

One Little Menorah

by *Zalman Velvel*

Zach threw open the front door and then slammed it shut, making the house shudder down to its foundation. His parents, Scott and Naomi, who had been quietly watching television, were startled.

“Being Jewish stinks!” Zach shouted as he stomped up the stairs to his bedroom, kicking his bedroom door closed for punctuation.

Naomi clicked off the TV, and looked at her husband. Batting her hazel eyes, she motioned with her head toward the stairs.

“I think this is your department, Scott,” she said.

Scott nodded and stood up. He tucked in his shirt and brushed back his thinning brown hair. He straightened himself to his full six-foot-two height, and headed for the stairs.

When he arrived at Zach’s bedroom door, he knocked twice. Receiving no answer, he opened the door and entered what he fondly called “The pig sty of Long Island—Massapequa branch.” A quick scan of the room revealed a bag of sweaty gym clothes that came home at the start of winter recess but had yet to find its way to the wash, two weeks worth of dirty clothes spilling out of the laundry basket in the corner of the closet, homework papers and school books in various stages of procrastination, and one brown-haired, twelve-year-old boy lying on his bed, his face buried under two pillows, ostrich style.

“What’s wrong, Zach?”

“Nothing,” came the muffled reply.

Scott removed the top pillow. Zach put a death grip on the one remaining.

“I believe you whispered something about being Jewish, and how it stinks, as you tiptoed quietly into the house.”



“Leave me alone, Dad.”

“Zach, I’m warning you. I was a tickle-a-holic before I married your mother. I’ve been on the wagon for thirteen years. I mention this because your ticklish areas are exposed, and my fingers are beginning to twitch. I’m not sure how much longer I can resist if . . .”

When Zach shot his arms down to protect his sides, Scott pulled away the last pillow.

“Thank you, Zach. Now that I can see your sparkling blue eyes, I have the strength to resist tickling. Whew, that was close.”

Scott waited for Zach to begin. When he didn’t, Scott asked, seriously, “Come on, tell me what’s wrong?”

“I don’t want to be Jewish anymore.”

“I see. And what brought this about?”

“It stinks. I hate it.”

“Is this stinking pure coincidence or is it related to the fact tonight is Christmas Eve?”

“Yeah, maybe.” Zach got up from the bed and pushed the power button on his computer.

“Zach, if you touch the mouse on that computer, instead of telling me what’s bothering you, I promise, I’m going to tickle you within an inch of your life.”

Zach swiveled around in the chair, away from his computer. “I was over at Orin’s.”

“Yes. And?”

“You should see their tree. It’s huge. And he has a pile of presents underneath it.”

“So?”

“I want to do Christmas. It’s way better than Chanukah any day.”

Scott clenched his fists involuntarily. He tried to relax, but it wasn't working.

"Okay." Scott took out his wallet and pulled a bill free. "Here's twenty dollars. Go down to the big tent at the shopping center parking lot and buy a tree."

"You're kidding, right?"

"No. You should be able to get one real cheap. At midnight, which is about, oh, five hours away, there will be no market for them. If I were you, I'd make my first offer ten dollars."

"What good is a tree without presents?"

"Oh, you want presents too? Okay . . . Here's one, two, three hundred and ten, eleven, twelve dollars. It's all the money I have on me. Go out and buy some presents, too."

Scott laid the money on the bed and left the room. He didn't wait to see Zach's reaction. When he arrived at the bottom of the stairs, he opened the hall closet and took out his coat.

"I'm going for a walk," he said and was out the door before Naomi could ask questions.

As Scott walked, he studied the houses along Kinsella Avenue. Some were sparkling showcases; others were lit simply with a string or two of lights. He walked three blocks, to Cartwright Boulevard, where "The Christmas House" was.

The Baxter's lived there, but after twenty years, it was known to the neighborhood as "The Christmas House." It stopped traffic for those who weren't aware of it and was a perennial visiting place for those who were. The yard was a wonderland of lights and statues and nativity scenes, with Christmas songs playing softly on outside speakers. Every square foot of tree and lawn was lit up. A newspaper article said the Baxter's spent \$25,000 over the years on lights and accessories, and it took the whole month of November to set up.

A crowd of about thirty people was gathered outside when Scott arrived. Some were taking pictures, some were humming Christmas carols, and some were just staring,



transfixed by the blinking lights.

I'm the only Jew left in the world, Scott thought. He watched the crowd as disconnected and removed as if he were watching a television program.

"Dad?" Scott was startled from his thoughts.

"Zach?"

"Here." Zach handed the money back to his father. Scott took the bills and tucked them into his jacket pocket without saying a word.

They stood there together, silent, watching the people come and go. Then Zach asked, "Dad, what are you doing here?"

"I don't know. Thinking, I guess. Right now, I'm wondering what it must be like to live next to this." Scott looked around, and then did a double take.

"Zach, look at that. Not there, over there, the house next door."

There was a small menorah in the window, its electric lights fully aglow.

"Poor little Chanukah. No way it can compete with Christmas, huh, Zach?"

"Dad, I'm sorry. I didn't mean what I said."

"Sure you did," Scott snapped, regretting the angry tone as soon as the words came out.

"I knew this wouldn't work," Zach said, turning to leave. Scott grabbed hold of his arm.

"Zach, do you know the story of Chanukah?"

"Yeah."

"What is it?"

"Come on, Dad. Everyone knows it. We light candles because the temple oil lasted eight days instead of one."



“That’s the symbol, not the meaning.”

Zach did not respond.

“Come on, Zach, ask me what the meaning is.”

“Okay . . . so what’s the meaning?”

He doesn’t care, Scott thought, but I’m going to tell him anyway.

“It happened about a hundred and fifty years B.C., when the Middle East was ruled by Assyrians. The Assyrians were aligned with the Greeks, who were pagans—they worshipped idols. Jews were the only people who believed in one God. We were forbidden to teach the Bible and forced to bow down to carved idols that were placed inside our Holy Temple.”

Scott waited for his son to ask a question, but none came.

“Then a brave family called the Maccabees rose up and united the Jewish people against the Assyrians. The Maccabees were out-numbered, out-weaponed, and inexperienced in war. The Jewish people should have been annihilated, but we won because of our courage, and the miracles God rewarded us with when He saw our courage. So Chanukah is really a celebration of religious freedom.”

Zach’s interest was now elsewhere. Scott grabbed his son’s face in one hand and turned his head toward the house next door.

“See that one little menorah? Without it, there would be no ‘Christmas House.’ People would be worshipping the Sun God, the Rain God, Zeus, Aphrodite, and Mercury.”

“Dad, you’re hurting me.”

Scott let his son go. Zach rubbed his cheeks as his father studied him. Those are my eyes, my cheekbones, my lips, he thought.

“Zach, you know I’m angry don’t you?”



“Yeah. I can feel it on my face.”

Scott smiled and tenderly touched his son’s cheek. “I’m sorry. It’s not your fault I’m angry. I’m angry because you’re going through the same thing I had to go through. It’s not easy to be a Jew living in a non-Jewish world, is it?”

“No.”

“But you must remember, as I had to, that millions of our people died so you could have the freedom to be Jewish. You have a great grandfather who was put to death in a gas chamber, and a great-great grandfather who resisted persecution by Russian Cossacks. Because of their sacrifices, you and I are able to be Jewish today. They chose not to change even when it cost them their lives.”

Zach was silent.

“Our forefathers passed down to us some precious gifts: over three thousand years of culture, wisdom that has withstood the test of time, and a courageous example. God willing, I will pass these gifts down to you.”

Zach thought about this until they were approached by a stranger who had perhaps imbibed too much in “holiday spirits.” When they looked his way, the man called out, “Merry Christmas!”

Neither father nor son replied.

“Didn’t you hear me?” the stranger asked. “I said Merry Christmas!”

Zach looked up at his father. Then he turned to the man and said politely, “We’re Jewish, mister.”

THE END