christianity when she was older. "But by the time I got to any age where that might happen, I had been going to Hebrew school and had a sense of being Jewish, and there wasn't anything that my dad himself espoused that would make sense to connect me to," she says.

With their mom, Melanie and her sister attended a reform synagogue in Ottawa, primarily as "high holiday

Jews," she says. In high school, Melanie got involved with NFTY, the Reform Jewish Youth Movement; at the same time, she began bringing *kashrut* and Shabbat observance into her personal life. "I thought, that's part of being Jewish. I should try to do some of this."

When she got to university, Melanie became more serious about religious observance. She studied traditional liturgy, learned to read Torah. "I did a lot of learning during that period of my life," she says. Ultimately, she'd awakened a new sense of Jewish self. "I had an identity that was meaningful to me of being a Jew." She'd also been comparing reform teachings from her upbringing to traditional Jewish teachings and found the latter much more resonant.

Wholeheartedly Jewish

Melanie says the 'half-Jew' designation was a vital component in shaping her real identity. She recalls feeling conflicted at an Easter party when she was very young—Jewish law prohibited her from eating the bread she wanted, because it was also Passover. Melanie's Dad offered a solution: "You can be your non-Jewish side today." This made no sense to Melanie.

"Being half Jewish just didn't work," she says. "There was a point in early high school where I said, I can't be half Jewish, I'm either Jewish or I'm not Jewish. Then I started exploring if I'm Jewish, what does that mean?"

Ultimately, committing fully to Judaism felt right to Melanie. "My personality resonates with doing things wholeheartedly. In some ways, that headed me in the direction of being more observant. And I didn't want to be a half Jew. I wanted to be a full Jew," she says.

Changing how she thought of herself, from half- to full Jew, was a significant

shift in Melanie's life, she says. "It was incredibly important and (there were) a lot of difficult feelings associated with it. That was a huge moment to realize I did not need to think of myself as a half Jew," she says.

The G-d Question

Melanie isn't sure how G-d fits into the Judaism equation. "My religious observance and practice is very important to me, and I have a mixed relationship to the G-d side of it," she states. To expand, she describes a Hebrew school assignment from when she was young: each student had to illustrate what they thought G-d to be.

"I found this incredibly challenging," she begins. "I drew a hand (with) a face and it made no sense. I couldn't grasp the nature of the question. Any description that anybody has ever tried for what G-d could be doesn't jive with anything that fits with my experience of the world. It's scientifically inconceivable; it makes no sense." On the other hand, an understanding of *G-d as nature* or *G-d as the world* feels a bit trite, she says.

"If I'm going from the perspective of the part of me that believes in G-d, G-d is something that we can't define," she says. And I don't feel like I can describe myself as having faith in G-d, because anything I can describe as being G-d feels wrong."

Hell Destined

Melanie and Michael met at university. Michael had been raised a Catholic. As a child, he accompanied his devoutly Catholic Mother to weekly mass; he recalls feeling bored there most of the time. He became a church altar boy¹ and later played trumpet for the church's folk choir, organized to play

¹ An altar boy [altar server] assists a priest during mass, fetching and carrying, ringing the bells, and so on.

music during mass—not because he felt any particular connection to the church, but “it was more interesting to be a participant than someone in the audience observing,” he says. Michael says his father’s background was Baptist, but he believes he was an atheist, who never interfered with nor participated in family religious activities, except on Christmas and Easter.

When Michael, originally from New Jersey, entered college, he stopped going to church. But he says he began identifying as an atheist much earlier than that. By midway through high school, he was also attending a “Catholic equivalent of Sunday school,” where he learned basic Catholic doctrine and an understanding of G-d as “someone who loves all His children, but if you don’t believe in Him, you go to hell.”

“In mass one day I was thinking about all the Indigenous Americans who were born after the death of Christ but before Columbus crossed the Atlantic,” he continues. “So they had no way of knowing about this G-d. But they went to hell because they didn’t believe. That was the thing that convinced me, I don’t believe in this,” he says.

In the strictest sense, Michael says he is probably agnostic, not atheist. “But if you ask me to put a probability on it, I would say the probability that man invented G-d rather than G-d created man is effectively 100%. There is, of course, no way to know for sure—it’s not a testable hypothesis,” he says.

Melanie and Michael

Melanie and Michael married in 2004 at a reform synagogue in Winchester, Massachusetts.

“When Melanie and I were dating and I knew I wanted to be with her forever, but I was concerned about our religious differences, and I know she was too; it took me a little while to understand that Melanie’s religion was not so much about faith and belief in something and was more about practice. That was an interesting revelation to me,” he says.

“Christianity emphasizes above all faith,” he continues. “It’s about what you believe and everything else is secondary. Judaism, and for Melanie in particular, a lot of it is about practice.” Indeed, of the 613 *mitzvot* G-d gave

the Jews, only the first commandment mentions G-d. The subsequent 11 are about G-d but use pronouns: He, Him, His. The remaining 601 *mitzvot* are rituals—do this, don’t do that—a blueprint for a good life.

Michael says he can “get on board with rituals. I have no problem with that.” And he says he participates in them to some extent—but “in a meaningful way,” stresses Melanie. “He bakes the *challah* every week. He might not come to *shul* with us most of the time, but he’s there when we’re lighting candles, he’s there when we’re doing *Havdalah*, maybe he doesn’t always come out to the *sukkah* when it’s snowing,” she laughs. “But I put the *sukkah* up,” Michael says, adding that his daughters helped. At the couple’s wedding ceremony (18 years ago) they included almost all the customary Jewish wedding traditions. “We did pretty much everything, including some things many progressive Jews don’t bother with. I think there were one or two things the rabbi said we shouldn’t do because of Michael not being Jewish, but we did everything else, and then some,” says Melanie.

“Tradition is wonderful, I love tradition,” Michael says, offering *yichud* as example: right after the wedding ceremony, the bride and groom retreat to a private room to spend a few moments alone, as a married couple.

“That’s great!” he says, adding, “as opposed to immediately after you have the long receiving line nonsense.”

Melanie says contemplating marriage forced her to decide what was most valuable to her. “I had to confront some of my attachments to traditional Jewish practice and how that was inconsistent with marrying somebody who was not Jewish,” she says. “I had to make some decisions about what was important to me.”

Don’t Call Me Anything (but my name, please)

Michael acknowledges an important difference between himself and his life partner: “Melanie talks about having a Jewish identity and that identity is important to her. I’m not uncomfortable with *other* people having an identity but (personal) identity in general is a thing I am uncomfortable with,” he says.



Melanie says something different. “There’s a sense of belonging to the Jewish people that is really important to me. I believe in the Jewish people; I believe in my connection to Torah and to thousands of years of knowledge and thinking and belief that comprise the Jewish tradition. And I have faith in *those* things. Those things are real and tangible and beautiful and this is a tradition that goes back thousands of years so that is really beautiful and important. It’s an identity.

“I have connections to community and to history and to my family, and they’re important to me,” she states, adding that Jewish continuance is also critical for her. “Commitment to passing on that tradition, that’s central to me. I was struggling with the idea of marrying somebody who is not Jewish in the first place and that was my significant concern: continuity. So, if we were going to do it, that had to be in the ground rules.” That is, as their effort to ensure continuity, their children would be Jewish.

As well, she says, she was already making a big transition towards more significant Jewish practice. “It did feel, in some ways, a little hypocritical to be contemplating a relationship with somebody who’s not Jewish at the same time I was committing to being fully Jewish,” she says. “It seemed like I was pulling myself in two different directions. I had to reconcile that. It was a compromise that I made with myself, that this was somebody I wanted to be with and how could we make that work in a way I could accept?”

Melanie and Michael have indeed built a Jewish family: their children, Ryan (15), Channah (13) and Bridget (10), are Jews. “100 per cent,” Michael says.

"No half or quarter Jews," smiles Melanie. And though Michael is an Agnostic Atheist, calling them an interfaith-family doesn't work for them.

"I don't think we're an interfaith family; it's just we're a family and it's known there are four members of the family that are Jewish and one member that's not," Melanie says. ■

Embracing It All



To navigate differences in their faith backgrounds and current religious beliefs, David and Jenny Spigelman find middle ground when necessary, holding fast to a shared, strong devotion to family and tradition as well as an "embrace it all" attitude.

David is fiercely committed to his Jewish identity. "For me, Judaism is extremely important. My parents were raised Jewish, I was raised Jewish, I want my family to be raised Jewish," he says.

Judaism in the Modern World

David, who attended Hebrew school until high school and participated in and later led Junior Congregation, at *shul*, says he believes in a modern Judaism, a faith that doesn't disallow such things as tattoos (he has four).

"I believe in Judaism in the modern world," says David, who is part of the Children and Families committee for Congregation Etz Chayim and is a volunteer pallbearer for the Winnipeg Jewish community.

"It's about believing in G-d, following the testament—not verbatim, but understanding the stories and

principles behind them, ensuring you're following G-d's word of *tikkun olam*, and being the best person you can be, doing what you can to make the world a bit better.

"I do that through my Judaism," he states. "Judaism has taught me and guided me to be who I am today."

Goodness Isn't Faith Dependent

Jenny, agnostic, was raised a Christian. She went to church every Sunday with her family, attended Sunday school, was involved in church youth group. She grew up celebrating all the Christian holidays with her family.

As a teen, Christianity no longer felt right to Jenny. "I didn't feel it was the right fit for me and I grew away from it," she says. Although she stopped going to church and began identifying as agnostic, she continued celebrating the Christian holidays with her family.

Jenny defines personal morality a bit differently from David. "I don't need a faith to be the best person I could be," she says, adding "other people have faith and that's how they view their faith, and that's okay."

The Conversation

Early in their relationship, the couple had an important conversation: David told Jenny if their relationship was ever to be permanent, Judaism would have to play a significant role in their home and family.

"I didn't want to lead Jenny on into a relationship (if we) had different goal posts. It was, 'this is who I am, this is what I want, this is important to me... think about it.' At no point did I give her a timeline. It was, 'think about it.' And that was the start of many conversations on, if we do continue, what our family is going to look like and what aspects of each of our beliefs are we going to be embracing?"

Jenny says she was a bit taken aback by David's words, not because of what he'd said, but "he was already really jumping ahead," she says. Still, "I'm glad the conversation started early. I wouldn't have wanted the relationship to go on for no reason."

They decided to move forward in their relationship. Jenny "came to *shul* pretty much from the get-go," David

says. "So she learned, being immersed in our culture and religion, through holidays and events, why we do what we do."

Jenny and David

Jenny and David married in 2014. To answer David's early-relationship question ("what aspects of each of our beliefs are we going to be embracing?") they decided on all of them. The family has a Jewish home, they celebrate the Jewish holidays, and their three young sons, Josh, Connor, and Logan, are Jews. They honour Shabbat every week, lighting candles, eating Challah, and drinking wine and grape juice. "It shows (the boys) the importance of family coming together, to have dinner and be together." He says there are many aspects of Judaism that "Jenny really embraced because she understands why they're important and I believe she sees the value in them."

Keeping the Christmas Magic

The Spigelman family also celebrate Christmas and other major Christian holidays with Jenny's family.

"Jenny lost both her parents, and Christmas is her family tradition." It's a tradition Jenny and her brother uphold together and with their own families, despite she being agnostic and he being atheist.

The Christmas tree that the Spigelman family have in their home over Christmas "was hard for me" at first, David admits. But he came around. "Jenny did a full overhaul of our tree about three years ago, so it matches with Chanukah," he adds enthusiastically. The tree is decorated in blue and silver.

Regarding Santa, "the boys understand that Saint Nick doesn't come to our house because we're Jewish. But they still get gifts under the tree, and (Santa) still goes to their cousins' house," David says. "We have to make that distinction, because of their cousins. We respect everyone's beliefs and we had to be very cognizant of how we explained it."

"We don't want to ruin the magic," adds Jenny.



Finding Middle Ground

The Spigelman find other ways to meet in the middle. Jenny chose the family's *chanukiot* and the *mezuzot* that hang in their doorways. "If Christmas falls over Chanukah, we take one of the *chanukiot* to the Christmas dinner and we light it (there). If the Passover Seder falls on Easter, we do only one of the Seders and then we go have Easter with Grandma," says David.

"It's to show the boys these are all our traditions and they're important," says David.

"And not one trumps the other, they're both really important," says Jenny.

Embracing It All

There's one more set of cultural traditions the Spigelman are beginning to delve into as a family: those of Jenny's Indigeneity, a heritage that belongs to Josh, Connor, and

Logan as well. "That's also part of who they are, they're Indigenous Jews," says David. This exploration is new to all of them; Jenny says she wasn't raised with these traditions but as an adult, she is "embracing that part of my life too."

"Overall, we've pretty much embraced it all," David says.

As in any marriage, there are points of friction, he says. "It's just ours sometimes occur around different beliefs. But if an Ashkenazi Jew married a Sephardic Jew, you'd probably have similar friction. It's natural within couples to have these; for us it's a clear outline of what some of those conversations are. It's regular conversations about what Chanukah and Christmas will look like, what Passover and Easter look like, how we balance them," he says. Balance, of course, being part of what family life is all about.

"You're gonna love who you're gonna love, right?" David says. "And just because we're not of the same faith doesn't make that relationship any less valid. It's just ensuring that you are on the same page." ■



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Family Traditions

Stephanie Faintuch and Michael Bertie had very different religious upbringings.

For Stephanie, being Jewish has always played a central role. She reminisces about weekly family Shabbatot at her Baba's, special evenings for which her family still gathers.

"When we were younger, my sister and I would sleep over Friday nights. She (Baba'd wake us up with breakfast in bed and then we'd all go to *shul* together," says Stephanie, who also attended Junior Congregation at *shul*. Stephanie went to Margaret Park (then a Hebrew-immersion school within the public school system) and spent many summer weeks at Camp Massad over more than a decade.



She calls her family "traditional" Jews who "believe in all the traditions and history," Stephanie says.

"My Baba goes to synagogue every week. She lights the candles on Friday. We celebrate every family holiday."

Michael, born Catholic, says religion had more of a peripheral role in his life, growing up.

"We weren't really religious," begins Michael. "We didn't go to church often, maybe once a year." The only time he had to go to Sunday school, he says, was to take his First Communion² classes. After that, around age 13 or 14, he explains, a Catholic is formally confirmed into the church. "My parents left it as an option to me—I could (get confirmed) but they wouldn't force me. I chose not to," he states.

Stephanie, whose family has a history with Beth Israel Synagogue and then Congregation Etz Chayim, says finding a Jewish life partner had never been a focus for her. "What's always been important to me and that we live by today, is that I would have a Jewish house and my children would be raised Jewish. In Judaism, the child is the religion of the mother. My kids will always be Jewish," she says.

Right from the get-go, Michael has been happy to embrace Judaism with Stephanie. "I knew it was important to her," he says. The couple took the Introduction to Judaism course together with Rabbi Lander and while Michael had originally considered converting to Judaism, he decided not to. The couple married in 2018.

Their home is a Jewish one. And while the only progeny now is a dog they call Shay (short for Shayna Punim), their future children will be Jewish.

Michael's one concession, and one they've always agreed on, is Christmas—something they would always keep as a part of their family culture.

"We don't have Christmas at our house, and we don't put up a tree or decorations. But we always follow my family's Christmas traditions and we do Christmas with my parents and family," Michael says.

"It was never about the tree and the decorations," he continues. It's the family get together, the meals, all the excitement around Christmas."

Stephanie describes an annual tradition among Michael's family: "Two or three weeks before Christmas, we go to his parents' house and we decorate their tree together," she says.

To simplify the holiday planning, particularly when there are date conflicts (for example, if Chanukah and Christmas coincide, the couple lets their moms figure it out. "They communicate directly with each other, and they'll let us know where to show up and when. That way no one's hurt, no one's thinking they're left out. It's pretty simple.

"It's really never been an issue," she continues, adding that one year her mom brought the Menorah to Christmas dinner.

"We're pretty fortunate in how our families embrace us," Stephanie says. "My parents think Michael is the best



thing that ever happened to all of us," Stephanie says. And the couple agrees his parents think something similar about her. "His parents built our *chuppah*," Stephanie says enthusiastically.

Even if Stephanie and Michael found themselves without surrounding family on Christmas some year, they agree they'd still celebrate the holiday. "There'd be some sort of celebration," says Michael. And while they don't yet have children, Stephanie says she's already thought about what she'll tell their future progeny about Santa and Christmas.

"Santa goes to Grandma and Grandpa's house and his presents are under their tree. We'll celebrate Christmas and Chanukah, they'll get twice the presents, we'll get twice the dinners. I don't think they'll complain," she laughs.

While Michael did not convert, he has learned a lot about Judaism. "I know quite a bit. I took the conversion classes and I've done research on my own," he says, adding that some people have been surprised he knows as much about Judaism as he does.

"Christianity and Judaism are so different in many ways," he reflects, "yet the message in the end is the same. It always comes down to be a good person, respect your neighbours, be a productive member of society. Everything else in between I call traditions," he smiles. ■

² First Communion is a ceremony during which a person, usually a child, first receives the Eucharist—the wafer and wine/grape juice to symbolize the body and blood of Christ. Children attend Sunday school classes in preparation for First Communion.

Judaism, an Unfolding Religion

By Rabbi Klie Rose

M^{ai} Chanukah? What is Chanukah? The rabbis in the Talmud, attempting to understand the exact nature of the holiday, raise a valuable question. What exactly is Chanukah?

There are multiple tales about the origins of Chanukah. Many are familiar with the version of the Chanukah narrative found in the Babylonian Talmud (tractate Shabbat 21b): In 167 BCE, King Antiochus Epiphanies and the Seleucid Empire gained control over Jerusalem and the holy Temple. Antiochus forced Jews to abandon their religious practices; Jewish ritual was replaced by cultic observances. Some Jews embraced the Hellenistic culture; others fought against it, choosing to die *Al Kiddush Hashem*, sanctifying and glorifying G-d's holy name.

Our story recounts how Mattathias and his five sons refused to abide by Antiochus's orders. They led a revolt and liberated Jerusalem, regaining control of the holy Temple which had been defiled. The Maccabees purged the Temple of any cultic remnants, rededicating it by lighting the Menorah. They found enough oil to last only one night; miraculously, the oil lasted for eight days. In commemoration of the victory and the miracle, we celebrate Chanukah.

There are many other historical narratives about Chanukah, and no one is certain which version is the authoritative source for the holiday we celebrate today. Chanukah is by far the most historically documented holiday in the Jewish calendar. However, no other version describes the story details in quite the same way.

Another source is II Maccabees (1:8, 10:1-5). While the story is similar, this one says the eight days were a re-enactment of King Solomon's consecration of the Temple. Additionally, Chanukah is actually referred to as "Sukkot" or as a holiday of "Tabernacles and Fire." This version also describes how people celebrated, walking around in merriment "bearing wands wreathed with leaves and fair boughs and palms..."

Another account was documented by fifth-century CE Jewish historian Josephus. His version, based on I Maccabees, doesn't include the term Chanukah and refers to the holiday simply as "lights." The explanation is that this version was to remind people their loyalty to G-d came upon them unexpectedly, like a bolt of light.

Rabbinic sources mention very little about the origin of Chanukah. Initially the holiday venerated the military victory and marked the rededication of the Temple. It was only later that the miracle of oil took on significance. Scholars have offered a few explanations. One theory suggests the shift may be attributed to the downfall of the Maccabee/Hasmonean² family several years after their victory over Antiochus. The war heroes tried to establish themselves as leaders of the Jews, without support from the community. They were also accused of being corrupt leaders which did not sit well with the rabbis, and the two factions fought bitterly.

Despite vague historical data, we continue to remember the tale of the Maccabees and the miracle of the light. The stories and traditions associated with Chanukah were never canonized, and new tales evolved along with innovative customs. For example, in some Jewish communities it became the practice to read the scroll of Antiochus. In the Middle Ages, martyrdom became associated with the holiday. Stories about heroes like Hannah and her seven sons emerged (Gittin 57).

Mai Chanukah? What is Chanukah? Is there something to gain from these additional tales? Does it matter which version of the Chanukah tale is "true" (empirically speaking)? Is anything lost by discovering various narratives have existed simultaneously? Biblical Scholar Dr. Ed Greenstein suggests "the fact that different Jewish communities have found various meanings in Chanukah drives home the truth about all religious rituals; they thrive only when they mean something to people, when they externalize deeply felt concerns. Often, when we are



Photo Gil Dekel

attached to a ritual, we will infuse it with special meaning or manifest some latent significance in it. In other cases, a ritual may fall out of use for lack of contemporary impact. Yet, the Jews have had the wisdom to keep even underutilized rituals on the books. As circumstances change, we may rediscover their power at some time later on."

I am drawn to this notion. Like many other areas of Judaism, nothing is ever permitted to become stagnant. The transmission of oral stories and the plethora of possible narratives points to the wisdom of Judaism. It is an evolutionary and unfolding religion, continually in process. That is, perhaps, one of the main reasons Judaism has survived. And probably why Judaism remains palatable and relevant for our people today.

I wish you all a *Chag Urim Sameach!* May it be a period illuminated with many brilliant beams. May we embrace these multiple manifestations of light as we journey back to the light of the infinite One. ■

¹*Mai* is an Aramaic expression from the Talmud. It is a variation of *Ma*, which means "what" in Hebrew.

²The last survivor of the Maccabee brothers, Simon Thassi established the Hasmonean dynasty in 141 BCE, two decades after his brother, Judas Maccabeus (Yehudah HaMakabi), defeated the Seleucid army during the Maccabean Revolt.

The Ins and Outs of Being a Mohel

There's an interesting connection between Chanukah and *brit milah*, the *mitzvah* of circumcising an infant Jewish boy on his eighth day of life, says Dr. Matthew Lazar.

"The Chanukah story is about how the Jews fought back against the Syrian Greek culture that was trying to eliminate Judaism, religious practice. The three targets they chose to focus on eliminating were circumcision, Shabbat, and the Jewish calendar.

"Is it coincidence that Chanukah is an eight-day festival that starts on the 25th of *Kislev* (so) always includes Shabbat and always includes *rosh chodesh*, the new month? Eight days to coincide with the eight days (we wait until) circumcision. Chanukah holds within it those three commandments that they were doing their best to eliminate. They failed, and we maintain them," he says.

Who We Are as a People

Brit milah, ritual removal of the foreskin from an eight-day-old baby boy's penis, originates in Genesis: G-d commanded Abraham to circumcise himself and his descendants as testimony to the covenant between G-d and the Jews. This important tradition connects Jews to all generations of Jews before and after.

"It's one of the key cultural touchstones of who we are as a people," says Matthew, who has spent nearly four decades as a *mohel*, a highly trained individual in the practice of



Matthew Lazar

brit milah (Hebrew), or *bris* (Yiddish). "It's one of the things we have gone through hell and high water to maintain. It's important for cultural continuity."

"It's also one of the happiest things I do. This is a celebration," says Matthew, who is also a pediatrician.

Enter the Mohel/et

Traditional liturgy deems it a father's obligation to circumcise his son. Since most men don't know how to perform *brit milah*, a *mohel/mohel*et, like Matthew, usually carries out the *mitzvah*. A *mohel* does not have to be a doctor; every *mohel* undergoes intense training—both procedural and liturgical, under close supervision of a veteran *mohel*. While Matthew lists more than a dozen doctors and rabbis who contributed to his *brit milah* education, "Errol Billinkoff is the *mohel* who took me under his wing," he says.



Alex Singer

Dr. Alex Singer is also a *mohel*, a family physician, and associate professor in the department of family medicine at UofM. He and Matthew had a similar relationship when he was training as a *mohel*. Alex had learned to do medical circumcision during his residency, a technique involving an instrument called a *plastibell*, which isn't kosher for a *bris*. When he decided to train as a *mohel*, he upgraded his skills, working with Matthew to learn to use the *mogen* clamp, approved under Jewish law and safer than the *plastibell*, he says. Alex then taught the *mogen* clamp procedure to some colleagues.

Before Alex came on board as a *mohel*, a Rabbi attended every *bris* with Matthew to carry out the religious service. Alex and Matthew decided to train to do the service themselves and undertook a course with three local rabbis at the time (Rabbis Lander, Green, and Benarroch) and Errol Billinkoff,

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MAZEL TOVS

Brenlee Schacter and Josh Weinstein on the Bat Mitzvah of Samantha, November 5th

Shaaron and Hymie Weinstein on the Bat Mitzvah of their granddaughter Samantha

Rebby and Alan Schacter on the Bat Mitzvah of their granddaughter Samantha

Tannis Weinstein and David Afriat on the Bat Mitzvah of Mika on November 5th

Shaaron and Hymie Weinstein on the Bat Mitzvah of their granddaughter Mika

Kae Sasaki and Marc Schaeffer on the B Mitzvah of Alex on November 19th

Brenda and Jordan Hochman on the B'nai Mitzvah of Brielle and Kayden on November 26th

Dafne Orbach and Diego Skladnik on the Bar Mitzvah of Yaron on December 17th

who had at the time been hoping to retire his *izmel* (the knife used for *brit milah*).

"We met for a bunch of Sundays, did some studying and learning and had some good conversations about the ins and outs of being a *mohel* and doing the religious side of it. At the end, we had the consensus of the rabbis from orthodox to reform that they were comfortable with us doing (*brit milah*) independently. From that point, we have done them without having a rabbi present necessarily."

The Brit Milah

Unless health complications prevent it, a *bris* is always on the eighth day of a baby boy's life, even if that falls on Shabbat or Yom Kippur. The *bris* often happens in the family's home. Because Jewish liturgy tells us Eliyahu, protector of children, is present at every *bris*, it is customary to prepare a chair for Eliyahu and put the infant on it before his circumcision. It is also tradition to light candles in the room.

The person holding the baby during the circumcision is called the *sandek*. Before picking up his tools, the *izmel* and *mogen* (guard), the *mohel* says a blessing, acknowledging that the *mitzvah* of *brit milah* is about to be realized. After the circumcision, the *mohel* takes a cup of wine

and recites another prayer, announcing the baby's Hebrew name. A drop of wine is placed in the baby's mouth and the parents take sips.

Keeping Babies Comfortable

Most parents worry about their child's comfort during circumcision, "that the baby will be hurt or scarred, or it'll be difficult for him," Alex says.

"The answer is twofold," he continues. "One is we use an anesthetic, so they don't feel much pain. They don't tend to like being held down, but you hold them down every time you change the diaper, so that's not terribly traumatizing to a baby." Secondly, a baby's memory is about 90 seconds. They retain no more memory from this event than from "the blood draw when they were born, or the delivery, which is far more traumatizing," says Alex, who has been practising as a *mohel* for about seven years.

"And they let me hold them immediately after, so they're obviously not terribly hurt or offended," he adds.

Matthew says babies receive up to four anesthetics on this memorable day.

"We tell parents, an hour before, give the kid some Tylenol, which helps reduce

pain (1). Then, take Emla (a skin numbing cream, available without prescription at pharmacies) and smear that all over the penis an hour before (2)." Five minutes before the service, the *mohel* uses a local injection to freeze the baby's penis (3), already numb from the Emla.

"And then, we give the kid wine (4)," he smiles.

Like Alex, Matthew says the baby feels minimal discomfort because of the anesthetic. "We've had numerous cases where the baby has fallen asleep in the middle of the procedure. To me, that indicates it's not hurting them very much," he says.

Alex says one of the rewards of being a *mohel* is meeting the different families—"people you see at (*shul*) on holidays and their families, and then completely new people, some of whom are newcomers to Winnipeg, and you get a chance to help coach them a bit through the early part of parenthood. That's really lovely, and it's nice to be able to contribute to their experience of starting a family in Winnipeg.

"The covenant of *brit milah* is important," he continues. "So it's a way of contributing to the community in a meaningful way, supporting people in generally a fun and exciting time." ■

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