

HANUKKAH  
IN JUNE

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## HANUKKAH IN JUNE

One evening in late June my wife and I were invited to dinner at the home of Jacob Presser, the wealthiest and most illustrious citizen of Worthington, Ohio, a town to which we had recently moved. I had purchased the practice of a Dr. Sanders and was just beginning what would turn out to be a long and satisfying career.

Mr. Presser sent his carriage for us at our modest cottage, and up the hill we went, up to his mansion overlooking the town, where he lived with his three maiden sisters, his wife having died childless some years earlier.

He greeted us outside his door as the carriage arrived.

"Dr. Childes! And Mrs. Childes!" he exclaimed, as though having waited anxiously for years to meet us. "What an extraordinary pleasure!"

Although I imagined he greeted all of his guests with similar enthusiasm, I felt his warmth not as affectation but as something genuine, and I warmed to him immediately.

He was a portly old gentleman, but muscular, with the red face of someone of high spirits and blood pressure, and the sure grip of someone who knows both himself and the world.

He ushered us into the drawing room, where

his sisters were waiting, and after introductions, drinks were served. The gray-haired sisters engaged my wife in conversation while our host began to question me about my education and experience, my knowledge of sanitation and public health, my opinions on various medical controversies, and the like, leading me to a better understanding of this dinner invitation. It was, to put it plainly, an interview, and I suppose that, given my subsequent success, I did well enough.

As the sun began to set, our host and his sisters excused themselves. Servants came in to light the rooms, and then the butler announced that dinner was ready and led us into the dining room.

This was strange enough, but as we passed through the darkened library I saw what looked like a menorah on the sill of a large bay window, flickering with the light of five candles.

I had had some contact with Jews in Cincinnati, where I had attended medical school, and the oddity struck me: Hanukkah in June? But I thought it rude to say anything to Mr. Presser about his religious beliefs and practices, and resolved to allow the mystery to remain a mystery.

Dinner was, of course, sumptuous, and the conversation enlightening, as Mr. Presser and his sisters gave my wife and I excellent advice about life in Worthington – where best to obtain this or that, whom to meet, what to watch out for, and the like.

When it was over, Mr. Presser and I retired to the library for cigars and after-dinner drinks, while the ladies retired to the drawing room.

The library had been lit by the servants before we got there. I glanced at the sill as we entered the room. The menorah had been removed. But Mr. Presser had followed my eyes, and when we were seated comfortably with our cigars, he said, "You're wondering about the candelabra."

"Yes," I admitted, glad for an opportunity to show that I had some little knowledge of his faith. "The menorah. Doesn't Hanukkah fall normally in December?"

He nodded. "Yes," he said, obviously pleased. "But we have our own little tradition here. We celebrate Hanukkah twice a year, in June and in December. If you're curious, I can tell you why, but it will take some time."

"Please do," I urged him. "There's no hurry on my side."

"You see," he began, settling himself more comfortably in his chair, "I believe that the age of miracles is still with us. God intervenes in our lives every day. We just ignore it, giving pedestrian explanations for miraculous events. But occasionally something happens for which there is no explanation, and then we take notice.

"Such a thing happened in my family sixty-two years ago, when I was twelve years old. My father was a peddler who sold goods to farmers all round about here, in the days when it was more difficult to get into town. Each Monday morning he would go on the road with his horse and wagon, returning on Friday afternoon.

"On this particular Friday afternoon in June, we heard the wagon return and ran out to the yard to greet my father. We found him slumped across the seat, apparently lifeless. He wasn't breathing, and his body was cold. The horse had brought him home.

"My mother and sisters and I carried him into the parlor and laid him on a blanket in the middle of the floor. My mother sent us from the room as she stripped the body and washed it, then dressed it again for burial. I was sent to the carpenter to order a coffin.

"Later that night, our little family gathered in the parlor to contemplate the calamity that had befallen us. It was as though we wanted to be in my father's presence as we discussed our fate.

"Our only hope was that I, a twelve-year-old boy, could take my father's place. But I had no idea how to run the business. And I didn't know my father's route and customers. We would all starve if I had to start from scratch.

"As we faced this catastrophe, we heard a moan coming from the corpse on the floor, then saw the flutter of a hand through the shroud. Our father was alive!

"We jumped up and freed him from the shroud, hugging him with tears of joy, but he made it clear to us, with many moans and desperate hand motions, that he had returned for a purpose, and that there was much to be done.

"It was the sabbath, however, and he was forced to wait until Sunday, on the morning of which he insisted on being taken out into the yard, where with

waves of his one good hand he supervised the loading of the wagon, indicated where his customers' orders were written, and showed me how to keep the ledger.

"We set out Monday morning, with my father strapped onto the wagon seat next to me as we went into town, bought what was needed, and set out on my father's route so that I would know where to go and get to know the customers."

Here my host subsided into tears at the memory, and I waited in respectful silence.

"It was the most beautiful week of my life," he was finally able to say. "God had granted my father a reprieve so that he might instruct me, and we spent that week together in His presence.

"Each night I fed my father and undressed him. I bathed his paralyzed body and tucked him in. Then I sat under the stars and prayed to God that he might live beyond this precious week.

"But on Friday afternoon, after we had visited the last customer and started home, my father smiled with the half of his face that could smile, waved the one hand he could wave, and then slumped against me, this time truly dead.

"I stopped the wagon and held his body in my arms. I felt the miracle of his having been sent back to give me the knowledge I needed to support the family. It was his precious love, his will to protect us, that had brought him back to life.

"I vowed then that our little family would celebrate each year our own Hanukkah, in memory of our own eight days of holy light. And so we have ever

since.

"Do you believe in miracles, Dr. Childes?" my host asked abruptly.

"I believe all creation is a miracle," I answered diplomatically.

"Indeed it is," my host said, letting the little ripple of disagreement dissipate.

"But what a wonderful story!" I added, afraid he might think I was belittling what was obviously to him the most significant event of his life.

"Thank you," he said. "As you see, none of us has children, and so our little tradition will end with us. But no matter."

He put out his cigar and rose. "It's a great comfort to believe that everything is by intention. It has, at any rate, vastly enriched my life. But there is much else about which I would like to speak. Perhaps we can have lunch in town?"

"Yes," I said, also rising. "I would like that."

"I have ideas for a hospital I would like to discuss with you."

A hospital! I thought. In Worthington! Vistas suddenly opened for me.

"Shall we join the ladies?" my host asked, raising his arm to usher me to the drawing room.

I nodded and began to leave the library, but not without making sure to cast a glance back at the empty window sill, a motion which my host noticed with a knowing smile.