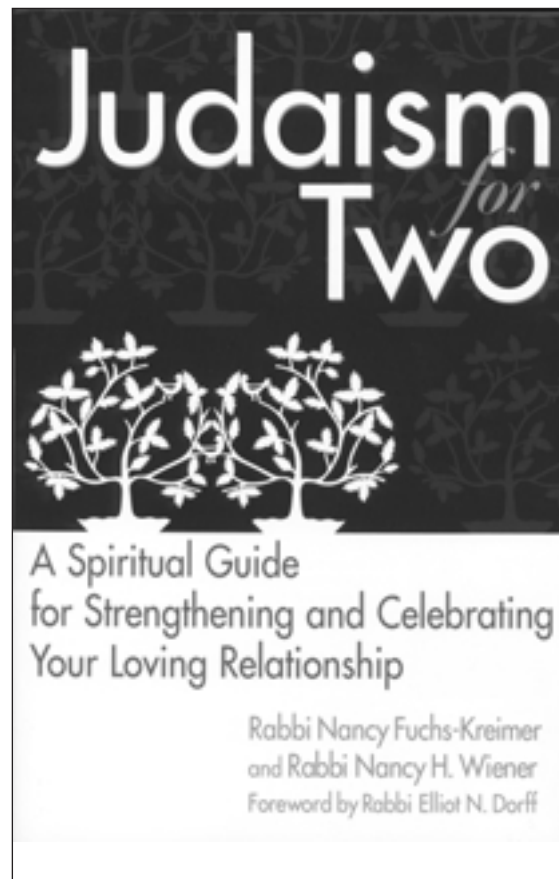


Judaism for Two

A Spiritual Guide for Strengthening and Celebrating Your Loving Relationship

Rabbi Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer and Rabbi Nancy H. Wiener, Jewish Lights, 2005

More than just calendar commitments, the Jewish holidays carry with them a view of what is important in life, a set of assumptions that can challenge and deepen one's thinking about relationships. Drawing from ancient and contemporary texts, Jewish tradition, and personal stories, Rabbi Fuchs-Kreimer and Rabbi Wiener provide creative exercises, rituals, and guided discussions that help couples make connections to tradition, community, and each other. Renewed meaning in holy celebrations and opportunities for spiritual growth are explored in the context of the Jewish holiday cycle, including: *Yom Kippur* – Forgiving and Growing; *Purim*—Playing, Laughing and Taking Risks; *Pesach* – Coming Home, Finding Freedom; *Sukkot*—Blessing Bounty, Facing Impermanence; *Shabbat*—Pausing to Bless What Is, and, in this excerpt, *Hanukkah*.



Telling Our Story, Dedicating Our Space: Hanukkah

Every relationship begins with hope. Two people take the risk of becoming involved, becoming vulnerable. When they make a long-term commitment to one another, they are taking a leap of faith: faith that they can grow and change together, faith in a future they cannot foresee. Like lighting a lamp in the darkest moments of winter, kindling the flame of commitment and rekindling it each year are signs of the miracles, wonders, and power of faith that can sustain you in an unpredictable and often very dark world. In a long-term relationship, nothing makes any sense without hope. And each forward step rekindles faith in

the possibility of something new. The Jewish festival of lights, which began as a rededication of the sanctuary in Jerusalem, carries messages for us as couples: messages about the telling of our stories, about hope and identity, and about how we dedicate our own homes as sanctuaries even as we remind ourselves to reach out beyond them with our gifts.

Telling Our Stories and Finding New Meanings

We all tell stories about our lives—our lives as individuals, our lives as families, our lives as a people. The events we include in the narrative and the meanings we give to them change over time, as we change, as our audience changes, as our understanding of ourselves changes,

and as the world changes. Each time something significant occurs, we either work it comfortably into the narrative-as-we've-told-it, fitting it into our existing sense of meaning, or find a way to tell the entire narrative in a new way to accommodate the new information. Either way, the process involves reinterpreting old information, drawing on new information, and creating a new focus and locus for the larger story.

Hanukkah's story has been told in different ways by Jews of different eras. The earliest version celebrated the rededication of the Temple after a military victory. The Talmudic Rabbis focused on a story about a single cruse of oil that miraculously burned for eight days.

Modern Zionists emphasized the issue of national liberation in a secular song that asserts, "Now all of Israel must join together and redeem itself."

The significant recasting of Hanukkah can be a guide to us, inspiring us to think more openly about our own stories. It reminds us that we can change the story we tell ourselves about our past. For couples, Hanukkah can be a time to consider the story we tell about our relationship, how it has changed, and how we might tell it differently. Ascribing new meanings to past events helps us live more comfortably with our past and our present, and enables us to look toward the future with hope. Hanukkah's changing narratives encourage us to reconsider our

own old stories in light of our new insights.

From soon after you met, you began to tell your story as a couple. At first it focused on how and when you met and the early stages of your relationship. As time passed, you had more moments to retell, and the significance of some of those early “key” moments changed. Think back to how you talked about your relationship to new acquaintances shortly after you met. Compare that to the way you talk about those early days now: the adjectives you use about each other; the way you describe the trajectory of your relationship; the meaning you give to your meeting and deciding to make a life together. With each retelling, with the change of even one detail, you are redefining or re-creating your relationship. With each change there is loss, but also the potential for gaining new meaning. Each change is an implicit commitment to going on; each becomes a new narrative and sometimes a new celebration. Despite the radical differences among the Hanukkah stories, many Jews have come to under-

stand this holiday and its rituals best by fusing some or all of them together. They become a single, layered story, with some details diminishing in importance and others being emphasized and embellished, depending on the desires and the circumstances of the teller. It is the same for us and our personal stories. As our understanding of ourselves and our relationships develops, our stories emphasize different details and meanings, often becoming a single layered story with its own focus or message.

Even the way we tell ourselves about Hanukkah can change over time. When their first child was born, Jean and Mike agreed to make their family’s celebration of Hanukkah one of the highlights of the year. For Jean it was a way to transform their home, its sights and smells, into a festive space. For Mike, who had been raised Methodist, it was a way to re-create, albeit with a different focus, the joy of the season he had known while growing up. Now, their children grown, Jean and Mike are facing their first Hanukkah on their own. They have no satisfactory way to explain, even to themselves,

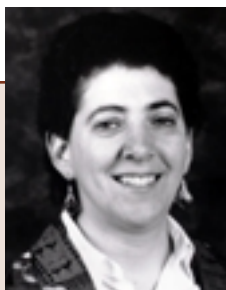
how and why they will celebrate. It’s easy enough to take the old menorah from the cabinet and light the candles, but they really want to figure out what meaning it has for them, as individuals and as a couple, at this stage of their life.

On a holiday such as Hanukkah, which has pervasive associations with children, finding meaningful ways to celebrate as adults with or without children can be a challenge. But among Judaism’s more interesting teachings is one that says that finding a novel interpretation or teaching within the tradition is a sign of an agile mind and a committed heart. Whatever Mike and Jean end up doing, their new practice will become part of their ongoing life story.

The story of hope connected to Hanukkah can become part of our own stories, sustaining our spirits. The rabbinic version of Hanukkah focuses on a miracle. But when did the miracle occur? Was it the eighth night when “miracle oil” was still burning, contrary to expectation? Or was it the first night, when the weary Jews, seeing the devastation of the Temple, lacking any assurances concerning

the future, lit the lamp anyway, hoping it would suffice?

For Marty and Emily, this story and its message of hope held a special meaning. Marty was subject to bouts of depression. All would be going well and then, with no apparent catalyst, his spirits would plummet. The first time this happened Emily was scared, and she too felt hopeless, helpless. With professional help, they both learned how to manage his depressions. During the dark periods, Marty felt Emily’s constancy as a powerful and positive influence. Emily and Marty recognized that while he wasn’t interested in seeing other people, she would need to continue with her social life, and that was OK. Each Hanukkah Marty and Emily stand quietly in the darkness together before lighting the first candle, contemplating what it means to trust in the dark, to begin the lightmaking, even without guarantees. After their time in darkness, one or the other purposefully lights the candles, reminding them of their recurring experiences of hope finally breaking through.



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