

JOEL BEN IZZY

DREIDELS
ON THE BRAIN



Dial Books for Young Readers

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This is a work of fiction . . . and of friction—the kind that filled the author’s childhood. Although much is based upon actual people, places, and events from his life, he has taken great liberties in all these realms—as well as spelling—to recount a story set over the course of the eight days of Hanukkah, 1971. While some characters represent real people, they have been fictionalized, and other characters, incidents, and places are entirely the product of the author’s imagination.



For my parents, Robert and Gladys,
who lit candles in the darkness.

For my children, Elijah and Izzy,
who carry light into the future.

And, always, for Taly.

Contents

- THE FIRST CANDLE: Chopped Liver . . . 7
- THE SECOND CANDLE: In the Land of Shriveled
Dreams . . . 43
- THE THIRD CANDLE: The Difference Between My
Grandmother and Houdini . . . 82
- THE FOURTH CANDLE: A Tiny Shred of Something
to Believe In . . . 129
- THE FIFTH CANDLE: Shlemiels and Shlimazels . . . 166
- THE SIXTH CANDLE: Sucker Bets . . . 202
- THE SEVENTH CANDLE: The Rest of the Matzoh . . . 238
- THE EIGHTH CANDLE: An Orange . . . 259
- THE SHAMMES: Just Enough . . . 291



THE FIRST CANDLE: Chopped Liver

Sunday, December 12, 1971

I could have stopped at three and called it a miracle.

After all, three in a row is good. Not just good—great. You know the odds of that happening by itself? Miniscule. A dreidel has four sides, so the chance of getting a single *Gimel*—which is the letter you want—is one in four. The chances of getting two in a row is one in sixteen. And three in a row—which I had just spun—is one in *sixty-four*.

And the number three makes a lot of sense. There are all kinds of things that come in threes: tic, tac, toe, three in a row; Snap, Crackle, Pop; third time's a charm; three strikes, you're out. And stories—which I love—are filled with threes. It's always the third son who sets off to seek his fortune and actually *finds* it—which works for me, because I'm the third son. There's Goldilocks and the Three Bears. The Three Little Pigs.

But those things aren't Jewish. Especially the pigs. They

are, as my dad would say, *goyish*, which is the Jewish word for non-Jewish things. For Christians, three is a magic number, like the Holy Trinity. And maybe if I wasn't Jewish, spinning three Gimels in a row would have been enough. Then again, if I wasn't Jewish, I wouldn't have been spinning a dreidel in the first place, trying to figure out whether I should believe in magic, or God, or miracles, or anything at all.

For Jews, things come in fours, like the four sides of a dreidel. Just look at Passover: You drink *four* cups of wine, ask *four* questions, tell about the *four* types of children. Besides, four was the deal I'd made with God before the first spin.

"Hey, God," I'd said, "happy Hanukkah."

I never know how to talk to God, and always end up feeling foolish. "I'm looking for a sign. Nothing big. Nothing fancy. No lightning or thunder bolts. Just a little sign. Between you and me." I held up the dreidel. "So I'm going to spin this dreidel four times. And if you're there, I'd like you to give me four Gimels in a row."

That didn't seem like too much to ask—just one lousy miracle.

And why, you might ask, did I think this Hanukkah should be different when everything else in the first twelve years of my life has been so amazingly, astoundingly, unbelievably *unmiraculous*?

Well, for one thing, I could feel it in the air. Outside, it was really cold, even misty, that kind of feeling you get just before it snows, when the world gets all quiet and the light becomes soft. At least that's how I think it feels. I've never actually seen snow, on the ground or falling from the sky, though I've read a lot about it in books.

But it had been raining all day, a cold rain, and I had just checked the barometer on the front porch for the tenth time, and I could see it was between 29 and 30, pushing toward SNOW. The windows were so foggy, I couldn't see outside, so I could pretend I was somewhere else, anywhere else but here in Temple City, California.

It was also the perfect time for a miracle. The house was quiet and I was alone. I had looked through the garage and found the cardboard box of Hanukkah decorations. Sifting through the dreidels, which were mostly crooked or broken, I found a perfect one, made of wood, painted orange, with gold letters. I don't know where we got it, but it was nicely balanced. Just to be sure, I spun it a half-dozen times. Just a regular old normal dreidel—excellent.

Then I cleared all the junk off the table—a bunch of papers, my dad's electronics stuff, and some glow-in-the-dark phone dials—and piled it on the washing machine. I wasn't going to let anything interfere with these four spins, so I took the sponge from the sink and cleaned off the table-

top so thoroughly that I could see the little gold sparkles among the black and gray swirls of the Formica.

“All right, God,” I whispered, “this is your chance. Four Gimels in a row. One little Hanukkah miracle. Right here, right now.”

I spun. A good, solid spin. And when the first Gimel came up, I was impressed.

“All right,” I said. “That’s one.”

But when the second Gimel came up, everything changed.

“Excellent,” I said, trying to play it cool. “That’s two.”

I tried to act casual, like miracles happen to me all the time, as opposed to *never*. I wound up the dreidel and spun again, hard as I could.

Gimel!!! This time, I went wild.

“Yes!” I shouted. “YES! That’s it! Woo-hoo!” I completely lost it, jumping around screaming “Man-O-Manischewitz!”

“Be quiet!” said Howard, who had come out of his room. “You’re making too much noise. I’m trying to concentrate.”

When I said I was alone, I wasn’t counting Howard. He’s my oldest brother, and he spends all his time in his room with the door closed, studying math. That’s all he ever does. He’s fifteen and he’s in high school, and is supposed to be some super-brilliant genius. At least that’s what he tells us. The only time he stops studying is to come out and eat or when Kenny and I are making noise. Kenny’s my other brother, who is two

years older than me, and actually *likes* to have fun. His real name is Kenneth, but everyone calls him Kenny. But no one calls Howard “Howie”—he won’t let them. When Kenny and I make noise, Howard stomps out and yells at us, then goes back into his room and shuts the door. That’s one reason Kenny and I hardly ever have friends over.

But at the moment, I couldn’t have cared less about Howard. This was between me and God.

“All right,” I whispered, suddenly feeling nervous about the next spin. “Three in a row is pretty good,” I said. “Really good. But it’s not a miracle. Not yet. It might just be luck—after all, it’s just a one in sixty-four chance.” I stopped myself, because weird as it feels to talk to God, it’s even weirder to lecture God about math. I brushed off any microscopic dust that might have settled on the table. “Just one more Gimel,” I said, so quietly, only God could hear me. “That’s all I’m asking.”

I wound the dreidel between my thumb and middle finger—and spun.

I realize none of this will make any sense to you if you’re not Jewish and don’t know what a dreidel is. Even if you *are* Jewish and know all about dreidels, it still won’t make much sense, because the whole game of dreidel doesn’t make sense. Nobody can agree on the rules, which is how you know it’s a Jewish game.

A dreidel is a spinning top with four sides. Maybe you've heard that stupid, inane, insipid song, the one that always gets stuck in my head this time of year: "I have a little dreidel, I made it out of clay! And when it's dry and ready, oh dreidel I shall play!"

Shoot. Now it's stuck in my head. I'm sorry if it's stuck in yours too. From now on, I'll just refer to it as "The Horrible Song." Anyway, "The Horrible Song" by itself wouldn't be so bad, but when the choir sings it at school along with the Christmas carols, and everybody acts as if they've done us Jews a big favor, it makes me want to barf.

Back to dreidels, which, by the way, can be made of wood, plastic, metal, even Styrofoam—anything *but* clay. They date back to the time of Antiochus, this mean Seleucid ruler who wouldn't let the Jews study Torah, which is the one thing Jews love to do most, like Howard studies math. So the Jews came up with this trick of keeping dreidels handy while they studied. That way, when the soldiers came by, they'd hide their books and whip out their dreidels, and the soldiers—who weren't too bright—figured they were just gambling, not studying. As soon as the soldiers left, out came the Torah. That's another totally Jewish thing. Other people might have toys they play with in secret to *avoid* studying. But Jews have toys we *pretend* to play with, so we can study in secret. Go figure.

Anyhow, there are four Hebrew letters on a dreidel—*Gimel*, *Hey*, *Nun*, and *Shin*. *Gimel* is the best—everyone agrees on that—and when it’s your turn to spin and it lands on *Gimel*, you win whatever is in the pot, which is usually pennies or stale chocolate coins. That’s easy to remember because *Gimel* sounds like “gimme-all!” When you get *Hey*, you get half of what’s in the pot. After that it gets confusing. *Nun* means “nothing,” but some people play that when you get *Nun* you *do* nothing, while others say it means you’re supposed to *have* nothing, so you lose everything you’ve got. The last letter is *Shin*, which is always bad, because you lose something, or maybe everything. The only good thing about *Shin* is that when you get it, you can shout, “Oh *Shin*!” It’s pretty vague between *Nun* and *Shin*, and that’s where the whole thing falls apart. I have never played a game of dreidel that hasn’t either fizzled out or ended in an argument.

If you still don’t understand the rules, don’t worry, because no one does, but here’s my point: If you spin a dreidel again and again, sooner or later it has to land on *Gimel*. You don’t need some kind of giant computer brain to figure that out. I’m not saying it should happen every time, or even very often, just once in a while.

If, however, you keep spinning and it only ever lands on *Shin* or *Nun*, then something is seriously wrong. Maybe the dreidel is loaded, like the dice they have at Berg’s Studio

of Magic—my favorite place in the world, by the way. It's on Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles, and Mr. Berg knew all the great magicians and tells stories about them. There's a display shelf of illusions and, right in the center, there's a straitjacket that Harry Houdini actually escaped from! There's even a picture of him wearing it, hanging upside down from a crane over a street in Chicago, and the rope is on fire!

I asked Mr. Berg if I could touch the straitjacket, but he just laughed, then gave me a pair of dice to play with. Every time I rolled them, they landed on five and two. Sometimes one would land on another number, then flip over, like Mexican jumping beans. He said the dice were loaded, and would always win in a game called "craps," which I've never played, but is a fun word to say.

Back to dreidel. If it's not a loaded dreidel, and all you ever get is Shin, you have to wonder. It's like the farmer who wakes up on a beautiful spring day, walks out of his front door, and steps on a rake. It flips up and hits him in the face—wham! Dazed and confused, he staggers and reaches his hand out to lean on a wall. Only it's not a wall, it's his bull—who doesn't like it one bit! The bull chases the farmer all over until he dives onto his tractor for protection, but his hand accidentally hits the lever and the thing starts up. Only he's not in the driver's seat, he's hanging off the side,

from one suspender of his overalls, getting dragged through the mud all over his fields, until the tractor finally runs out of gas. And as he's lying there in the mud, all beat up, the bull comes back, sniffs him, then poops right in his face. And the farmer looks up and says, "Why, God? Why are you doing this to me?"

Then the sky parts and this booming voice says, "There's just something about you that really bugs me."

I heard that joke from Brian, my best friend, and it's pretty good. But I would like to believe it's *just* a joke. I would like to believe that God is not up there snuffing out lives like cigarette butts. In particular I would like to believe, all evidence to the contrary, that my father—who never gets a break, no matter how hard he tries—is not one of those being snuffed out, and our home is *not* the ashtray. That even though we've lost again and again until now, we're not actually *losers*. We just haven't won *yet*. Because it seems to me that if life is a game of dreidel and you keep spinning enough times—and there's a God who doesn't hate you—it will eventually land on Gimel.

And by eventually, I mean *now*. Hanukkah, 1971.

It was a perfect spin, and went on so long that the dreidel moved slowly toward the edge of the table. That got me thinking about a whole moral question—if it dropped to

the floor, could I still count the fourth Gimel?—when it began to wobble, and finally fell—right on the edge of the table, half on, half off.

Oh Shin.

This is the first night of Hanukkah. Or, if you prefer, Chanukah. Or Hanaka. I've even seen it spelled Khanukkah. That's how you know it's a Jewish holiday—we can't even agree how to spell it. Mr. Culpepper—my seventh-grade English teacher, who is really tall, with a beard, and so cool that he's practically a hippie—told us that the word *catsup* can be spelled more ways than any other word in the English language: ketchup, catchup, katsup, katsip, catsoup—there are about twenty different spellings. Really, you can combine those letters almost any way you want and it works. So that's what I'll do with Chonikah—keep trying different spellings until I find the best one. But however you spell it, catshup is about what you put on hamburgers and French fries. And Hanuukkka is all about miracles. At least it's *supposed* to be.

Growing up Jewish, you hear plenty about miracles: Moses crossing the Red Sea, manna in the wilderness, Daniel in the lion's den. There's a whole song about miracles in *Fiddler on the Roof*, which we've seen more times than I can count. So I know all about how miracles are *supposed* to

work. But they don't. Not for me. And not for my family. What we get is the exact opposite.

Mr. Culpepper says you need to define your terms or no one knows what you're talking about. According to Rabbi Goldberg, who took over at our temple after Rabbi Buxelbaum died, a miracle is when the *exact* right thing happens at the *exact* right time, just when you need it the most. It comes as a surprise. You can't believe it, but there it is! Clear as day! And you say, "Wow! It's a miracle!"

But Mr. Culpepper also said you can define a term by its opposite, which is called its antonym. So what's the word for the exact opposite of a miracle? Like when you really, *really* need something to happen, even though it's a long shot. So you hope and you hope and then when you can't hope any more, you start to pray and ask God to please, please let this one thing happen, and if it does I'll believe in you for the rest of my life. And then, finally, when it seems like time has run out and there's no hope, at the last minute . . . *it doesn't happen.*

I've been looking for a word for *that* for a long time. Then, a couple of weeks ago, I found one. Actually, two. My mom was talking to her friend Esther—she actually has three friends named Esther, but they're easy to tell apart. This is the one who used to smoke, and keeps on quitting. I'm glad, because smoking stinks and is disgusting. Not only that, it

kills you. Now that Esther has quit smoking again, she has a new hobby: complaining about her husband, Harold, who doesn't pay enough attention to her.

“So there we were at the Finkelsteins' daughter's wedding reception, I'm wearing my new chiffon burgundy dress for the very first time, but does Harold even notice? No, he's too busy staring at Mrs. Fenig—God knows why, she's skinny as a stick—and he says to her, ‘That's a lovely dress. And those are beautiful earrings, Mrs. Fenig.’”

Then Esther says to my mom, “So what am I? Chopped liver?”

I'd heard the phrase before, but never really thought about it.

“Mom?” I asked later. “Why did Esther say she was chopped liver?”

“What?” she asked, confused.

“Chopped liver!” I said again, louder. My mom doesn't hear very well. I have to look right at her when I speak. “Esther asked if she was chopped liver. Why?”

“Well,” she said, “‘chopped liver’ is an expression that means ‘nothing special.’”

“Like ‘This weekend I have no plans, so I'm chopping liver?’”

“Not exactly,” my mom said. “You only say it to complain, when you feel like nothing special: ‘What am I? Chopped liver?’”

It was funny to hear her say that, because she never complains about anything, even when she should. Everyone's heard about the Jewish mother who makes you feel guilty. She gives you two shirts for Chchchcanukkah, and when you try one on, she says, "What's the matter? You don't like the other one?"

That's not my mom. She wants to believe everything is wonderful, even when it's not, which is pretty much all the time. And I'm the type of kid who tries to make everything wonderful for her, because I can't stand it when she's miserable. Sometimes I manage to do it. But, when I can't, I end up feeling worse than the kid with two shirts.

Even though the words *chopped liver* are English, it's a Yiddish expression. Yiddish is a Jewish language, like Hebrew, except Hebrew is for praying and Yiddish is for complaining. And for making jokes—it's really good for that. There are a bunch of Yiddish words that are just plain funny, like "*Gesundheit!*" That's what you say when someone sneezes, but it works as a punch line all by itself. If you don't believe me, try shouting it out sometime, you'll see.

As for chopped liver, I think "nothing special" understates the case. It isn't just unspecial—it's *revolting*. That's one of those funny words that can mean different things. The Maccabees in the Kchanukah story were revolting in

a *good* way, the hippies are revolting in a *confusing* way, and chopped liver is revolting in a *disgusting* way. As a phrase, though, chopped liver is great—and the perfect name for when the exact right thing *doesn't* happen. You pray for a miracle, and what do you get? Chopped liver.

The weird thing is, old people seem to like the stuff. Last year we were at a bar mitzvah party for the son of another one of the Esthers. This one wears a wig that spins around on her head when she sneezes, which she does fairly often, because she has allergies. And if that isn't enough to remember her by, her whole name is Esther Nestor. And her husband—get this—is actually named Lester, so they're Lester and Esther Nestor. I like the name, though I don't know how she felt about it when she married Lester. He must have *impressed* her. But maybe it *stressed* her. Or *depressed* her. Kenny and I joke about it, but never to her face, lest we *pester* Esther Nestor.

Anyhow, it was her son's bar mitzvah, though his name is something of a mystery. He's called—don't ask me why—Steve. They could have named him Chester or even Fester, like the uncle on *The Addams Family* on TV. He could learn to juggle and become a *jester*. Or a banker—Chester Nestor, Investor. The party was at this fancy hotel in downtown Los Angeles, with a huge buffet of Jewish foods like bagels and lox, and right there in the center of the table, like some

kind of wedding cake, was the head of President Nixon—sculpted entirely from chopped liver!

We all gathered around staring at it until Marty Finkelstein said that if they were going to go to all the trouble to make a president's head out of chopped liver, they should have chosen a good president, like John F. Kennedy. We all agreed—everyone knows Nixon is a crook—until Sidney Applebaum pointed out that it might not be right to have everyone scooping out chunks of Kennedy's head, given how he had died.

Everyone laughed. Then, suddenly, we stopped. There was a long, awkward pause as we all stared at our shoes. I don't know what everyone else was thinking, but I was remembering that morning in 1963 when I was in line with my mother picking up the turkey at the Midway grocery store. When we finally got to Mr. Chen, the cashier, he was crying. I was four, and had never seen a man cry in a grocery store.

“Mr. Chen?” my mother asked. “Are you all right?” He just stood there, shaking his head, and we all stood there, not buying groceries.

That year for Thanksgiving the whole country ate chopped liver. And three years ago, when President Kennedy's brother Robert was killed, we had leftover chopped liver. And now Nixon is president.



But Hanukkyah is not supposed to be a chopped liver holiday—it’s a *latke* holiday. And so, after the almost-but-not-quite-miracle with the dreidel, I got out the Veg-O-Matic and potatoes and went to work. With three Gimels in a row, I figured, God was at least *watching*.

“All right,” I said. “Maybe dreidel isn’t your thing. I agree. It’s kind of a dumb game. But how about this: Supposing I make this the most perfect Kquanukkah ever, starting with the latkes. And if you want to do me a little miracle, you can make it snow. Is it a deal?”

Latkes, in case you don’t know, are potato pancakes. It’s also a Yiddish word, and sounds a lot like another Yiddish word—*gatkes*—but that’s completely different. *Latkes* means “potato pancakes” while *gatkes* means “underwear.” Some people make latkes with grated potatoes, while others use mashed. Of course, no one can agree, which is what makes them a Jewish food. But everyone *does* agree they should be crispy, not soggy, and fried in plenty of oil, because Khanakah is supposed to be all about the miracle of the oil.

Last year, though, my father tried to make latkes without oil, so they would be healthier. He’s always trying to make healthy food, like his sugarless cheesecake made with cottage cheese and sweetened with grapefruit juice. Yuck. But his latkes kept sticking to the pan, so he added a bunch of

oil, which pretty much undid any health benefits, and we ended up with clumps of greasy potato mush. When latkes come out right, they're delicious and you eat them with sour cream and applesauce. I like them with jam, because that's how they eat them in Chelm, the Jewish village of fools. But you don't eat latkes with katsayp. Or kitshoup. Or catsip. None of those.

I couldn't find a recipe book, but then I remembered we have this little red 78 RPM record called "Let's Make Latkes!" I found it and put it on the record player, and it actually sang the recipe for latkes—including onions, which burn your eyes when you grate them, but it's worth it.

I followed the recipe exactly and made a sample one to test. It came out crisp and golden brown. Tasted like a dream! Perfect latkes for the perfect Kchahanukkah.

I covered the batter so it wouldn't get gray and disgusting, then went to decorate the house. I had time—Kenny was with my mom, at McVey's hobby shop. He's fourteen, and had his bar mitzvah last June. He also has a paper route and has been saving up money to buy a model airplane kit, which is the latest thing he's into. He makes them from balsa wood and coats the wings with tissue paper, then hangs them from the ceiling in his room.

As for my dad, he said he'd be home a couple of hours ago, and we were going to cook latkes together, but he's always late.

It usually bugs me, but in this case it may be good, because he was meeting with this guy named Forentos who has some serious investors lined up for “Omni-Glow.” That’s my dad’s new business, which is all about glow-in-the-dark plastics. If you haven’t heard about them, you will soon. My dad says they’re the next big thing, and the world is waiting.

That’s what makes Omni-Glow a sure bet, unlike the Garage-O-Matic, which was what last Chanakayah was all about. It actually began a couple months before, after Halloween, when we were driving home in the Dodge Dart. The rain was coming down in buckets, and my brothers and I got into an argument about who had to get out and open the garage door. Guess who lost? Me, that’s who. The youngest. That was really unfair, because I had already lost the argument before that one, and had to sit in the middle of the backseat, where there is a big, uncomfortable bump. Usually the middle seat isn’t so bad, because of the hole in the floor that lets you watch the street zip by below. But with the rain it’s a whole different story, and I was getting soaked. Having to get out to open the garage door—well, that added insult to injury.

I didn’t think much more about it, but my father stayed up late that night, and every night for weeks, fiddling with wires and switches and other little electronic gizmos. Finally, one day, he took us out to the garage to show us what he’d

built. Hanging from a pulley was a contraption with a rope and all the weights from Kenny's weight lifting set—which explained where *that* went.

But we didn't care about the weights, because our dad was so excited. We stood outside the garage, he flicked the switch, there was a loud grinding and banging noise, and suddenly—voila!—the garage door began to lift all by itself! We couldn't believe it.

You know how many garage doors there are in the world? A lot. And how many people there are who don't want to open them? Even more. So my dad called his brother, my uncle Morrie, who is a total *schmooser*, which means "he knows everybody." Uncle Morrie flew out all the way from Cleveland and lined up some big business people, ready to pay real money for my dad's invention—five thousand dollars! Three of them actually came to our house, driving a Cadillac, just to see our garage! We even cleaned it up just for the occasion. Everyone watched as my father pressed the button. There was the grinding and, a moment later, it opened up! You should have seen their faces. They were as impressed with the Garage-O-Matic as we were. They did it again and again, opening the door, then closing it. This was it.

There was a loud pop, and I turned to see my uncle Morrie, who had opened a bottle of real champagne for the occasion, which bubbled all over the driveway.

“Here’s to the Garage-O-Matic!” he said.

They were just about to shake hands on the deal when my dad started to tell them the whole story of how he invented it. While he was talking, one of the investors—Mr. Rosenberg—went over to examine the mechanism. Just then an airplane flew overhead and must have triggered the garage door to close. By the time Mr. Rosenberg noticed, it was too late. We didn’t see his face, but his legs were sticking out from under the door, like the Wicked Witch of the East, and he was screaming about a law suit.

The deal was dead, nothing left but a puddle of champagne.

Like I said, Chanaykayah isn’t supposed to be a chopped liver holiday. Of course, in Hebrew school, Cantor Grubnitz reminded us that it isn’t even a *major* holiday, and we shouldn’t get too excited about it. A major holiday is Yom Kippur, in the fall, which is the end of the beginning of the Jewish New Year. Let me tell you, Yom Kippur is not fun. You dress in uncomfortable clothes, go to temple, and sit there forever, not eating, standing, then sitting, not eating some more, then standing again, listening to Rabbi Goldberg go on and on, and to Cantor Grubnitz, who lives to hear himself sing. The two of them dress up in black robes

and pointy hats and tell you to say you're sorry for everything you've ever done and a whole bunch of things you've never even thought of doing. Then, when you get back to school, everyone says, "Wow, you got the day off? Lucky!"

This year was even worse than usual. My dad was in the hospital—again—recovering from another operation. So we were in temple with my mom, praying for him. And Cantor Grubnitz decided to sing extra operatically with notes that lasted for hours and nearly shattered the stained glass windows. *That's* a major holiday. Some fun.

Major holiday or not, I was going to make this a perfect Kchanakkah. I hung all our decorations. We had two letter chains—HAPPY HANUKKAH and HAPPY CHANUKKAH!—so I put both up, one in the kitchen and the other in the living room over the fireplace. Then I cleaned up our menorah, which I don't think had ever been cleaned. It's gold with blue-and-white enamel, and has eight soldiers, who I guess are supposed to be the Maccabees, each standing on one leg and holding up a torch, which is where the candle goes. There's a ninth soldier in front, a little taller than the rest, who I suppose is Judah, the leader of the Maccabees. My parents brought it back from their trip to Israel when I was in the third grade, and I thought it was the coolest thing ever. Now it seems a lot less cool, and the soldiers look more like the USC marching band than the Maccabees. Even so,

once it was clean and shiny, it looked pretty good.

That done, I picked out candles for the menorah. That's always my job, partly because no one else cares and partly because it lets me choose the *shammes*. I've always had a thing about the shammes, which is the helper candle, the one that lights all the others. It's not really part of the holiday, just a little bet I have going with myself each night, to see whether the shammes is the last candle to burn out. Because you light it first and it burns the whole time you're singing the blessings and lighting all the other candles, you'd think it would be the first to burn out. But I've noticed that a lot of times it actually stays lit longer than the rest, like it's being rewarded for sharing its light with the other candles. The first time I noticed, it seemed like a mini-miracle. Now I look for it to happen. Actually, I do more than look; if one candle is a little longer, I'll choose it for the shammes. Maybe that's cheating, trying to force a miracle, but I'll take what I can get. Tonight I chose a longish blue one for the shammes and a yellow one for the first night.

Only then did I allow myself to think about my Chahahnukkah present. I had noticed that my parents had been running mysterious "errands" in the past week, to Los Angeles, and I figured they had gone to Berg's Studio of Magic to buy me the one thing I've wanted for the past five years: a real silk top hat.

I do magic shows—that’s my thing. While Kenny goes from one thing to another—baseball, then coin collecting, then rock collecting, then weight lifting, and now model airplanes—magic has been my one and only thing. It started when Kenny got “Sneaky Pete’s Professional Magic Show” from Steve Klein, who lives next door, then lost interest in it, and gave it to me. Now I do magic shows around town, at birthday parties and libraries. Lots of my tricks involve a hat, but all I have is a crummy felt one. What I’ve always wanted is a real spring-loaded top hat, like the one Mister Mystery has—he’s my magic teacher. They’re from the old days, for going to the opera, made so you could take your hat off and press it down flat so you didn’t block the view of the people sitting behind you. Then, when the opera was over, you’d whack the brim against the back of your wrist and—pop!—it was a full-sized hat again!

You should see the audiences when Mister Mystery opens his. It’s not even a trick, but they’re amazed. And they have one for sale at Berg’s Studio of Magic. It costs \$50, but once when I was there with my dad, Mr. Berg said he’d sell it to me for \$38, which is still *a lot* of money—my felt one only cost three dollars. I’ve never asked for a gift for my birthday or anything else—what’s the point?—but I know my dad saw my face when I tried it on.



If it seems like I know a lot about Chaynukkayyah, I do. I'm kind of an expert. It began in December of first grade, when my teacher brought out song sheets and started leading the class in Christmas songs—first “Frosty,” then “Rudolph,” then on to “Silent Night.”

“Mrs. Grumbacher?” I said, raising my hand.

“Yes, Joel?”

“These are Christmas songs. But my family doesn't believe in Christmas. We have our own holiday, which is even better.”

I had been giving this a lot of thought. My brothers and I were the only Jews in Bixby Elementary School, which goes from first to eighth grade. When Howard started fourth grade, he came home and told us how the kids in his class had figured out he was Jewish and threw pennies on the ground to see if he would pick them up. He did, and they laughed and said, “Jews love pennies!” The next time he didn't pick them up, and they laughed again and said, “Why don't you pick them up? Jews *love* pennies!”

Howard, in response, said, “You're all stupid jerks.” In retrospect, this was not the cleverest comeback line. He may be an Einstein genius in math, but he has never been too smart at dealing with people, and quickly became the least popular kid in his class. Unlike Howard, Kenny gets along with pretty much everyone, so he didn't think the Jewish thing would be a problem. But when some kids in his class

discovered he was Jewish, they started asking him questions, like if he was rich, and whether Jews had horns and could they see his. He came home crying.

Being the only Jew in my class had never affected me personally. In kindergarten I hadn't said anything about it, and no one had asked. We sang all the Christmas songs, and when we got to the ones that mentioned "Jesus" or "Christ," I mouthed the words, like Jews are supposed to do. In fact, the only time the Jewish thing ever seemed like it might be a problem for me was at the start of first grade when I was at Jimmy Bowen's house and met his parents for the first time. His dad looked at me and said, "So, this is the little Jew-boy?"

Then Jimmy's mother, who is really nice and always gives us sweet iced tea, said, "Oh, Donald, don't say that!"

Then his dad said, "No, it's fine! We like Jews, right? The chosen people!" Then he shook my hand so hard, my fingers hurt. That started me thinking about the Jewish thing, and I decided it would be better to strike first, like the Maccabees, which is why I had raised my hand.

"Oh, yes," said Mrs. Grumbacher. "I've heard of your holiday, the Jewish Christmas. It's called 'Cha-nu-kah,' isn't it?" She said the *Ch* like in *chocolate*. "There's even a song on our song sheet. . . . Ah, here it is!"

"Actually, Mrs. Grumbacher, it's pronounced Chhhhanu-

kah,” I said, clearing my throat to stop her from singing “The Horrible Song.” “And it’s eight times as good as Christmas, because it lasts for eight days and nights. It’s a time when miracles happen!” This was a little hard to say because saying the *Chhhh* in *Chhhhhanukkah* had generated a big loogie in my mouth, which I couldn’t spit out but didn’t want to swallow.

My comments caused a ruckus. Every kid in that class lived for Christmas—the best day of the year by far—and the notion that some holiday they’d never heard of might be even better was inconceivable. Finally Arnold Pomeroy shouted above the rest.

“Oh yeah? Well, Christmas lasts for twelve days, so there!”

“Yeah, but do you get presents on *all twelve* days?”

That’s when Mrs. Grumbacher stepped in.

“Children, both holidays can be wonderful, and this is a good chance for all of us to learn about another religion. We don’t have time now, Joel, but perhaps tomorrow you would like to tell the class all about”—there was a pause as she prepared to clear her throat—“Chhhhhanukah?”

Now *she* was stuck with a big loogie, and I had just what I wanted: a chance to show off to the class. If I got it right, I would not be a bully magnet. I would be a star, and every first grader in Bixby School would be wishing they were Jewish.

The next day I arrived early with a paper bag full of supplies: a large Styrofoam menorah, a bunch of dreidels, and chocolate Choinykah gelt, along with the string of letters that said HAPPY HANUKKAH! I got Mrs. Grumbacher to stand on a chair and pin it above the blackboard, over the letters of the alphabet.

“Class,” said Mrs. Grumbacher as they took their seats, “today we will have a special presentation from Joel, who is one of the Jewish people and will tell us all about his holiday. The one he mentioned yesterday, which comes at this time of year. That isn’t Christmas.” She had given up on saying the actual word.

I stood in front of the class. “Once, in ancient Israel, there was this big, mean, hairy guy named Antiochus who thought he knew *everything about everything*. He told everyone how to dress and what to eat and who to worship: the Greek gods. He put up giant statues and made everyone bow down to them. The Jews didn’t like it one bit, but what could they do? If they didn’t do what he said, they would be killed—dead!”

Once it was clear that the story had killing in it, they were hooked. I told how the Seleucid army was the most powerful in the world, with swords and armor and even elephants, and if they didn’t like you, they would order the elephants to sit on you, squashing you like a pancake. “And that’s why

we eat potato pancakes for Kchanukkah, to remind us of all the people who got squished.

“The Seleucids put up this big honking statue right in the middle of town and said it was God, and made everyone bow down to it or be killed. None of the Jews wanted to bow down, because Jews don’t bow down to statues. But they didn’t want to be killed either, so most of them did it. Except for this one old guy named Mattathias, who went right up to the statue and knocked it over! The head fell off and rolled in the gutter and everyone cheered, and that began the revolution! Mattathias gathered his children, including Judah the Maccabee and his brothers, to fight for their freedom. During the daytime they hid out in caves and, at night, while the Seleucids were sleeping, Judah snuck up and hit them with his hammer—wham!”

They ate it up, and wanted more, so I told them about the oil.

“But that wasn’t all! After the Maccabees won the battle and went back to the temple, they found the Seleucids had left it a super-gross disgusting mess, filled with garbage and pigs’ blood. The Jews cleaned and cleaned until it was beautiful. When it was good as new, they needed to light the giant menorah, so they looked for the sacred oil. But the Seleucids had broken every single jar of it, except for one tiny jar they had missed. It was hardly any oil, but the Jews lit it, and

it burned and burned! For eight days and eight nights, just enough for the Jews to get more oil. It was a miracle!”

That part didn't go over so well. The class was kind of quiet.

“Wait a minute!” said Arnold Pomeroy. “That's supposed to be a big miracle? That they had just enough oil? So what?”

Arnold Pomeroy could be kind of a jerk even then, but he had a good point. I never saw what was so special about the oil either. But I wasn't about to let Arnold Pomeroy ruin my story, so I embellished.

“Well, Arnold, I guess you don't know how cold it gets at night in the Judean desert.”

“How cold?” he asked.

“Really cold. So cold that if that little light burned out, they would have all frozen, like Popsicles, and died!” Once I got back to talking about death and freezing, they got interested again.

“But that tiny flame *didn't* burn out! Instead, it got bigger and bigger, night after night for eight nights until it was a giant bonfire! They were saved! It was a miracle!”

The class actually cheered at that one. Someone even shouted “Right on!” Then I brought out the dreidels and told them how the letters Nun, Gimel, Hey, and Shin—which you already know about—actually stood for four words that summed up the whole story: “*Nes Gadol Haya Sham*,” Hebrew for “A Great Miracle Happened There.”

“And that,” I said, “is why Chahnnukkah is so different

from Christmas. We don't just celebrate for one night . . ." I took a long, dramatic pause. "We celebrate every night for *eight* nights."

A different silence fell over the class, and that's when I knew I had them. I could see Arnold Pomeroy working out the math, multiplying Christmas times eight in his mind, then slowly raising his hand.

"But what about presents? Do you really get presents every night?"

I took my time before answering. "Chhhanukah," I finally said, "is a bonanza!"

Now, what I told Arnold Pomeroy wasn't *exactly* a lie. I never actually said we got presents for all eight nights. Or at all, for that matter. As Mr. Culpepper would say, I *implied* it—and he just *inferred* it. But I didn't lie.

The truth is that in my family, we don't get any presents. We never have. That's because we're broke, and we've been broke for a long time. I know people say that Jews are rich, but that's a stereotype and isn't true. It's especially not true for my family. My mother has a part-time job, editing manuscripts for a company that makes educational film-strips. She's good at it but doesn't make very much money. And my dad hasn't had any regular work for a long time. Every month I watch him do different tricks with the bills—

like sending the check for the gas company in the envelope to the water company and the water company check to the telephone company and the telephone company check to the gas company. They all think it's an honest mistake, so they call, and then he gets them to call each other, and it can take a couple weeks for them to figure it out, which gives him time to come up with money somewhere, or get the next check from welfare.

I didn't want to tell Arnold Pomeroy what really happens on Khanukhaya at our home, but I'll tell you. Each year, after lighting the candles on the first night, when other families get presents, we get a story. But it's not a warm, feel-good bedtime story. It's more of an *explanation* as to why there are no presents that particular year. It's like every year they keep meaning to get us presents, but it never quite happens. Last year "The Explanation" was about how hard it was for engineers to find work since the collapse of the aerospace industry, and the year before that about the government making a mistake with the welfare checks. I dread The Explanation, because not only do we not get presents, but I feel guilty for wanting them. It always ends with my mom saying, ". . . but you know we get you things you really need, like clothing." And that's true, so we nod.

It's hard to be mad at my parents. They have it tough. You can't buy presents if you don't have money. And money

really isn't the important thing. "Money, shmoney," my dad always says, "as long as you have your health."

He's right. And that would be great, *if* he had his health. But he doesn't. He and my mom take turns going to the hospital. It's like that sign I saw in a store window: "Sleep Fast—We Need the Pillows!" Between the two of them, they are in and out of the hospital as often as our car is in and out of the shop.

The hospital is my least favorite place in the world. For one thing, hospitals have a gross smell that comes from being so clean. And when you're there, it's all about waiting to see the person you're visiting, then waiting for them to get out. I hate waiting.

But I could take the smell, and even the waiting, if it did any good. The real problem is that it's pointless. You go to the hospital, and what do you see? Sick people. And the longer they're there, the sicker they get. That's how it is with my mom and dad: Each time they go in, they come out worse.

I would say that my mom's problems are more like our current car, the Dodge Dart—so far we've had to replace the starter, the gas pump, and the radiator—while my dad's are more like our old car, the Rambler, which was falling apart from the time we got it and finally had to be towed away in several pieces. You can see my dad's problems just by looking at him. A lot of older people have

arthritis, but he's had it since he was young. It's not the usual kind that you just complain about, but a special kind called "ankylosing spondylitis," which is Latin for "curled up like a pretzel." His fingers are all knobby and twisted, almost like claws. You wouldn't know it to look at him, but when he was my age, he was a great violinist—a child prodigy, everyone says.

Now he can't even pick things up, at least not little things. Last week I got up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom, and I saw him sitting at the kitchen table, working on another one of his inventions—a box with a button you can press, to change the TV channel. At least, that's what it's supposed to do, though it sounds impossible. He had dropped a screw onto the floor and was trying to pick it up, but couldn't. I was behind him, in the dark hallway, so he didn't see me and I didn't say anything, because I didn't want him to know I was watching. He kept trying to pick up the screw until he was almost crying. I couldn't stand it, but I couldn't stop watching either. Finally, he reached over and grabbed a screwdriver, then bent down again. I guess the screwdriver was magnetized, because it picked up the screw. I went back to bed.

Along with twisting up his hands, this pretzel-arthritis curls up his spine. He used to be tall, but now he's almost as short as Howard.

It's painful to watch my father walk. He uses a cane, and sometimes two, and tilts to the left. With every step he takes, there's this loud clicking sound, like someone snapping their fingers, and then a grinding sound as his hip bone pops back into place. It makes me cringe, but I'm used to it. What's embarrassing is when other people see him. Like last week as we walked into Thrifty's Coffee Shop—which takes credit cards—there was this little boy about three years old, staring at my dad. First his face was curious. Then it sort of scrunched up, afraid. He pointed to my dad and started to cry.

But my dad looked right at him, then did this kind of move with his head, tilting it back and forth like Charlie Chaplin. He made a funny face and a clicking sound—with his mouth this time—and the boy actually started to giggle. It was like my father was only *pretending* that he couldn't walk very well, like he was putting on a show.

That's what my dad does best: He makes people laugh. He's always telling us how important it is to laugh, especially at things that aren't funny. "Like the circus clown," he says, "who may be sad, but still laughs—and that's better than crying."

Kenny came home with my mom all excited about his new model airplane kit. And when my dad finally got home, he was whistling, which was a good sign, as it meant his meet-

ing with Forentos about Omni-Glow must have gone well. My dad and I cooked the latkes together, and they came out perfect. Then, no one fought during dinner, which was practically a miracle in itself. After eating the latkes we gathered around the menorah, just like a normal Jewish family, and turned off the living room light. I checked outside. No snow yet, but it sure felt like it was coming.

As the youngest, I got to strike the match and light the shammes, and we sang all three blessings for the first night. Then my mom started to clap and sing “Maoz Tzur”—“Rock of Ages”—which is the traditional song you sing after you light the candles. We got two lines into it and realized we couldn’t remember the words, which is our own tradition.

We stopped, and there was a long silence.

My mother finally said, “How nice to be together for the first night of Hanikah!”

I nodded, seeing no sign of a box that would hold a top hat. I looked at my mom, waiting for The Explanation. Something wasn’t right. I could tell from the way she was talking, like everything was so wonderful.

“Aren’t the candles lovely?” she said.

This much cheeriness meant something was definitely wrong. Kenny and Howard must have known it too, because they sat there silently, waiting.

“Why the long faces?” said my father. “It’s Chhanukkah! You’re supposed to be Chhhappy!”

I saw no box, or bag, or anything that looked like a present, and realized I had been a fool to expect one.

“We have some news,” my mother finally said. She didn’t have to say another word. From the look on her face, I knew exactly what we were getting.

Chopped liver.