

EIGHT NIGHTS

By John Speed

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I will tell you what to say.
And I will tell you when to say it.
Lord Meher

• • •

We came to believe
that only a Power
greater than ourselves
could restore us
to sanity.
Step Two

• • •

I tell you this
to break your heart,
by which I mean only
that it break open and never close again
to the rest of the world
Mary Oliver

Night One

*Nes Gadol Hayah Sham. A Great Miracle Happened There.*¹

So we've lit the first candle of Hanukkah. I like the tradition of sitting beside the flame and watching the candle burn down. I like to pass this time by telling my Story.

My Story is the story of Hanukkah. Hanukkah means "Dedication," and the story is of the Great Miracle that happened when the Temple in Jerusalem was defiled, restored, and rededicated in 165 BCE.²

The story of Hanukkah is a big-ass story. It takes me eight nights to tell it. It's tough to squeeze everything in.

It's really a big-ass Story.

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The story of Hanukkah is the greatest story I know, and the Great Miracle we celebrate when we light the lights of Hanukkah is the greatest miracle the world has known.

When I finally understood the Great Miracle, I wept.

And ever since I understood it, even though I'm not a Jew, or even a Christian for that matter, now every year I light the lights of Hanukkah, and sing the blessings, and almost every night I weep. Because when you know the Story, and understand the Miracle, it's such a joyous moment, you almost have to weep.

And now I tell the Story to anyone who will listen. And if I tell it right, and sometimes I do, they weep too.

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I don't know if you are a Christian or a Muslim or a Jew and I don't care. Because whichever you are, we worship the same One Lord of Heaven. We are a kind of family, Children of that Same Father. And the Great Story of Hanukkah is the Miracle of how our family came to be.

This is what the Jews of Israel understood. This is why they created this celebration, almost twenty-two hundred years ago. The only celebration of its kind.

Eight whole days of remembrance. Eight whole days!

Now all the other celebrations of the Jews had been set out by the Lord – with Dire Consequences if the Jews failed to follow through. The Lord of the Jews was big on Dire Consequences.

But Hanukkah was different.

The Jews themselves created Hanukkah, so they faced no Dire Consequences for not observing it. They observed it because they *decided* to, because they *wanted* to, not because they were scared not to.

¹ This phrase is used in the dreidel game children are encouraged to play at Hanukkah. I love that phrase. It's a perfect four-word description of Hanukkah. But I won't be talking about dreidels, or gelt, or any of that other drivel. This is not a book for children.

² This story is about the Jews, so I'm going to use the terms "Before Common Era," abbreviated "BCE," and "Common Era," abbreviated "CE", for dates that are often marked AD and BC. It would be one thing to say "After Jesus" or "Before Jesus" but to say "AD" (or "Anno Domini – in the Year of Our Lord") or "BC" (Before the coming of the Christ) – that's really a thumb in the collective Jewish eye to start with, and has no place at all in book that is telling a history of the Jews.

I've also become unexpectedly sensitive to another Jewish tradition. Many observant Jews are concerned that a copy of the typical three-letter name for the deity might get disrespectfully tossed in the trash. Those Jews therefore write that name as "G-D", leaving out the "O". I find myself feeling oddly sympathetic with this notion, but I don't like typing G-D. There are other respectful names for the deity, however, so I will use those instead.

The Jews themselves decided that the Great Miracle was of such importance that they wanted always to remember. They decided on their own forever to dedicate eight entire days of every year to remembering. They swore of their own free will that they would forever gather their families together, and forever sing blessings, and forever recall that moment when the world changed for them -- and in truth for all mankind.

They lit lights for eight nights, outdoors or in windows, very visibly, so everyone could see. Everyone should see; everyone should know – because this Miracle was not just about Jews, it was about everyone. The Jews created this celebration and this method of celebrating because they wanted everyone to know about the Miracle. They promised to keep this celebration as important as their most sacred ancient rituals.

And they have kept that promise for twenty-two hundred years. They have kept that promise to this day.

It is because of their faithfulness to that promise that I have come to know of the Great Miracle, whose wonder touches my heart. I bow to them in gratitude. Thank you faithful Jews!³

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Now, you may have heard Hanukkah called the miracle of the lights or the miracle of the oil or some such thing.

And this, you see, is because over the course of time, something got a little confused.

When the Great Miracle occurred, it arrived with a miraculous sign: A bottle of consecrated oil that should have burned for a single day burned for eight days.

But, come on, who are we kidding? You call that a miracle? It's certainly not worth spending eight full days remembering. The Tanakh -- the Jewish Bible, the Old Testament -- has a ton of far more impressive miracles that aren't celebrated at all:

Men raised from the dead, hundreds fed with a single loaf of bread, men living unburned in a furnace, the sun going backwards, water flowing from a rock: those are some big honking miracles, but the Jews didn't feel that any of them rated even a single day's celebration.

But Hanukkah has been celebrated, not for one day, but for eight full days, for twenty-two hundred years.⁴ Faithful Jews passed the lights of Hanukkah from hand to hand – thousands of pairs of hands have passed those lights to us.

Do you really think a bottle of Miracle Oil would merit such faithfulness?⁵

No. Only a Great Miracle would merit it. What seems to me to be the Greatest of Miracles.

But at some point over the last twenty-two centuries, the Great Miracle, sadly, came to be confused with its miraculous sign, the oil.

That's a shame, I think. But maybe, when you hear the Story, you won't confuse the Miracle and the sign. Maybe you'll understand the Miracle.

Maybe you'll understand why I light the Hanukkah lights.

Maybe you too will light the lights with me and weep.

³ It would be nice for you to say "thank you" too, at this point, even you don't know enough to mean it yet.

⁴ That's more than 18,400 nights.

⁵ Also I've had some people explain to me that Hanukkah is meant to celebrate some sort of miraculous Israeli victory. Puh-lease. If you want to celebrate a miraculous victory, celebrate the Six-Day War. Judas Macabee's victory over a minor, tired Seleucid general who really just wanted to go home to Antioch doesn't hold a candle to Moishe Dayan's. So to speak.

• • •

Now, how odd is it that I'm the one telling this story and weeping? I'm not a Jew. I'm not a Christian. And yet here I am, tears in my eyes, the one telling you the Story. Why me? Why isn't a Jew or a Christian telling this story?

Well, Jews don't know it. Sorry, Jews, but you really don't. The story of Hanukkah is told in a couple of Bible books, Macabbees I and Maccabbees II, and neither of these Bible books is in the *Tanakh*, the Jewish Bible.

See, the canon of the Tanakh got frozen a few years before those books were written. The only place you can find those two books now is in *Catholic Bibles*. How weird is that?

In the Catholic Bible, those two books have been squeezed between the Old Testament and the New Testament, along with a five other books written by the Jews in the 165 years between the first Hanukkah and the birth of Jesus.

So if you're a Jew, and want to read the story of the Macabbees and the re-dedication of the Temple, the basis for one of the most important celebrations in Judaism, that's what you need to find: a Catholic Bible.

I personally guarantee that no Jew you know has ever read either of those books. No Jews have them in their libraries, except for a few rabbis maybe, and not many of those.

Of course no Christian has ever read them either.⁶

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Nobody knows this story. And anyone who starts looking into it, frankly, starts getting bewildered. Really fast. His (or her) mind starts doing pinwheels. People today just don't have the Background for it anymore. When it comes to Old Testament history, people these days, if you don't mind my saying, are a pretty ignorant bunch.⁷

But you see, the people who wrote these books – and the persons that would read them – were Learned Men.⁸ They knew the Background – not just the history of the Old Testament, but the history of the Greeks, and Egyptians and the Babylonians and the Persians. They knew about the death of Alexander the Great and the division of the World into Four Kingdoms.

They knew about the rise and fall of the kings of Judah, and the founding and destruction of Solomon's Temple. They knew about the fire of the Lord, Shekinah – how it fell from the sky and walked across the Temple courtyard. They knew about the Lost Ark of the Covenant and the column of smoke by day and column of fire by night that rose out of it, and how it led the Exodus Jews through the wilderness for forty years.

They knew about the Mercy Seat, and apparition of the Face of the Lord, and the High Priest, and the Jew's yearly goat sacrifice made to the demon Azazel who lived in the desert, and about the Blood of the Red Heifer, and about the Tumors Made of Solid Gold.

⁶ Oh, you noticed that I exaggerate? Yes, these statement exaggerations, but they're still true. I like these lines from "Sleepless in Seattle."

Keith: It's easier to be killed by a terrorist than it is to find a husband over the age of 40!

Annie: That is not true. That statistic is not true.

Becky: It's not true, but it feels true.

Keith: It feels true because it *is* true.

⁷ Actually, people are pretty ignorant about a lot of things, but that's going to have to be a subject for a different book.

⁸ Barbra Streisand had not yet broken the gender barrier.

If you knew the Background, when you heard even the bare bones of the Great Story, you would Get It. And for hundreds of years, and hundreds of generations – the Jews tacitly passed along the Background along with Story, so of course, they Got It.

The writers of the Macabbees books: they knew the Background, and everyone who read their words knew The Background, so nobody bothered to make a big deal about explaining it in the text.⁹

But without The Background, the Story is pretty skimpy in the Deep Meaning Department.

Now it used to be that the only school was a yeshiva, and the only books were the Tanakh or the Talmud: and then suddenly along came Bronx Science High School and The Catcher in the Rye. That made it tough for the Background to compete. The Background began to fade.

I think, as The Background began to fade, instead of Getting It, everybody Forgot It.

Without The Background, you don't get the Great Miracle – you only get the Sign – the slow-burning oil.

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If you don't get the Great Miracle that makes your heart crack open, if all you know about it is the Sign – it's no wonder nobody anymore gives a great big shit about Hanukkah. No wonder that nobody can figure out why the Jews made it the most important celebration of the year.

As the Background – the oral Tradition – has faded, it's gotten to the point that even Jews don't seem really to care about Hanukkah any more.

Most rabbis -- if you press them about Hanukkah, about why it's celebrated for eight nights, about its importance in the Jewish calendar -- most rabbis will frown a little, sort of indulgently, and tell you Hanukkah isn't really mentioned in the Bible, that it's not really an "official" celebration or some such. And if you press them to explain why in spite of that Hanukkah has still been so consistently, faithfully, enduringly remembered, you'll probably get the palms-up frown-shrug.

Hanukkah has come to be a kind of red-haired stepson of religious holidays, a slightly pathetic Christmas wannabe. Something for the kiddies. Here comes Hanukkah Harry. One of the worst days of my life was when I Googled "Least important Jewish holiday" and "Hanukkah" came up as the first 10 hits.

But the great ancient book of Jewish law and tradition, the Talmud, says that "kindling the lights of Hanukkah takes precedence over reciting Kiddush with wine on Shabbat." "Even if one is so poor that he has nothing to eat except for what he takes from charity, he should borrow money or sell his clothing in order to buy oil and candles to light." And if you bother to look into it further, the Talmud explains why.

That's what I mean to tell you. Why Hanukkah is for grownups, not children. Why Hanukkah should be of central importance to Muslims and Christians as well as Jews. Why all of them – all of us -- should celebrate that Great Miracle. Why we all share this Story.

• • •

And so it's come to this: now you have this non-Jew, non-Christian, non-credentialed, sinful, unworthy man telling you the Story.¹⁰

⁹ Ironically, those same writers were entirely aware that there was a vast Oral Tradition among the Jews that was fading quickly, and they had just begun to write down whatever they could as fast as they could: their vast records of the "unwritten Torah" became the basis for the second great book of Judaism, the Talmud.

I'm sorry it's me doing it...I really am...but I know The Background of the Great Miracle, and hardly anyone else these days seems to. I'm certain that if the Miracle could have found anybody else – ANYBODY – who knew The Background and knew how to write about it, there'd be a different author.

• • •

With religious stories, there's always an agenda. But I'm telling you up front: I have no agenda. I'm not a rabbi or a minister or imam. I don't care what you believe. I'm not out to change you, or even change your mind.

Except for this: the Miracle of Hanukkah is a Great Gift, one that anyone might reach out and take. And it may be that when you hear about it that you'll want to take it for your own, as I did.

But I don't care if you reach for it or if you don't. I just want you to know that you *might*.

It's your funeral either way.

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Tonight, on our first Hanukkah night, we're going to talk about the ancient Jews, the Jews as they were before Moses appeared and changed everything.

I'm going to tell you this story my way, so what you hear might be different than you expect, particularly if you've heard bits and pieces of this story before, like in a church or temple.

Who am I kidding with "might be different." I guarantee it's going to be different.¹¹

And why? Because anything you've heard before was told with an agenda. And, like I said, I don't have an agenda.

Even the Bible itself, which is the major source for much of this story, has an agenda. Lots of agendas.

The Bible – at least the Old Testament – wasn't written as a tool of evangelism. As you'll see, up until recently, you couldn't be a Jew unless you were a blood relative with another Jew. So the Tanakh, the

¹⁰ My forebears came from Dachau, Germany. My great-uncle and his children were Nazis.

But my great-grandfather was a German Lutheran Reformed minister who left Germany as the Nazis came to power. My grandfather and father also were German-speaking Reformed ministers.

I was reading at two, and my first books were Old Testament picture books, and Old Testament story books and the Bible were my main home reading material until I was a teen.

I used to think this focus on Old Testament Bible Study was just weird shit my minister father did. Now I think it was some sort of strange guilt/expiation trip because of our Nazi relatives. Also I believe in reincarnation. I've been told by one who should know that I was a Nazi-murdered Jew. My own feelings, however, tell me that I was one of the Nazi Jew murderers.

Anyway, I know the Old Testament inside out. I thought everybody did, and I'm still surprised to find out that everybody doesn't.

¹¹ Now I'm only going to apologize once, and I promise you I mean this sincerely: I'm sorry. My tone has been called cheeky, bossy, angsty, smug, supercilious, arch, impudent, snotty, know-it-all and pompous – words from actual critiques, not from a thesaurus, and those are from the *favorable* critiques. My own wife called my tone *obnoxious* – my wife who I *sleep* with! So if you can't stand the tone, just put this book down right now because it only gets worse. Or decide it is what the hell it is, and you're going to get the hell over it. I'm sorry, but that's how it is. I say unto you, as the Lord said unto Moses: I am what I am (or, as we'll discuss in a few pages, words to that effect).

Or, if you can't get over it but still want to read the book, take out a pencil and a piece of paper now and as you read mark down how many times you're offended, and when you're done, go to my website, go to the "I was offended" page, and I will apologize for every time I offended you.

Old Testament Jewish Bible, wasn't designed to convert you to Judaism, but it is nevertheless crammed with political and social agendas.

This is why some passages are so confusing. Chapter one says do this. Immediately after, Chapter two says: do the other. Sometimes, no one could decide between the two agendas, so the Bible authors included them both.

It helps to remember that the Bible wasn't written in a single flow of words. It was assembled over time, by People Who Wanted to Make a Point. If you realize that whole big chunks of the Bible were written with an agenda and then those agenda-filled chunks got arranged later, and assembled yet later into the pages of what turned out to be the Bible, it changes your understanding.

But like I said, I have no agenda.

• • •

(No, that's not true. I've since thought about this, and I have to admit that I do have an agenda.

I want you to love this story. I want you to love your ancient ancestors, and to love your true, imperfect, glorious heritage.

I want you to love the Lord.)

• • •

The Story of the Great Miracle of Hanukkah is intimately involved with the story of the Jews.

And the story of the Jews begins about forty-eight hundred years ago, with some guy, and some god.

Just like in our time, there were a lot of guys in those days, forty-eight hundred years ago. Not as many as in our time maybe, but a lot. There were also a lot of gods. This story starts with one of each.

The guy was some guy named Abram. The god didn't have a name. Not yet.

And gods of other cultures had names: Nut, Osiris, Marduk, Ba'al, whatever. This particular god didn't even have a name. Or to be more precise, He did have a name, but he kept it too Himself. He kept it secret for a long long time.

Also this god had no form. Don't ask me why. Most gods had a form. Gods of all the other desert cultures – gods of every other culture ever until then, I think -- had a form: animals mostly, Bulls, Lions, Jackals, all the inevitable human/animal combinations.

But this particular god had no form. Even at his most imposing, he never had a form. He was everywhere and nowhere. This is a big important thing to remember: Formless.

But probably most important to this story, unlike the gods of other desert cultures, this god didn't have anyone that worshipped him. This god was sort of a lone wolf. An orphan.

Nobody was making idols of this god because he didn't have a form. And nobody was calling out his name because he didn't have one.

This nameless, formless god was sort of a stray.

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The secret name of this god plays a big part in the story of the Jews.

A few centuries later, this god finally got around to revealing his name to Moses, but since the Hebrew alphabet doesn't have vowels, all that got recorded were the consonants: YWYH – and Bible translators have transcribed that name as *Yahweh*, or as the anglicized *Jehovah*.¹²

¹² These letters form the Tetragrammaton. Tetra=four; grammaton=letters – YWYH. A big deal to the Jews of the time, as we'll see, and something that still shows up when the Hollywood Kaballahistas get together. It sometimes shows up as clue in the Times crosswords.

To me, a bunch of consonants isn't a name. But what do I know?

In Hebrew,¹³ the consonants YHWH provides the framework of a sentence, with wildly different meanings depending on the vowels you insert: YHWH might be translated "I am what I am" or "I will be what I will be" or "I was what I was" or "I might have been what I should be" or "I could be what I ought to have been," or any other variation you can think of.

With the True Vowels, YHWH formed a Meaningful Sentence: the True Secret Name of the Lord

The Secret Name was passed from Moses, who heard it from the deity, to the first High Priest (who, handily, was Moses' brother Aaron), and from Aaron to the next High Priest, and on and on for generations. Eventually, the succession failed, and the Secret Name was lost.

The Secret Name had power. Josephus – a Roman Jew who wrote a history of the Jews – wrote that Jesus could do his miracles because he had somehow stumbled across the Secret Name.

The Secret Name was so powerful that the Jews feared to say it aloud, even by mistake. So instead when they wrote about their god, they used the word "Adonai," or Lord. But they feared even to say *that* name aloud, and so, when they spoke about Him, they said instead "Hashem," which means The Name.

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This nameless, formless god, of course, was going to turn out to be the god of the Jews. The Lord of Hosts. The King of the Universe. But right now there were no Jews. And right now this god was not much more, as we'll see, than a sort of disembodied voice.

Honestly, I'm not kidding when I say this: when I think about this god at this exact point in His history, He seems so lost and pathetic, I honestly feel a little sorry for Him.

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It's pretty clear that at this time, Abram was nothing special either. He was just some guy. He could have been anybody.

Abram was the great-great-great-great-great-great-grandson of Noah. But if you believe the story of the flood,¹⁴ then you realize that practically everybody at that time had to be Noah's great-great-great-great-great-great-grandchild.

After the Flood, Hashem sort of mysteriously disappeared from history. He had disappeared for about a thousand years. Nobody had heard a peep out of him.

All of a sudden, this god once again decided to make his presence known. (Since he had no form, and frankly, he only seemed able to do things like make it rain a lot, and so on, I really wonder if he'd been like shouting and waving for a long while before this, but that it took this long before somebody sort of noticed that he was trying to attract attention.)

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There's no record of what Abram saw. All that's recorded is that he heard a voice. Aside from weather changes, that's actually the only real manifestation there was of this god, for a long time: just a Disembodied Voice.

¹³ I don't speak Hebrew.

¹⁴ Do I believe in Noah and flood? Do you? You're going to have to get used to hearing about people believing a lot of things we don't believe any more. As you hear me recount these tales, I offer this advice: just listen with an open mind. Accept the truths that I and these ancient storytellers tell you at face value.

Columbus, for example, was no liar and no idiot. His truth – that he'd found the East Indies – is different than our truth – that he'd found the Bahamas. Both versions were true, and both had important personal and world-affecting consequences. The Old Testament authors weren't liars or idiots either.

First the Disembodied Voice told Abram to go to one place. Abram obeyed. Then the Disembodied Voice told him to go to another place. Abram again obeyed. Then, apparently, encouraged by these successful orders for Abram to go Hither and Yon, the Disembodied Voice followed up with a very specific, and for my money, rather unexpected proposal.

Hashem, the Disembodied Voice, offered to cut a long-term Deal. It was a package deal, and it was quite a package:

Hashem, it turns out, wanted to be worshipped.¹⁵ He wanted sacrifices. And he had this thing about foreskins.¹⁶ If Abram would cut off his foreskin, and if his descendants would cut off *their* foreskins, Hashem said, and if Abram and his descendants would make regular sacrifices, Hashem would give Abram lots and lots of descendants, and in time He would give those descendants a country of their very own.

On behalf of his unborn descendants, Abram accepted Hashem's terms. With a quick snip, He and Hashem cut this deal.

This was the Covenant.

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Throughout the Bible, Old Testament and New, and later in poetry, and in prose, and up to this very day on the lips of TV evangelists, you'll come across references to this forty-eight hundred year old Covenant.

They're referring to this exact moment. When Abram and Hashem cut their deal.

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You've probably got at least some vague inkling about this Covenant. All your life you've heard bits and pieces of this huge and wonderful tapestry of a story that started with this deal. Words and images that have gone in one ear, picked up speed, and out the other.

No one ever showed you how the pieces fit together. No one showed you how your life is connected, thread by thread, to this astonishing moment in history.

Remember when your grandmother took down that musty-smelling scrapbook and forced you to sit on the sofa beside her. How she pointed to pictures of stern, vacant-eyed relatives. Maybe you'd heard their names in conversation: people your elders spoke of that you had never met.

And how your Nana pointed out the pictures, putting faces to the names: Uncle Seth with the angry eyes, who moved to France before the Great War and was never heard from again. Clara, the Suffragette who died giving birth to your Aunt Lucy. Those old faces, that looked oddly familiar. Because you'd seen them before, in the faces of your relatives; in your own face when you looked in a mirror.

Sure, you've forgotten them all by this point. But at least she showed you the web of your heritage. At least you then knew that your family originally came from Estonia, or Nairobi, or County Cork.

What I'm doing now is sitting beside you like your Nana, telling you the story of your ancient ancestors, and the Great Miracle that happened to them. This story is their story. This story is your story.

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Yes, this is *your* story I'm telling. I don't care if you're a Muslim or a Christian or Jew. Abram is your grandfather.

Hashem is your god.

¹⁵ A few centuries later, when He was carving the Ten Commandments into stone with his Finger of Flame, his very first words were that He was a jealous god, and you know, I believe him. I think he *was* jealous of all the attention those dog-headed lion-gods and idols and what-not had been getting from everybody for all those years.

¹⁶ You can write your own foreskin jokes, if you feel the need. I'm not even going to go there.

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Stories have to begin somewhere. The storyteller picks an arbitrary point and begins to speak.

This is where I choose to begin the story of Hanukkah. With the Covenant, the deal between Abram and Hashem.

That's where the Great Story begins.

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Anyway: Hashem offered the deal, and Abram signed up. Who's going to say no to Hashem?

Hashem then changed Abram's name to Abraham and his wife's name from Sarai to Sarah. You might have noticed a pattern: names were a big deal in those days.

Abraham and his wife were in their seventies, but Hashem promised that Sarah would get pregnant and bear a son. Which she did: Isaac, that first son of Sarah, was the first Jew, circumcised as promised eight days after his birth.

That must have been quite a moment. "Hon, bring me that knife, will you? The sharp one? I got a thing I've got to do with this baby."

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Like I said, the Covenant began about forty-eight hundred years ago. That's a pretty long time. Let's talk about what those Ancient Jews were like, forty-eight hundred years ago.

You probably have some ideas about Jews. Those ideas, whatever they are, have nothing to do with those forty-eight hundred-year-old Ancient Jews.

So just drop everything you think you know. The Jews of that time were nothing like the Jews of today, or the Jews of Hanukkah times, or the Jews of King David's time, or Moses'. They certainly have nothing to do with the Jews of our own time.

Those Ancient Jews were just a Bunch of Guys With Nothing In Common with any other Jews except (1) they could all trace their lineage back to Sarah, and (2) they didn't have foreskins.

Like I said, you've got to forget what you think you know. Those Ancient Jews didn't believe a tenth of the stuff later Jews believed.

They didn't believe in Heaven or Hell. They didn't believe in any afterlife at all. Which, like their formless nameless god, was something very different from other religions. Almost all of those religions believed in some sort of afterlife: usually a dark shadowy place underground where souls went after death. For most cultures, the afterlife was a lot like regular life except that being underground, it was a lot harder to see.

I guess you might interpret this lack of belief in an afterlife as a lack of a belief in an immortal soul. Which it is.

Which to me is pretty shocking. The Ancient Jews did not believe in an immortal soul. Allow me to add some exclamation points. !!!!!!!

Usually, for some reason, about this time someone pipes up and asks me if the Jews believed in angels. I guess because I mention dead people and souls, and a lot of people these days think a dead person's soul becomes an angel, like in "It's a Wonderful Life."

Well, obviously, they didn't believe in *that* kind of angel. Did they believe in *any* kind?

Well, not at this point, not those Ancient Jews. At least not like we think of angels today. In fact, Jews didn't start believing in angels until about 1500 years after Abraham. I can pretty much pinpoint the exact day the Jews began to believe in angels, and I promise I'll tell you about that day later. That was quite a day. I can't wait to tell you about that day. But like most of this story, you need to know a lot more stuff to understand that day's significance.

No, these Ancient Jews didn't believe in angels. The King James Bible translators used the word "angel" for the Hebrew word "malak" – messenger. And "malak" appears quite often in the Old Testament, and the translators' use of the word "angel" got picked up by most of the subsequent translations. More's the pity.

Malaks weren't angels. Let me tell you about malaks.

The words of Hashem are imparted by these malaks – but while these malaks/messengers seem to have some sort of ghostly physical presence, their physical attributes are never described. They're like some sort of vaguely embodied voice. Malaks simply "appear." Jacob's Ladder, for example – a vision that appeared to Jacob, Abraham's grandson -- is of malaks walking up and down a kind stairway that led from heaven to earth. Later Jacob wrestled with a malak who had the form of two disembodied arms. I have no idea what to make of malaks, except I can tell you they're not like any angels as we imagine them today, with wings and robes and flowing hair, and so on. Angels like those *do* show up in my Story later, big time, but much much later.

Now what the Ancient Jews *did* believe in was *cherubs*. Oh good lord, cherubs. Cherubs are a Big Honking Deal in the Old Testament.

Cherubs aren't those cute little babies with pink wings.

Old Testament cherubs are often called "guardian angels." I don't know who made up that misleading name. Cherubs were not the hell those sweet little cartoon halo angels who sit on your shoulder and whisper in your ear to guide you away from dubious actions.

Cherubs were guardians the way Sherman Tanks are guardians. Cherubs were fucking monsters.

Cherubs were huge scary creatures: a lion's body and a human head. Think the Great Sphinx: like that. And that big – like it takes eight minutes to walk around the Sphinx, and the Sphinx's forepaws are three times as tall as you are – that's how big the cherubs were.

Sometimes the cherub's head had four faces: a lion, an ox, an eagle, and a man's. Also they had gigantic multicolored wings. And they had swords, great big honking swords, usually alive with flame.

When Adam and Eve got driven out of Eden, Hashem sent a cherub to do the driving. You'd flee too.

Hashem may have been formless, but He made damn certain that his guarding got done by big scary extremely visible critters.

I bring this up because cherubs show up all over the place in this Story. And cherub lore worked its way into Christian figures too: the lion, eagle, ox and man became the symbols of the Evangelists, the Gospel authors. And did you ever wonder why you'll find a painting of a lion, ox, man and eagle painted on the corner walls of European cathedrals? To suggest that the cathedral is a sort of an embodiment of a cherub, that the cathedral itself is a guardian angel.

The Jews believed in cherubs. But for 1500 years, they didn't believe in angels.¹⁷

¹⁷ And at *this* point someone always pipes up and asks: What about Seraphim?

Well, Seraphs, the *seraphim*, were snakes. Firey, poisonous snakes.

They first show up when the Jews followed Moses out of Egypt. As they walked through the desert, a lot of Jews were bitten and killed by those fiery, poisonous snakes.

So the Jews didn't exactly need to *believe* in seraphim, not like someone believes in angels, because seraphim were quite literally biting them in the ass.

2200 years later, Isaiah had a vision of the Lord of Hosts on his Heavenly Throne surrounded by gigantic flying, fiery winged snakes. In other words, he described *dragons*. Somewhere along the line, those heavenly dragons started to get depicted as winged men.

But at this point, they did believe in Demons. They believed that demons roamed the earth. Those Jews lived in the desert, and they believed that demons lived next door. I don't know what the hell the Jews imagined demons looked exactly, but I know they believed in them.

Those Jews believed that the main reason Hashem sent the Great Flood, Noah's flood, was to get rid of some of those nasty demons. "There were Giants in the earth in those days." Not so much after the flood: Hashem did a good job drowning them.

Not a perfect job though, apparently at least one of the demons survived: Azazel, a demon who lived in the desert. Azazel shows up later in a major starring role.

Azazel was a kind of Jewish version of Prometheus. Prometheus brought fire to man. Azazel, however – I totally love this – didn't bring fire. Instead, he brought the secret of making weapons. How to make weapons -- and how to make cosmetics.

Yes, cosmetics. Swords and eye shadow, stolen from Heaven and brought to earth by a demon.

• • •

Now those ancient Jews, the offspring of Sarah, were more or less rudderless when it came to understanding how to worship Hashem.

They had no defined rituals (unless you consider foreskin removal a ritual. But they didn't have specific words to say when they did it, like at a baptism or wedding).

They had no priests. They had no Holy Books. They had no Sabbath. They had no Law.

When I say no law, I mean it. You know about the Ten Commandments, I'm sure. Those hadn't been thought up yet. The Ancient Jews weren't resting on the Sabbath. Nobody had gotten around to asking them to.

All they knew that they were supposed to do was to offer sacrifices. Sacrifices meant burning something. Not dedication, or intent, or giving something up. Burning. Burning something until smoke comes out. Giving something up to the deity, transforming it by flame into smoke.

Hashem loved him his sacrifices. Hashem loved the smoke.

So the Ancient Jews tried to please Hashem by burning stuff. They did this as individuals, or as a families or as tribes. It was very ad hoc: Any time, anywhere: They'd just build a fire wherever they happened to be and throw stuff on it.

Now why were they doing this? Because they wanted to stay on Hashem's good side.

Pay attention here:

The Ancient Jews (and the later Jews, too) believed that Hashem would be nice to the people he liked and nasty to the people he didn't like, and since they didn't believe in an afterlife, they believed that Hashem would do whatever the hell He was going to do them in *this* life: which meant, if Hashem liked you, your life was going to be a breeze, and if He didn't like you, you were fucked.

These ancient Jews saw the evidence everywhere. They could just look around and do the math. There's Tommy: sick, poor, and sad. Why? Hashem doesn't like him. There's Bobby: rich, healthy and happy. Why? Hashem likes him.

And about the only thing they knew for sure was that Hashem liked best was sheep smoke.

They believed this because they believed this One Important Story, one of their oldest stories: You've probably heard it too: you probably even know the names of the characters -- Cain and his younger brother Abel, the first children of Adam and Eve.

Well, the story goes that Cain and Abel both burned stuff for Hashem. Cain and Abel made the Very First Sacrifices, Ever.

Abel was a shepherd so he burned some sheep flesh and sheep fat. Cain was a farmer so he had a Vegan sacrifice. Hashem liked the sheep smoke, but the vegan smoke not so much. Cain got so jealous he went and killed Abel.¹⁸

So Cain scored a lot of Firsts. He was the First Child, the First Brother, and the First Murderer.

From this story, the Ancient Jews came to believe that Hashem most of all loved meat smoke, particularly sheep smoke.¹⁹ Later they came to believe He also loved the smoke of fragrant resins, like frankincense.

Even so, you could never tell for sure. One guy might get rich and healthy sacrificing sheep, while another might get sick and die poor.

Hashem, silent and mysterious, was like a high-maintenance, passive-aggressive spouse. You'd do something you hoped He would like, and for no particular or obvious reason, He'd respond by making you sick and poor. You'd try again! You would try practically anything! You'd bend over backwards! You never knew how He would respond! What the fuck did He want anyway?²⁰

• • •

A couple of other things: the Jews were just a big extended family. Tribes. Some of them farmers and lot of them shepherds. They all lived in some rough ragged land near Gaza. They had no country to call their own. They were constantly running away from bigger and stronger tribes. There had no over-arching hierarchy that ruled all the tribes, no one person to guide the whole people, no king. So, for sure, no army.

So those Jews were easy pickings for any country that was organized, that had a king, and an army and weapons.

In those days, when a king wanted something done, like building a pyramid for example, he'd just round up a bunch of Jews and make them slaves.

Which is how all the Jews ended up in Egypt.

• • •

Well I'm not going to tell the whole story of the Exodus tonight. It's just too huge. But I do want to talk about some highlights, which have some real relevance to our Story, the story of Hanukkah.

OK: Jews taken as slaves to Egypt. Building the pyramids, etc. Nasty, nasty. Lots of whips.

And for 350 years, as the Jews suffered this horrible fate – and believe me, I can't imagine any fate more horrible than being an Egyptian slave, building Pyramids and what not, for 350 years – Hashem *simply disappears*.

Hashem -- who previously at least shows up in dreams, or says something as a disembodied voice, or sends a malak or a pair of wrestling arms out of thin air or some damn thing -- now, when his Chosen, Foreskinless People are really the hell in Dire Need, is nowhere to be found, leaving them to pick up the check.

¹⁸ This makes me even more wary of the whole vegan thing, but that's up to you.

¹⁹ But I think it's worth pointing out that in this core proto-myth, so basic and sacred to the People of the Book, that about ten minutes after Abel made The Sacrifice That Pleases The Lord, the King of the Universe, Abel gets killed by his own brother, Cain.

I know that, officially, "correlation does not prove causation," but honestly, those of us with unsophisticated minds sometimes wonder.

²⁰ When I think about Hashem in those days, the image that comes to mind is of Tony Soprano's passive-aggressive mother.

But through those 350 years of enslavement, though, the Jews, bless their hearts, stayed faithful to the Covenant. And here's the thing:

Hashem hadn't left the building. He was backstage, preparing the next act. And it was going to be a big honking Las Vegas Spectacular.

• • •

Like all great second act spectacles, it started quiet.

After 350 horrible years, the curtain goes up: Moses, a baby secretly born to a Jew, is hidden in a basket in a swamp, adopted by a princess and nursed by the secret Mom, grows up, kills a slavemaster, runs away, lives among Jews as a shepherd. And then:

MOSES HEARS THE VOICE OF HASHEM FROM A BURNING BUSH.

• • •

Yes, that's all in capital letters, though the voice was quiet and the flames were gentle. And just to make sure we get we know it's a Big Deal, here are some exclamation points: !!!!!

A bush that burns, but is not consumed by the flame.

Hashem manifesting as flame is a motif that repeats throughout the Old Testament, and this is where that image first appears.

Now the Jews eventually, much later, gave a name to this flame, this Presence of the Lord: they called it *Shekinah*. And *Shekinah* had two interesting facets worth mentioning now.

First, *Shekinah* is a feminine noun: The Presence of the Lord is Female.

And second is: She appears as flame.

And she shows up quite often, it turns out, as the story progresses. But this, the Burning Bush, is her first appearance.

So Hashem tells Moses to go to Pharaoh, say "Let my people go," etc. What does Moses do? He argues.

Earlier, I asked, rhetorically "Who's going to say no to Hashem?" Well, Moses, for one. No way, he answers. And the argument goes on for some time. It even starts to look like Moses is going to win.

Which makes me wonder: How many guys did Hashem go to first before he settled on Moses – how many times did He lose the argument and need to look elsewhere?

Anyway, Moses finally gives in, and gets his marching orders, and goes to Pharaoh and says "Let my people go, etc., etc."

But Pharaoh just sits there, all Yul Brynner-y, and he doesn't. Anything seem odd to you about that?

One of the reasons I'm telling this story as a story, instead of (as I originally intended) as an historical novel, is that it turns out that the main character is the Lord of Hosts Himself, and the Lord of Hosts is a troublesome character. Trust me, it's a bitch to have Hashem as a main character. You try writing His dialog if you don't believe me. (Other troublesome principal characters include the Temple and City of Jerusalem. Again, their dialog is a bitch.)

But if you think about Hashem as a character, as I have done practically nonstop for the past nine years, His interactions with Pharaoh via Moses are about as loopy as anything I have ever run across. If I wrote it as fiction, nobody would willingly suspend disbelief.

I mean: here's Hashem, the Lord of All Creation. And within a few days, He's going to bring all sorts of nasty shit down on Egypt: First by changing the water of the Nile to blood, which is nasty enough to start, but then the whole blood thing also kills all the fish in the Nile, and they go belly up, and rot, and stink up the place.

And then he sends down plagues of

- Frogs
- Gnats
- Flies
- Pestilence
- Boils (boils show up a lot in the Old Testament)
- Hail
- And Locusts

all of which completely overwhelm the whole country. And even the Jews, the chosen people, the ones on whose behalf all this nastiness was being done, would be affected by these things. You think the Jews didn't smell the stink of the rotten fish? So He's making the Jews suffer too. And what had the Jews done to deserve this?

Then he covers Egypt in Total Darkness. Total Darkness. That is seriously omnipotent. You cannot deny the Power of a god who can blot out the sun.

But, here's the thing: All this nasty ugly stuff (a) demonstrates all sorts of omnipotence and (b) doesn't move the ball a goddam inch.

How can it be that Hashem, with the power to do all this nasty, can't figure out how to just flip some sort of psychic switch and just change Pharaoh's mind? Or maybe give him a heart attack or something? Or simply make the word "OK" come out of his lips?

Well, to me that's a very bizarre and therefore very interesting item to consider.

At this point in the story, All-Powerful Hashem isn't actually all that omnipotent. He's simply a kind of a Nature God: strong with the locusts, weak with the people skills.

In fact (this is the author in me speaking) Hashem is a Developing Character. And at this point in the Old Testament, He's almost childlike. Throwing tantrums, making a big fuss, wrecking things, making everybody feel bad, but not getting his way.

• • •

Now the final plague: Hashem kills every firstborn child in Egypt.

That is seriously harsh.

But once more, not without some loopy elements.

Hashem instructs the Jews to mark their doorways with the blood of a lamb. Hashem will pass over the doors so marked and not "suffer the Destroyer to come into your houses and smite you."

This is what Passover is about: the night when death came through Egypt, and passed over the Jews.

• • •

It's a wonderful story, and I hope you'll go to a seder sometime and spend the day thinking about it. For now, I want you to stick close me; we're going to take some side roads.

I love The Destroyer. I'd LOVE to go down that road: who's the Destroyer? Shiva, maybe? But instead, let's just remember this passage, about the Blood of the Lamb. We'll come back to it later.

Also, can we talk about this? What, Hashem, the Lord of Creation, can't figure out on his Omniscient Own which houses to avoid? His Destroyer has to go from door to door, sniffing for the lamb's blood?

It's just goofy.

• • •

Now please: this is important. It's important to me that you understand the wise-ass way I'm telling this story.

When I say: “Hashem is throwing a tantrum” or that it was “goofy” that Hashem needed lamb’s blood to direct his deadly efforts, I mean no disrespect. Au contraire.

I know how typical it is for atheists or college sophomores to make fun of religious beliefs by pointing out their contradictions and absurdities.

I am not making fun of this Great Story.

Earlier I mentioned how Moses argued with Hashem, and asked what kind of man would do that. I’ll tell you: a man who was uncertain about the Voice that spoke to him. A man who doubted. A man who doubted himself, and because he doubted himself was unable to trust the Lord’s voice.

A man no different from me, for example. Maybe no different from you.

When I say that this Great Story is my story, I am telling you the truth.

And when I talk about the absurdities or contradictions of this story, I discuss them because I love them. The absurdities and contradictions *are* the story, and they are *why* I love the story. They unfold for me the nature of the Lord, and of mankind.

The great Hassidic rabbi Rebbe Nachman of Breslov speaks often about how Hashem gives us “hints.” This Story is full of hints: about the nature of Hashem, and the nature of people, and our relationship to the divine, and how that relationship changed again and again, until the Great Miracle occurred. And it hints as well as how it continues to change in our own time.

The Lord made me a wise-ass. I have learned that I cannot overcome my nature. So if, as I truly believe, the Lord has charged me to tell this story, I think He must also want it told with my wise-ass tone. Too bad for you.

How many times have I wished that I were a better writer. That I were a better man. But just as Hashem pulled a name out of his hat to father his chosen people, just as he chose a weak, argumentative man to lead the Jewish slaves from their Egyptian captors, so too for some goddam reason, he chose a wise-ass to tell the Story of the Great Miracle.

But this Story – my Story, *your* Story – is full of Hints. And if it takes a wise-ass to point them out, then I guess I’m just the guy to do it.

• • •

Every year, Jews gather together to re-enact the meal they ate on that terrible, frightening night. The slaves of Egypt, packed up and ready to go, with their unleavened bread because they didn’t know the moment of departure, and they needed food for the journey, and they couldn’t wait around for the dough to rise. They would need to move fast when the moment came.

And they did: Pharaoh had barely given permission for them to depart before he rescinded it and sent his chariots after them to bring them back, or kill them.

Our ancestors²¹ were terrified, but they were brave.

And I’m not going to make fun of that.

• • •

By the way, here’s an interesting fact or two:

Passover didn’t used to be a solemn holiday. It used to be a rowdy, drunken feast day. Even when Jerusalem was under Roman rule, the Romans complained about the drunkenness on Passover. Jesus’ Last Supper was probably unusual for *not* being a big drunken party – that’s what everyone else was

²¹ Yes, these *are* our ancestors. It is virtually impossible for us not to be related to one of them. Unless you’re a pure-blood Inuit maybe who’s never left the ice-floe. Anyway: if you can prove you’re not related to them, which you can’t, I’ll give you an autographed apology for free.

doing that night. Maybe that's why there was all that folderol about finding a place to hold the Last Supper: nobody wanted to invite thirteen grown men over to go all frat-house for Passover.

The long solemn seder that Jews celebrate today? That didn't get started until around 200 CE. The Hagadah, that Passover ceremony that starts with some kid asking "What makes this night different from all other nights" ...that didn't show up until the 11th century.

Part of the Hagadah that often gets ignored, I'm sorry to say, because it sounds like a lot of fun, is that the seder meal is supposed to be eaten while reclining -- not seated like slaves, and not on one's feet like the Ancient Jews trembling as the Destroyer passed through the town, but reclining, the way rich nobles ate their meals in ease. I like to think about that, about the Last Supper taking place around a low table, with Jesus and the disciples stretched out on couches.

So the way Jews currently celebrate the Seder is pretty old, but it's not their ancient way. It's not a tradition handed down Jew to Jew from Moses' time. As traditions go, it's not even as old as Hanukkah. In fact, Jews were lighting the lights of Hanukkah for more than a thousand years before they first started having Hagadahs at Passover.

Judaism has reinvented itself a score of times. A lot of stuff that Jews talk about as if they were ancient ancient traditions didn't really get started until the middle ages. Like Bar Mitzvahs, for example which only got started in the 14th century. In Spain.

Even Jewish weddings are kind of new, at least in the kind of solemn rite we know today. Before the 5th century they were fairly ribald. Wine parties that lasted for days. Remember Jesus turning water into wine?²² That was on like day 3 of a four day wedding party. They'd run out of wine, for pete's sake, and still no one was going home. That should give you some idea about what Jewish weddings were like. Finally in the 5th century some rabbi, I forget who, introduced the concept of actually exchanging vows. That was a new and novel idea. He also suggested not drinking quite so much, and introduced the ritual of breaking the wine glass. The rabbi, I suppose, thought that if you reduced the amount of stemware, you might also reduce the wine consumption.

• • •

And another thing: You may think I'm tossing in facts like these as some sort of trivia. I promise you I'm not. This story has no trivia. It's all part of the Story. This story didn't end in 165 BCE. In fact, it's still going on today.

For one thing, I'm telling you about seders and weddings and Bar Mitzvahs to remind you of the importance of the Hanukkah celebration: which *has* been maintained continuously, for over two thousand years. That's an indication of the importance of Google's "least important Jewish holiday."

• • •

Anyway, back to Egypt: The Destroyer killed all those Egyptian babies, and Yul Brynner let all the Jewish slaves go. All it took was ten horrific plagues.

²² You know about Jesus turning water into wine if you went to Sunday School. Others may not have been forced to learn about this, you lucky dogs. The gospels are full of wedding metaphors, allegories and parables. Here are some fun facts to know about Jewish weddings from the Hanukkah period to New Testament Times. If your Sunday School teacher had known these facts, a lot parables would have made more sense. Betrothal was the big event, sealed with a formal contract between families. The bride would stay at her parent's home for an indefinite period. One day, without any certain warning, the bridegroom and his groomsmen would show up in the middle of the night, knock on the bride's door, and take her away the groom's house. The smart bride would be ready -- have her stuff set to go, have her friends set nearby, and lots of gossips in the neighborhood telling her what to expect. That's what the parables of the wise and foolish virgins are referring to. The actual "marriage ceremony" consisted of the groom taking the bride to his bedroom, and coming out with stained sheets as proof of The Act. Everybody at the four-day party would be waiting by the door, and when the moment came, would let out a big cheer.. These fun facts about marriage, however, have no bearing on this Story whatsoever.

Then Moses led the Jews away, parted the Red Sea, drowned the Pharaoh's chariots, and walked several thousand men, women and children into the merciless Sinai desert.

Which is where we'll leave them, until tomorrow.

Right now, it's time for latkes.

Night Two

We've just lit the second candle.

Let me tell you a little about the Hanukkah menorah.

You'll see a picture of a menorah on a lot of symbols associated with Israel. That's a seven-branched "Jerusalem" menorah, like the one found in Temple, the actual menorah that was lit at the time of the Great Miracle.

The menorah that we use to celebrate Hanukkah, however, has nine branches, not seven. My menorah is typical: it has a central candle holder, and four branches with holders to either side, but there are also asymmetric versions. The central holder is for the *shamash*, the candle used to light the other candles. One by one, we put candles into the other eight holders over the eight nights of celebration.

I say candles because I use candles for the lights, but historically, obviously, the flames were from oil lamps – wicks sitting in a little bowl of oil – and you can still easily find Hanukkah menorahs designed to burn oil instead of candles.

You can find a lot of discussion about Hanukkah in the Talmud.

I've mentioned the Talmud earlier. Jews will have heard of it, but it's not a book that non-Jews know much about. For sure, I knew nothing about the Talmud until I started studying Hanukkah. I was brought up by a Christian minister, so I had heard the title *Talmud*, and knew it was some sort of Jewish book, but didn't really understand what it referred to.

I know better now: the Talmud is a very important work, and in my humble opinion, a very kooky work, written by brilliant, scholarly rabbis during the Middle Ages.

In fact, there are a number of different Talmuds, different versions collected by different rabbis living in different cities all over the world. They all have the same format: a collection of interpretations of various Jewish laws and traditions. These collections first started appearing around 800 CE.

The Talmuds provide a wonderful insight into Judaism. Take, for instance, the Talmud discussions about Hanukkah.

I've told you that Hanukkah has been celebrated continuously since the Great Miracle occurred in 165 BCE. The Book of Macabbees II, written about 100 BCE, takes the form of a letter written to a group of Jews living in Greece, explaining why the Jews of Israel celebrate Hanukkah, and encouraging the Greek Jews to do the same, by telling the story of the Macabbees and the Miracle.

Much like I'm doing now, actually. In a way, what I'm doing now, telling you this Story, is part of a long, ancient tradition.

So when Macabbees II was written, Hanukkah had already been celebrated continuously for 60 years or more. About 200 years later, the Jewish/Roman Historian Josephus described how Jews around the world were lighting lamps to commemorate Hanukkah. So Hanukkah was already a big deal to the Jews, even then.

The Talmud, written a thousand years after the first Hanukkah, discusses the celebration in some depth.

Now Talmud discussions are among the most amusing and confusing things I have ever read. And I have read a lot.

Each Talmud discussion brings up some point of Jewish law or tradition, and then elaborates on the point by collecting very precise, very sophisticated interpretations from various intelligent rabbis.

And each interpretation basically contradicts the previous one. In ways that make your head spin. I make my living programming computers, and any ambiguity means failure. So a book based on

collecting contradictions is a book that institutionalizes ambiguity, and that seems, to me at least, to be absolutely kooky.¹

The Talmud discussion on Hanukkah poses a lot of questions: what sort of lamp should be lit? Are candles acceptable? Should one use oil lamps? If so, what sort of oil for fuel? And so on. And to each question, the Talmud records the very minute, considered and utterly contradictory opinions of rabbis who have studied the matter.

Take the candle vs oil lamp discussion, which gets answered: yes, candles are OK. No, they're not OK. Yes they are too, OK.

Or the fuel discussion: Olive oil only. No, any oil, but not animal fat. No animal fat is fine, but not beeswax. No beeswax is OK. And a kind of meta-answer: any fuel will do, because the flame is pure regardless of the fuel.

Or how many lights to light? The use of the nine-candle menorah is apparently kind of new-fangled at the time the Talmud was being written, so the Talmud talks about an earlier tradition: just lighting some lamps around the house. But: how many lights to light? Only one light for the whole house? Or one light for each person in the house? One light for each Jew in the house? Are you allowed to sew by the light of a Hanukkah lamp? Or Read? Or Read by the light, if you're reading a Holy Book?

After these subtleties gets discussed, but not settled, the menorah questions get asked. Since menorahs are suddenly getting popular, how to use them? Light all eight lamps on the first night, and then extinguish them night by night? Or start with one light, and build up to eight? How to light them: Left to right or right to left? Where to put the menorah: outside, inside, near a window, on a table? Can you move a lit menorah? When to light the lights: at sundown? Is it OK to delay until the whole family can gather?

All these questions asked, and all these questions answered with rabbis saying, with elaborate scholarship and thoughtful reasoning: Yes. No. Maybe.

You get done, and you have no clue what to do.

When I say the Talmud is a kooky book, I mean: (a) The discussions go all over the map. A discussion that starts off about whether you can carry a toddler up the Temple hill turns into a discussion of diet. It's like sailing through a typhoon, you start off one place, with the sun shining, a fair breeze and clear heading, and you have no earthly idea where you'll end up. And (b) You'd think a book that uses so much ink and so much paper to discuss the weighty matters about how to live your life in accord with Hashem's law would actually deliver a definite answer. But all you get is a bunch of contradictory opinions. By the end, you really wish for something – anything – that just lays it out: Do this. Don't do that. But in the end, to this non-Jew, at least, it feels like, you're sort of on your own. You want to follow Hashem's Law? Well, you've been given a brain and a conscience, and examples of how to use them: so use them.

Which brings us to The Law. Hashem's Law.

And back to Moses and the Jews in Sinai.

• • •

Tonight we get to the beating heart of my story.

Tonight's the night for all of us to stand in awe of Hashem's Law.

I've said that the sign of the Great Miracle was the oil, and this is the part of the story where I tell you why: why there was oil, and why there wasn't enough. Why oil lights were lit, and why it was a big deal that they stayed lit.

¹ For more information, please see Night One, footnote 9.

In other words: Why there was a Sign – and why, when they saw the Sign, people understood the Miracle.

To understand the Sign, you have to know about the Temple Menorah and the Sacred Oil, and those are just two tiny threads of a vast magnificent tapestry: The Law.

The Law. I feel bad using such a short name, for the Law is so breathtakingly huge. But I have to call it something.

The Law itself is a kind of miracle. The Law is amazing, unlike anything that went before or has come since.

The Law is one of those topics, like DNA or string theory or black holes, that just gets vaster the more you look into it. It's one of those topics where you wake up in the middle of the night seeing the mystic beauty radiating like a spiral galaxy, and you think your head's going to explode.

My goal tonight is to tell you about The Law, and if I do my job right, by the time I'm done, you'll have little spinning pinwheels for eyes. The Law is just that amazing.

• • •

About 150 years after Abraham, the Egyptians captured most of the Jews and made them slaves. They lived as slaves in Egypt for 350 years.

When Moses arrived and the Jews fled with him into the Sinai it was five full centuries after Abraham. Twenty five generations of Jews had been born. Twenty-five generations had died.

The Jews that fled into the Sinai knew nothing but Egypt, and nothing but slavery. The only thing that made them different from any other Egyptian slave was that they'd cut off their foreskins, they had a grandmother named Sarah, and they thought despite all evidence to the contrary, that they'd been given a promise from a nameless, formless god.

• • •

2500 BCE. That's when the Jews became the children of the Law.

We've come to another of those times when I have to ask you to make an effort to forget everything you think you know.

Those Old Jews are long, long gone. Nothing like them exists today. None of us has anything in common with them. Even the most faithful, fundamentalist, conservative Hasidic Jew has Nothing In Common with the Old Jews.

I assume that you've seen the Cecil B. DeMille *Ten Commandments*. Tonight's talk, after a fashion, might seem from time to time a rerun of that movie. You'll probably remember parts of that movie as I tell you tonight's story. That's *exactly* what I want you to forget.

That movie was made by Modern Western Men and Women playing dress-up. That's exactly *not* what things were like. Exactly not a bit what things were like.

From movies like the Ten Commandments, we've all absorbed this notion that The Old Jews were Just Like Us except that they wore robes and sandals.

Oh, my dear friends: The Old Jews were *so* Not Like Us. The Old Jews were almost a different species.

• • •

The closest parallel I can think of is looking into a working beehive. There you see an astonishing, organized society with which you also have nothing in common. The constant activity of the bees, their constant interactions; all of them independent and interdependent; a whole society dedicated only to making honey and making more bees. And the minute you try to draw a parallel, like calling one of

them the “Queen” – you profoundly miss the point and lose perspective. There is no Queen in a beehive. To say so trivializes and mocks the hive.

Hashem’s Law defined a society. The Law created the society of the Old Jews.

It created, in effect, a Giant Jewish Hive, far, far, far more elaborate and complicated than a beehive: a huge, unique society dedicated only to honoring the Lord.

A society as different from our own as anything you can imagine. Don’t go looking for parallels. Don’t trivialize and mock it with your preconceptions. Forget what you know. See it for what it was, as it was.

Tonight we talk about the Old Jews and Hashem’s Law.

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So: the Book of Exodus says that 603,550 souls fled Egypt; naturally there are dozens of other scholarly estimates, typically between a half-million and two million souls.

Now my rule of thumb with any estimates based on Biblical material is to cut them by 90%; typically this provides a much more believable number. But whether there were 50,000 or 200,000 or 603,550 or 2,000,000, Moses was taking a lot of fucking souls into the desert.²

Now these Jews had been slaves, and while they may have been used to harsh treatment, they weren’t used to the desert. They’d lived in houses (remember the lamb’s blood – on *doorposts*? Ergo: they had *doors*. Now they had only the open air.)

We can imagine how quickly Jewish jubilation turned into misery. As the food ran out, as the water gave out, as they got hotter in the burning sun and colder in the brutal nights. Moses’ divine magic tricks might have given him some leadership cred for awhile, but if he was so divine and his god was so all-powerful, why didn’t Moses just use his magic staff and make things comfortable? They grumbled morosely.

Anyway: You’ve seen what happens after a hurricane -- that’s when a relatively small group of people used to civilization suddenly lose it; even with some vague hope that FEMA is on the way and the National Guard will arrive with MREs and comforting M16s any minute. You can imagine the quick devolution of all those thousands of Jews stumbling blindly across the moonlit Sinai, the collapse of a society of people who had been used to centuries of being bossed around in a very structured, albeit very oppressed lives. At least they’d been oppressed in houses! At least they’d had oppressed flour to unleaven!

Moses had mixed the chaos of the mob with the chaos of the desert and called it freedom.

² I’m trying to think of how to put this in perspective. If you’ve ever seen the movie *Woodstock*, those long, 5-minute panning shots showing a solid wall of thousands and thousands of bodies – Woodstock was only about 300,000 people. The Exodus crowd was twice that size: two entire Woodstocks. At least it wasn’t raining.

The Exodus was like taking everybody who lived in Kansas City into the desert. The Exodus was like taking everybody who lives in Syracuse into the desert. The Exodus was like taking everybody who lives in Peoria, Illinois into the desert. The Exodus was like taking everybody who lives in Salt Lake City into – well, into an even nastier desert. All of them. All of them, from all four cities. ALL FOUR CITIES, all at once, with nothing but what they could carry.

What is it like to be in the desert, moving in a crowd with 599,999 other people? A typical movie theater has about 250 seats, and you know what a zoo that can be when the movie lets out. Now imagine that at the end of the lobby each person goes to a special door that opens onto to *another* theatre, also completely jammed with people. Then all those 250 movie theatres crammed with people let out into one gigantic lobby the size of the 40 football fields. Now you’re in a crowd of 600,000 people. Imagine that sea of people all trying to get to the ladies’ room or trying to buy some Junior Mints. Except there are no rest rooms or refreshment stands. You and the rest of those 600,000 people are in the goddam desert.

I imagine Moses having some Serious Disembodied Dialogs with Hashem. I imagine Moses saying: Lord, I better get me some goddam Rules, or everything is going to go straight to Hell.

Anyway, Moses made a beeline with this mob, and headed straight for Mount Sinai.³

Moses camped everyone around the foot of Mount Sinai. Then he climbed up the mountain, and after a while, came sliding back down with the Tablets of Stone: What most people call the The Ten Commandments.

It's hard to get an exact count of those commadments, but it's some place between 8 and 12. The number you count depends on whether you punctuate the language with periods or commas. But "The Ten Commandments" has a nice ring to it, and you know, there's the movie with that name.

But a little more about how he got these Roughly Ten Commandments: Moses climbed to the top of Mount Sinai, and the Jews below watched in awe as the top of the mountain became engulfed with clouds of smoke and fire.

Remember when I mentioned "Shekinah," the Presence of the Lord? After her teaser appearance in the Burning Bush, that was Shekinah making her first major appearance in a starring role. And it made a big impression on the Jews around the foot of Mount Sinai. We'll see more of her in a couple of minutes, and a lot more of Shekinah over the next few Hanukkah nights as well.

Anyway, Moses comes skipping down the mountain trail, with his shiny new commandments etched by Shekinah's Finger of Fire into Tablets of Stone, and at the bottom, what does he find?

A big honking mess, that's what.

The very first commandment Hashem had given Moses had been "You shall have no other gods before Me." He even opened up on the topic. It's the first and I think the only time he offered any insight into his personality. "For I am a jealous god."

Not loving. Not gentle. Not merciful. Not cruel. Not just. Not practically any of the attributes that modern religions apply to Him.

Jealous.

Have no other gods before Him: First commandment.

And what does Moses find when he comes down?

While he was busy chatting with the Presence of The Lord, the Jews had had a little community gathering, and decided that they didn't really like following some loopy prophet and a nameless, formless god into the nasty cold desert.

So they had made an idol, a golden calf, and then (naturally) celebrated this event with singing, dancing, and of course, lots of fornicating. If you're going to make an idol, you might as well make one that appreciates fornicating.

Now what Moses had brought down from Sinai were Ten or So High Level Guidelines For Living a Good Life. But those Ten or So Commandments didn't last a Sinai minute. Moses saw the orgy and smashed the stone tablets to the ground.

Then he smashed the idol, gave everybody hell, and stormed back up the mountain in a huff. And over the course of several weeks, commuting from the camp to the mountaintop, he finally brought back 673 commandments.

³ These days nobody has any clue where Mount Sinai was. Lots of candidate mountains have been nominated, but no firm data. Some scholars speculate it was a mountain named Har Gebnunim, but I only mention this because that name means "The Mountain of Pure Cheese," and that definitely deserves a footnote.

My take is that Ten Commandments would have been plenty if the Jews had been, I don't know – let's call them Grownups, for lack of a better word. But what Moses (and Hashem) finally came to realize was that the Chosen People were, for lack of a better word, Children.

It's all very well to tell a grownup something general, like – Keep things neat. For children, you need to be more specific. Make your bed each morning, by eight am. Tuck those sheets in, like this. Smooth the pillow, like this. I'll be in to bounce a quarter on it at 8:01, and it better be right or you're grounded.

This was the nature of the Hashem's Laws, the 673 Commandments: not general guidelines, but precise, specific orders like those you might give to a wayward, undisciplined child.

Everyone knows the Ten Commandments by heart already, right? So, since they only actually lasted for a minute or two, let's talk instead, the 673 Commandments. Let's talk about Hashem's magnificent, astonishing Law.

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Now knowing that I'm a wise-ass, you might at this point think that I'll make a list: the Top Ten Goofiest Commandments of the Law.

And you would be so very wrong.

For while the 673 commandments individually have some goofy, and I mean goofy, components, in total they are honking brilliant – a means of establishing a social structure -- a whole way of life.

They define an entire new society.

The problem for me, your storyteller, is this: since all the elements of the Law are so intertwined and interdependent, it's hard even to know where to start to describe them.

But I think I will begin with the Ark of the Covenant. Which is a central character in this Story and also, a central element of the Law.

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Now where have you heard about the Ark of the Covenant before? Why, in the movies. The movies love the Old Testament. The Ark of the Covenant is the same Lost Ark raided by Indiana Jones.

The Ark was a box. By the way, that's what an ark is: a box. A box for holding something sacred, something special. Noah's Ark was a box, not a boat.

You put something very special in an ark, like the last two living representatives of every creature on the earth -- or in the case of *this* Ark, the broken Tablets of Stone. This Ark was built specifically to hold the Ten Commandments.

The Law provides precise, elaborate descriptions of the Ark, actually a sort of a spec sheet that describes exactly how to build and maintain it.

A box about the size of small coffin (much more room than was needed for the Stone Tablets). Built of *shittim* (acacia wood, probably). Covered completely in gold. Two long poles of shittim wood to carry it, also covered in gold. A lid (gold, naturally), and on the lid, two small, solid gold statues of our old buddies, the cherubim.⁴

⁴ Now some bright boy is probably saying right now: "But what about the Third Line of Commandment One of The Ten Commandments!!!" (or alternately "What about the First Line of Commandment Two of The Ten Commandments!!")

"Thou shalt not make for thyself any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, or that the water under the earth."

Yes it may come as a shock, but in the Law are a *lot* of commandments requiring the Jews to grave a whole bunch of images. Cherubim mostly. Also cows.

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When the Ark was complete, something astonishing happened that made the Ark the most precious object on earth.

The Ark didn't just hold the Stone Tablets of the Ten Commandments.

It held the Living Presence of the Lord of Hosts.

This Ark held a living, breathing Presence. Shekinah herself lived inside the Ark.

You could see the Sign of the Presence of the Lord. From under the golden lid of the Ark, smoke and fire poured out, all day and all night.

You may have heard of the Pillar of Clouds by day and the Pillar of Fire by night. We'll talk about those more tomorrow night. But they refer to Shekinah in the Ark.

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The Law dictated that the Ark be rested on a carved wooden stand. You may have heard of "The Mercy Seat," a term which gets thrown around in a lot of Christian hymns. This wooden stand was the Mercy Seat.

The Law defined that a tall screened canopy was to be erected around the Ark. And this canopy was meticulously described: right down to the multiple colors and fabrics to be used, and each panel's height and width, and even to the rings that would suspend the canopy over the Ark. (And, by the way, more graven images: pictures of cherubim were to be woven into the cloth.)

This screened canopy was meant to keep the Ark from being viewed. No one was to look at the Ark, except one man, once a year...we'll get to that in a minute, too. (The Ark had a special cover for when it wasn't behind its privacy screen.)

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You've got an Ark, and the Ark has canopy. Now what? Around the Ark and canopy, a tall, tall tent. Really tall, maybe 35-40 feet tall. Like a 4-story house.

This tent was called The Tabernacle. That's where the word Tabernacle comes from. A really big tent, also meticulously described, right down to the fabrics to be used and the length of the tent poles.

The cloth for the canopy and the Tabernacle, according to the commandments, had to be thrown away and newly rewoven every year. And believe me, that amount of cloth, what with cherubim designs and so on, would take some serious weaving. They didn't have mechanical looms in those days; they had those vertical frames you've probably seen in travelogues or on the TV show "Lost", where the threads were inserted by hand.

So it would take a lot of looming, by a lot of people, to remake each year the huge lengths and widths of cloth required for these structures. I'd guess the effort was practically non-stop, like painting the Golden Gate Bridge. It probably took all year to replace the fabric that was about to be thrown out.

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OK: a big tent surrounding the Ark.

What else is inside the tent, along with the Ark?

A great big incense burner, made of silver and gold. Again, meticulously described.

And a lampstand, the Menorah. (To give you an idea of just how thoroughly these items were described, I'm adding ^{this footnote > 5.})

Also a table covered in gold. On this table, every day, were to be set twelve loaves of fresh bread. This was called showbread (or shewbread, which sounds a even cooler). Showbread because it was meant to be shown on the table, not eaten. At least not right away.

The Censer, the Menorah, and the Showbread Table were known as the Holy Vessels. Remember the term, because these Vessels are constantly being stolen and later returned, and I don't want you constantly interrupting me by asking "*What exactly* were the Holy Vessels??"

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Why twelve loaves of bread? One loaf for each tribe. You see the 600,000 Jews were organized by family ties – tribes. And the Law began by setting out tasks for each of these tribes: like I said, providing a kind of social order based on a Law that would unify them.

For example, one tribe – I forget which – was responsible for making the incense for that Censer in the Tabernacle. Naturally the recipe for the incense was meticulously described. Every aspect of the Law was meticulously described.

• • •

Now the tall Tabernacle tent was to be enclosed by a running screen which would enclose the open area surrounding it. Do I need to keep repeating how spec-sheet described this screen was?

The area around the Tabernacle -- the area enclosed by the screen -- was known as The Courtyard. And that name is quite suggestive: A yard for the Court. Kings have courts, the people they choose to trust and keep close, and kings meet with their courts in a courtyard. So if this is the Courtyard, then it must be the place of the King. And the people in the Courtyard must therefore be the persons the King chose to trust and keep close. And by inference: the King is Hashem, and the Jews are his Court.

⁵ I'm breaking my self-imposed vow against quoting the Bible to quote this passage: the Law for the construction of the Holy Menorah, which comes from Exodus 25, verses 31 through 40. It tells how to construct the menorah, a lampstand, from "a talent of pure gold" -- a *talent* meaning a weight equivalent to about 70 pounds.

³¹ And you must make a lampstand of pure gold. Of hammered work the lampstand is to be made. Its base, its branches, its cups, its knobs and its blossoms are to proceed out from it. ³² And six branches are running out from its sides, three branches of the lampstand from its one side and three branches of the lampstand from its other side. ³³ Three cups shaped like flowers of almond are on the one set of branches, with knobs and blossoms alternating, and three cups shaped like flowers of almond on the other set of branches, with knobs and blossoms alternating. This is the way it is with the six branches running out from the lampstand. ³⁴ And on the lampstand are four cups shaped like flowers of almond, with its knobs and its blossoms alternating. ³⁵ And the knob under two branches is out of it and the knob under the two other branches is out of it and the knob under two more branches is out of it, for the six branches running out from the lampstand. ³⁶ Their knobs and their branches are to proceed out from it. All of it is one piece of hammered work, of pure gold. ³⁷ And you must make seven lamps for it; and the lamps must be lit up, and they must shine upon the area in front of it. ³⁸ And its snuffers and its fire holders are of pure gold. ³⁹ Of a talent of pure gold he should make it with all these utensils of it. ⁴⁰ And see that you make them after their pattern that was shown to you in the mountain.

This passage was the inspiration for the "Holy Hand Grenade" skit from Monty Python and the Holy Grail.

By the way, there's a dispute among Old Testament scholars about whether the menorah arms were rounded or straight, or whether the lamp cups were at the same level or different levels. There's always a dispute among Old Testament scholars, about every little damned thing. This is how the Talmud came into existence.

The Courtyard was about the size of a football field. The Tent of the Tabernacle and the Ark in the very center of the courtyard.

In the Courtyard, in front of the entrance to the Tabernacle, stood an altar. Just to be clear, to the Jews and to any religion of those days an altar meant one thing: Not a table, a barbeque. A place of flame to burn sacrifices.

The Altar was a big brass brazier, a brass bowl the size of a bathtub, where a fire was kept burning continuously.

Other things around the Tabernacle also had to be kept burning continually as well: the incense censer, as was the Menorah.

Continuous burning, of course, required a continuous fuel. Wood for the fire, oil for the Menorah, burning embers for the incense.

Just as each of the twelve tribes had to provide a daily loaf of showbread, the twelve tribes were to share, month by month, responsibility for providing the continuous supplies of fuel.

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The menorah oil had to be pressed from olives, purified, and – pay attention to this – sanctified by keeping it in the front of the altar flames for seven days.

In case you were nodding off, I repeat: The menorah oil had to be pressed from olives, purified, and sanctified by keeping it in the front of the altar flames for seven days. OK? You'll remember that? Good.

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Do you see how these commandments start to fit together? These were *commandments* – things you *had* to do to keep Hashem happy. And they required a constant flow of activity and cooperation; work shared by all the tribes.

OK: we've got a screened courtyard, and Tabernacle tent holding the Holy Vessels and the Ark, and oil lamps and incense burning, and an altar of ever-burning fire. Now what?

Obviously: now we have sacrifices.

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There were two kinds of sacrifices (three really, if we count the Red Heifer, which is the strangest sacrifice of all).

First: sacrifices of Thanksgiving. Second: sacrifices of Expiation.

Now the Thanksgiving sacrifices were mostly of flour, wine, and the “first fruits” of the farm. These items would get tossed on the altar and burned.

Also there were occasionally animal sacrifices of thanksgiving: Sheep mostly, which you'd sacrifice when you had a newborn child, and so on.

For the most part, vegan sacrifices were *holocausts*⁶. Most animal sacrifices, however, were partial sacrifices. The commandments described which parts of the animal were to be butchered and thrown away (mostly the spine), which parts were to be burned completely (the fat, mostly), and which parts were to be, in effect, cooked (the nice juicy fleshy parts, mostly). Those parts got pulled out of the fire when they were cooked, and the people making the sacrifice, and the priests, got to eat them.

So along with pleasing Hashem, sacrificers got themselves a nice roast leg of lamb for dinner.

⁶ A holocaust sacrifice meant completely burning everything, leaving nothing behind. The term was metaphorically applied to the Nazis' extermination of the Jews, but it's actually a sort of technical term, and quite old. Like 3500 years old.

• • •

You've probably heard about Kosher butchers; those butchers follow the Law's methods for killing animals for sacrifice (that is, with one stroke of a sharp knife through the neck), and also the sacrifice Laws about which parts can be then be eaten and which must be thrown away, and so on.

We'll discuss on night five how the Sacrifice laws came to be applied to the Jewish diet. But Jews might be interested that very few of the gazillion rules of a strict Kosher diet are specifically called out in the Law as found in the Tanakh. These rules are Talmudic, developed by rabbis. What the Law does call out, with no equivocation is this: don't eat Unclean animals.

So this might be a good time to talk about two Big Fat Concepts:

Clean and Unclean.

Clean and Unclean have nothing to do with being hygienic or being dirty. These are *ritual* terms. And while scholars of many religions with concepts of ritual purity will assert an absolute equivalence between hygienic purity and ritual purity, there is none⁷. Sorry. Ritual cleanness is defined by religious law, and by faith, not by science.

But there is nothing wrong with basing one's actions on a belief in a cleanness one cannot see with the naked eye. You do this for your doctor all the time. Why shouldn't you also cut your deity a little slack?

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The Law states, for example, that certain species of animals were Clean (sheep, goats, cows, fish, some kinds of birds). Some animals were Unclean (pigs, delicious lobsters).

You were forbidden to eat things that were unclean. And you couldn't sacrifice them.

Of course other some things could be clean sometimes and unclean at other times. Most importantly, People.

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A person who had come into contact with menstrual blood, for example, even her own, was Unclean. And that person would need to take a ritual bath to return to Cleanness.

The typical kitchen sponge, which often looks reasonably clean, is actually crawling with bacteria. It's the most bacteria-infested item in the house. Way, way worse than any toilet seat. And practically speaking, hygienically speaking, you'd be way worse off touching that sponge than you'd ever be, even if you splashed in a wading pool of menstrual blood.

But in terms of *ritual* cleanness, you could wipe that bacteria-ridden sponge all over your body and still be Ritually Clean. But a touch of even an eensy-weensy drop menstrual blood – your own or anyone else's – and bingo – you and everything you then touched became ritually Unclean.

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Only things that were ritually clean could enter the courtyard of the Tabernacle.

So the Law also describes a special kind of bathing pool, a Mikvah, which requires a special construction: fresh water that flowed into a standing pool, and then flowed out. And lists specifics about how to bathe in the pool to make you ritually clean again, so you could enter the courtyard.

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Now why did you need to be clean? Why did you need to enter the courtyard? Because if you could not enter the screened courtyard of the Tabernacle you could not make a sacrifice.

⁷ If ritual purity had an absolute hygienic equivalence, then the definitions of ritual purity of Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Bahais, Muslims, Shintos, Native Americans, Eastern Orthodox Christians, etc., etc., etc. would all line up neatly. What do you think, they all line up neatly?

And why did you need to make a sacrifice? Because, without a doubt, you had done something wrong in Hashem's sight. You had broken one of Hashem's 673 commandments.

And Hashem did not look kindly on those who broke his commandments. Not kindly at all.

You could fix things up with Hashem, usually, with a sacrifice. For most of these broken commandments, the specific sacrifice of expiation was specified. You needed to burn a dove or a sheep or something.

Being ritually clean didn't mean that your sins had been expiated — You still needed to make the prescribed sacrifice for that to happen. But it was the first step -- you could only make the sacrifice at Altar in the Courtyard, and you could only get to that Altar if you were Clean.

So getting ritually clean was a big deal, because making the proper sacrifice was a big deal. Otherwise you would be In Bad With Hashem. And, believe me, you did NOT the hell want to be In Bad with Hashem.

• • •

Holy cow, did you not want to be In Bad with Hashem.

Remember that the Jews at this point still did not believe in Heaven and Hell. But they did believe in the consequences of disobeying Hashem's 673 commandments.

And here was Hashem's edict: Obey his commandments and you would have Health, Wealth and a Nice Long Life. Disobey and you'd be Sick, Poor and Dead.

But not just you: your family too. "The sins of the father will be visited on the sons unto the third and fourth generations."

That's a critical element. That's huge.

Break a commandment, and wasn't just going to be *you* that got sick and poor. Your sons would get sick and poor. And their sons, your nice little grandchildren. And beyond: your great-grandchildren. And all your wives and sisters. And their husbands, and their brothers and wives and sisters and children would suffer too. So one thoughtless act by one thoughtless person could fuck things up for maybe thirty or forty family members for the next sixty or seventy years.

Naturally, this belief in the consequences of your thoughtless act would make you want to run to the altar with your expiation dove ASAP. If that meant you had to take a ritual bath first, you'd the hell get one. And you'd want that altar fire burning when you got there. Because it wasn't just your neck on the line, it was your whole family in jeopardy. You can bet your family would be breathing down your unclean neck.

Before the Law, you alone faced Hashem's anger. Like the bad guys say on TV: Don't do the crime if you can't do the time. You might decide you could do the time; you might decide a sin was worth it. You might think Hashem wouldn't notice; you might think you could talk your way out of it. That's what Cain thought he killed his brother.

But after Hashem gave the Law, everything changed. After the Law, if you sinned, it was as though Hashem would set you on fire and then let you burn until everything close to you was in ruin.

Hashem enforced the Law more ruthlessly than any South American drug cartel or Asian Triad or the Eastern European Mafia, for he poured His Wrath down not only on you, and your immediate family, but on all your living relatives, and beyond that: on generations of your relatives yet to be born.

Oh, and by the way, this wasn't some obligation you could decide to adopt or unadopt. There was no way in and no way out. Being a Jew was *not* a religion.

You either were a Jew or not. This wasn't like becoming a Christian or a Buddhist. There was nothing to say or unsay to make you a Jew. There was no place you could run where the Law didn't apply. You were a Jew by blood, and wherever you went, the Law applied to you.

You were a Jew because your forefather Abraham cut the deal with Hashem, and you were part of that deal. You were bought and sold: a captive; a slave to the Lord. That missing foreskin? That was just the sign of ownership, like the brand on the haunch of a steer. If you were related to Abraham, you were Hashem's property, and your foreskin better the hell be gone, or Hashem would be angry.

For what Hashem's anger entailed, see above.

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I hope you're beginning to see, from these datapoints, the rough outlines of the whole. It's kind of like one of those "Magic Stereograms" – you know? Those pictures you have to stare at, and then suddenly you see the 3D dolphins.

Keep staring with me: we're about to see more dolphins.

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A few more points of the Law.

This whole set up – the Tabernacle, the altar, and so on – needed people to run it. And the Law set down that one of the Twelve Tribes (remember the Twelve Tribes?) was to be put in charge.

That tribe, the tribe of Levi, would be the ones in charge of keeping the fires burning, of assuring that the sacrifices were done correctly and so on. The tribe of Levi would supply the Priests of the Tabernacle.

I've only touched on a few points of the Law. It covers five whole Bible books and mountains of interpretive commentary. And the execution of the whole law was going to be a full-time job.

So the Levite priests could be dedicated solely to the task of putting The Law into action, the Law said that they (a) could do no other work and (b) would receive a tithe – a tenth – of all the sacrifices.

So if you were going to sacrifice some grain, the Levites got a tenth. A tenth part of the lamb you were going to sacrifice. And so on.

So if there were enough sacrifices, the Levites would do OK.

And the Law really set up that there were going to be plenty of sacrifices.

• • •

673 commandments. 365 negative – things you were not supposed to do; 208 positive: things you had to do.

For most of the negative commandments, an expiation sacrifice. For most of the positive commandments, an attendant sacrifice of thanksgiving.

Remember, I haven't said one word about repentance. Repentance had no bearing on your sins. Contrition had nothing to do with it. Nobody including Hashem cared if you were sorry. Nobody gave a shit about your attitude. Either you paid the price for your sin – the sacrifice – or you didn't. If you did, you were square with Hashem. Otherwise not.

You could barely get through a day without breaking one of the negative commandments. You could hardly get through a month without failing to do one of the positive commandments.

So animals, vegetables, grains were flowing into the Courtyard to the altar and going up in smoke, more or less constantly, thanks to Hashem's Law. And ten percent of the sacrifices that flowed through the Courtyard flowed into the pockets of the priests.

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In addition to individual sins (personally breaking specific commandments), there were collective sins – the failure of the whole Jewish people to act in accordance with Hashem's Law. The Golden Calf incident, for example, would qualify as a Great Big Collective Sin. And in the course of their history, the Jews would do whole lot of Collective Sinning.

And there was a sacrifice for these Collective Sins as well. The most important of these was the annual Rite of Atonement. Yom Kippur.

Only one man could do this rite: the High Priest, one of the Levite priests, who was elected to the job.

It was a long, complicated ritual that needed to be done very carefully or the Atonement wouldn't work and all sorts of nasty stuff would fall on everyone. Just as Hashem would send Poverty and Illness and Death to you and your children and grandchildren, He would drop a whole can of Nasty on all the Jews if He didn't get this sacrifice done just right.

The Law set out three occasions a year when every single Jew needed to go to the Tabernacle, get Clean, and get together in the Courtyard. Yom Kippur was the Great Big One. No excuses about that one. So all the Jews would be there for the Rite of Atonement, All Eyes On the High Priest.

It would be easy to spot the High Priest: He wore special clothes: a turban, a golden crown, a white robe with a jeweled breastplate, a purple under-robe with tiny golden bells sewn into its hem – all these garments, of course, specified by the Law.

The ritual took most of a day, and had many phases, and between these phases the High Priest would bathe and change clothes.

I'll just skip to some high points: Two identical goats would be brought forth. One would get a red ribbon tied around its horns, and be driven into the wilderness, as a sacrifice to the Demon Azazel. Remember Azazel – with the eye shadow and swords?

That's right, the Law set out that the Old Jews had to make an annual sacrifice to a demon.

The other goat (where we get the term scapegoat)⁸ would be sacrificed to Hashem on the altar.

I mentioned earlier that once a year the canopy around the Ark would be cast aside and one man would see the Ark inside. This was that time. The High Priest was that man. He would carry a bowl of the goat's blood into the Tabernacle, throw aside the Canopy, and sprinkle the goat's blood onto the sides of the Ark.

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And the High Priest would see Something.

Above the Ark he'd see a cloud of glowing mist. As he sprinkled the blood on the sides of the Ark, the High Priest would see in that cloud The Face of the Lord.

• • •

After he saw the Face, the High Priest would step outside the Tabernacle, and standing its doorway, in the courtyard, facing all the Jews in the world, he would say aloud the Secret Name. And the Jews would weep when they heard it.

(And I guess forget how to say it a few moments later, since nobody supposedly could know the Name except the High Priest.)

• • •

One or two more data points:

At one point Moses seemed to realize that he would need the buy-in of the tribes to make the Law work. Every couple of days he'd go up the mountain and come back with the next installment of the Law. The Tribes were getting restless.

⁸ I've always been confused that Christians refer to Jesus as "the Lamb of God," when clearly his role is equivalent to the atonement sacrificial goat. Christian apologists make a very lame case that the "Lamb" has something to do with lamb's blood of Passover, but come on. Obviously, the real reason is that nobody wants the church choir to stand up and sing "Behold the Goat of God."

So Moses invited leaders of the tribes to accompany him on one of his mountaintop excursions. Into that cloud of fire and smoke that hovered around Mount Sinai. So that one of every tribe could hear with their own ears the Voice, see with their own eyes Hashem's face.

Oh yes, they joined him; they trudged up the mountain. But they came scurrying back down right away. Those tribal leaders would not say what they had found there. They just begged Moses never to take them up there again.

• • •

Anyway, the Law institutionalized the Twelve Tribes. Not just the Levites, all of the tribes.

The Tabernacle, Courtyard, the Altar, the Ark, everything: these weren't to have a permanent location: The whole affair was meant to be dismantled, moved, and rebuilt regularly. The damned medicine show would be set up with a different Tribe every few weeks.

Now at the time that the Law was being brought down by Moses, page after page after page, all Twelve Tribes were camped at the foot of Mount Sinai, the Mountain of Pure Cheese. So the Tabernacle didn't have to move far to be stationed with a different tribe.

But eventually (as Hashem had promised Abram), the Jews would indeed get a country of their own. Hashem, as promised, delivered the goods. And when they came into the Promised Land, the Tribes of Jews spread across the land, and the distances the Tabernacle had to move became great.

And since each tribe had to share responsibilities with the others, these regular movements of the Tabernacle meant establishing coordinated logistics.

Also, each month a different tribe had to provide the enormous amounts of fuel required for the ever-burning flames, regardless of which tribe was hosting. So imagine what that meant...how hard to coordinate those mountains of firewood and so on, in a rough land, with few forests and fewer roads. And just as one tribe got familiar with the drill, another tribe would have to take on the job.

And since the tribe of the Levites was attached to the Tabernacle, it meant that the host tribe would need to make living arrangements for all the Tabernacle priests and their families as well.

And for Yom Kippur, and also Shavuot (or as it was called at the time of the Macabbees, Pentecost), and for the seven-day festival of Sukkot -- those times when all Jews of every tribe were required to be in the courtyard of the Tabernacle -- the host tribe on those occasions would also need to figure out food and lodging for the entire nation of the Jews.

• • •

Now this seems a good time to mention that the Golden Calf affair really set Hashem on the warpath. He decreed (through Moses) that the Jews would not come into the Promised Land right away: they'd first be forced to wander the desert for Forty Years, and only then receive the country promised to Abram. And only if they kept the Law.

So at the start of the Law, there was a carrot as well as a stick. Obey the Law and get the Promised Land. Or don't. Not only would you and your descendants be Poor, Sick and Dead, you'd never get the Promised Land.

• • •

Do you see? The Law defined and created a whole society -- a hive, if you will -- based on the endless worship of the Lord.

The Tabernacle was a lot like the factory in a company town. The life of all the Jews was connected to the endlessly burning Altar.

The constant flow of wood for the fires. Of water for bathing. Of things to sacrifice. Grain. Sheep, goats, oxen. Birds.

The constant weaving of new Tabernacle tents and canopies, which had to be remade each year. The constant demand for wool and cotton and linen needed to weave those fabrics.

And of course, a constant flow of joyous life events that demanded a sacrifice, like a childbirth or harvest. And a constant flow of sins that required sacrifices. After all, the Jews were only human.

Like the smokestacks in that factory town, smoke poured from the Altar constantly.

• • •

Also consider the effects of those annual required gatherings. That requirement of constant return to these gatherings meant that no Jew could live too far from the Tabernacle. You couldn't pack up and move your shop to Alexandria or Macedon: you needed to be within striking distance of the Tabernacle.

Those gatherings really defined a lot of extra work, just like you have to work extra hard before and after taking a vacation. They forced everyone to drop everything, and make travel arrangements for the whole family (don't forget, this was when people traveled by ass, and inns ran out of room and sent you to the stables to sleep). (Since you and all your family would be away, if you had flocks to look after, this almost required that you have some non-Jewish slaves.) You'd end up in the territory of a different tribe, and stay in the Tabernacle courtyard cheek by jowl with all the other Jews. And then you'd need to find the food and water and all the necessities for the trip back home.

Think of the elaborate preparations each host tribe had to make to support those gatherings.

To follow the Law required constant organization, constant initiative, constant effort, constant agreement on the part of everyone. The Jews had to work together, plan together, worship together, live together.

• • •

And to top it off, the Law instituted a day of rest: the Sabbath, that required work to stop on one day out of seven. Which is probably a good thing, or the Jews then would be like people are these days – they'd never stop working.

• • •

The Law, with its demands for constant worship, created a whole focused, organized society.

Nothing like this had ever happened before. No other nation was focused so utterly on constant religious requirements. For the Jews, every other part of life was secondary.

Their whole focus was the Law.

• • •

And this society created by the Law, created, in effect for Hashem, and by Hashem, lived according to His will [with a few minor interruptions] for generation after generation after generation. For more than 1500 years.

A society who lived with a single continuous purpose, never looking around, never asking why, for fifteen centuries.

Until the Babylonians showed up one day and blew the whole kit and caboodle to smithereens. But that's a story for another night.

Tonight's the night we stand in awe of Hashem's Law.

• • •

One last PS and we'll call it a night. The Blood of the Red Heifer.

I told you about how touching blood could make you unclean. This is why women were set apart in the Red Tent during menstruation, and kept apart after childbirth, and needed to bathe in a mikvah before returning to their families (and why every little town and village needed to have access to a mikvah, which was yet another constant task).

But you would be made even more unclean by touching a dead human body. No Mikvah could clean you. Also anything the dead body touched was unclean. And anybody or anything *you* touched after touching a dead body became unclean.

Now people die all the time, and you have to bury them within a day (according to the Law). So the families who bathed, and wrapped and buried their dead loved ones were unclean, and their furniture and tents were unclean, and everyone who gave them a sympathetic hug was unclean.

The only thing that could clean the touch of Death was the Blood of the Red Heifer.

This is the third type of sacrifice I mentioned earlier, and, besides the Rite of Atonement, the only other task assigned to the High Priest.

First you needed a Red Heifer. A Red Heifer isn't really red. The Law sets out the criteria, but the toughest ones were these: Its hair needed to be all one color: it could have no more than two hairs of a different color. Priests would need to examine each hair. Hair by hair by hair.

Also, it could never have been yoked. So someone needed to notice the hair might be all one color before it got yoked. Good luck on that.

In the 2500 years after the Red Heifer laws were established, only nine were ever found.

The sacrifice of the Red Heifer took place outside the Tabernacle. A special altar was set up, with a ramp beside it. Piles of cedar, hyssop wood on an altar next to the ramp.

Because the Heifer was going to be burned whole, and it would be a bitch to lift her on to a hot fire. Therefore, build a ramp, build a fire, kill her and tip her over onto the altar.

The high priest killed the heifer, pushed the dying animal on to the altar. Like cow-tipping.

Once dead the whole beast was burned, even the unclean parts. Then all the ashes, both of the wood and flesh were collected.

Then these ashes were mixed with water. This was the Magic Stuff, this ash water. Priests would sprinkle the water on the unclean persons and objects and they would be cleaned. But he priest would go to the mikvah, because – for some reason that even the Talmud can't really explain, by cleaning the unclean, the priest becomes unclean...I don't get it. Also the (now clean) persons also would go to the mikvah. Anyway, final clean-ness would be thus restored.

So in addition to a mikvah, every little town and village needed to have a priest with a bottle of Red Heifer Ash Water. More work for the Levites.

On another night I'll tell you why the Red Heifer is so important to the End-time Fundamentalist Christians.

• • •

That's it for night two. I don't know about you, but I'd love a drink. I don't think I'll have one though... but you go ahead. I'll just watch enviously.

Night Three

Three candles.

Why do we do this same gesture: lighting the candles, singing the blessings, every night the same for eight nights?

Remember that this celebration of Hanukkah was set up by men, not by the Law. And I think the men who established it saw the value of this repetition.

We repeat instead of doing something new each night, so we can focus and reflect on the gesture. Sometimes the gesture seems boring. Sometimes, though, we see it in a new light and it's brand new. And that is marvelous.

The discipline of repetition is part of their gift to us over the centuries.

• • •

I'm glad to say we'll have some actual stories tonight, not just factoids.

I've promised myself not to quote from the Bible while I tell this story. I want it to be told sort of campfire fashion. From memory, or as the saying goes "by heart." That seems important to me, to tell this tale by heart, no notes. So I'm going to screw things up, guaranteed.

I could quote chapter and verse. I could quote from the scholarly works I've read. But even great scholars don't have a perfect truth. There are no golden, unassailable facts. Though some of the learned opinions of scholars are smart – not like my half-assed opinions – many of them don't seem all that bright, at least to me. Also, I have looked at this history for so long, I've felt obliged to draw my own conclusions and make my own speculations. You're free to do the same, of course.

The great muslim Sufi poet Rumi says: *If you have no facts and only opinions, have good opinions about Allah.* At a certain point as you delve into this Great Miracle, you realize that no one has all the facts. Least of all me. Even the best of us only have opinions. At least I have good opinions about Hashem.

So if you're inspired by my story to study more thoroughly, you're going to find a lot of opinions that diverge from mine. I don't care. If you're inspired by my story to find out more, swell. Then tell your own version, and call me an asshole. That at least is an unassailable fact.

Until then, just accept that even with its flaws, my version is reasonably close to the mark. You'll be smarter after you hear it than you were before. That's a kind of miracle too, these days.

• • •

During my coffee breaks I've been watching re-runs of Battlestar Gallactica and here's how that show handles boring exposition. First they show you some hugely dramatic scene -- a Viper crash, or a Cylon holding a gun to Starbuck's head or something – and just when you get interested they pop up the words "48 hours earlier" and they cut to the 20 minutes of boring exposition that led to the dramatic opening scene. And you sit through those boring minutes gamely, rolling your eyes, but thinking OK, I'll bite: what happens to Starbuck??

If I were to use that method, it would go like this:

It's a brilliant, sunny day. We're on a narrow cobblestone city street, winding up a tall hill. In front of us, narrow houses line the edges. People wearing robes and sandals, men, women, and children, and all of them cheering and waving palm fronds. Echoing from the walls, the sound of drums mingle with the shouting. Deep kettle drums boom. Small hide drums pop as they're hit with sticks. And brass horns blare, and reed pipes bleat, and thin cymbals crash.

Not far down the hill, we see a procession approaching. A cadre of soldiers, marching in formation, bronze armor gleaming, bronze spear tips shining, bareheaded and holding their helmets, tramp, tramp, tramp in time.

Children and dogs dash between the soldiers' legs, it's a game. Women throw flower petals as they pass: these float onto the soldiers' flowing hair. As they come close, you can hear they're singing, in low gruff voices, a rough staccato marching song: the places they have fought and died sets the time of their march. They pay attention to their song, not to the blare of trumpets or the shouts of the crowd. Their faces are serious, but not grim. Some of them seem happy.

Behind them, priests in white robes and tall conical blue hats walk; they almost dance. Each priest holds a censer, and rich smoke billows around them: frankincense, amber, chandal. The crowd quiets as they pass, as the smoke charges the air.

But then people see what they've been waiting for, and they cheer with all their might. For now they can see it! Now it comes! The Ark!

The Ark of the Covenant, held high above the cheering throng, carried by four bare-chested, sweating men who lift its golden handles by one arm above their heads.

The cloth that covers the Ark is cut so it drapes across the sides, but the golden cherubim on its lid are exposed, brilliant in the noon sun. A constant misty fog seeps from under the cover of the Ark, and it mingles with the incense. As it passes the crowd is bathed in a holy cloud.

And a naked man dances in front of the Ark on its march up the hill. Young, slim, muscled, skin and hair oiled so he gleams like another golden cherubim in the bright sun. On his head, a thin singlet of gold; the King's crown.

He is the most beautiful man anyone has ever seen, so beautiful that men weep to look at him. So beautiful that no one even thinks that he blasphemes by dancing naked before the Ark. They'll grumble about that later, but now they only see his beauty, and how he seems to bow as he dances, bowing constantly as if to the people who watch him, or to the Ark, or to Hashem.

The beautiful young man is King David, triumphant against all odds. The city is Jerusalem.

This how King David brings the Ark to its new home.

• • •

At this point Battlestar Galactica would cut to a scene labeled "48 hours earlier." I, however, am cutting to a scene labeled "13,140,000 hours earlier¹."

Wide shot of Mount Sinai at the crack of dawn; a great orange sun slowly rising, distorted by the desert air while the sky is still dark: An overhead pan of the 600,000 Jews folding their tents, hoisting packs on their heads. It's not like the crowd watching David's triumphal entry. They're weary, ragged, hungry. A rapid tracking shot through the shambling throng; the grim faces, children stumbling forward, cheeks stained with tears; hundreds of sad, grim faces, thousands of them; a long, painful, nearly endless scene.

Finally we reach the edge of the crowd. The camera pulls in on Moses, bearded, fierce, his wild beard side-lit by the low gold light of dawn. He's staring ahead, into the distance, into the void.

A few yards away, four men hold the golden carrying poles of the Ark of the Covenant. They're not big, strapping, bare-chested fellows holding it overhead, though, not like in the procession into Jerusalem. These fellows seem to be struggling even to lift it from the ground.

And here a big, glowing cloud billows out from beneath the cloth that covers the Ark, like there's a raging fire inside. The cloud seems almost alive, drifting methodically around the feet of the carriers, then twisting up into the air in a column lit as with a flame from within. For a moment the pillar pushes upright into the sky as if it has no end. Then it bends, unmistakably, like a long finger pointing the way.

¹ 1500 years earlier: David's entry was in 1000 BCE, but now we check back with Moses in 2500 BCE

Moses watches, lifts his staff, and points in the same direction. Turning, he faces his people and shouts "Walk on!"

The Ark is leading the Jews deeper into the wilderness.

• • •

Hashem's anger. He told the Jews that as punishment for the Golden Calf they would wander in the wilderness for 40 years before they came into the Promised Land. Moses, he added, Moses, his faithful servant, would not live to enter the Promised Land.

• • •

Let's just skip ahead, shall we? We don't have to spend all 40 years in the desert, after all. Suffice it to say, after the 40 years of desert wandering, Hashem finally showed the Jews the Promised Land.

May I say I find that actual event rather odd? You get the impression from all His "I shall give you a land..." rhetoric that Hashem's going to do some Dramatic Miracle like parting the Red Sea; POOF: and there's The Garden of Eden II, The Promised Land.

Instead He just showed a place to them: He led them to the borders of Canaan. He led them to Canaan, a land already entirely full of Canaanites, and said "There you go. There's the Promised Land."

Hashem said it was theirs for the taking.

So they took it.

Adios, Canaanites.

But not without blood. Lots of battles, lots of blood.

• • •

Now by that time, the Jews that took Canaan from the Canaanites were no longer the Exodus Jews, the former kvetching slaves who had suddenly been cast from oppression into chaos. Forty years had passed, and most of those Jews were dead.

These Jews were their children, and their children's children, men and women who had grown up wandering, who had grown used to desert heat and desert cold. These Jews were tough, sun-baked, and as lean and stringy as the goats they herded. They had never lived in houses; they'd never had a door. They'd done nothing for forty years but fight each day to stay alive in a world designed to kill them.

They weren't soldiers. And now they were battling Canaanites, who also weren't soldiers.

But the Canaanites were softer, plumper. Juicier. Better fed. Used to living under roofs and inside walls. Gulping down well-water whenever they pleased. What chance did those Canaanites stand against these desert-hardened Jews?

• • •

The battles for Canaan weren't grand heroic battles. These weren't soldiers with swords and chariots, but desperate, terrified men on both sides, men armed with kitchen knives and homemade spears, and axes, scythes, and hammers; with sticks, fists, and teeth;

Fathers, sons, brothers; men and women tearing into other men and women and even children, until they broke through bone and teeth and skin, until blood spurted from the cracked skull and guts poured from the slashed belly, until the ground turned brown and slippery from shit, until enemies fell screaming and begged for death.

And yet, even though blood covered their hands, even though bits of hair and bone clung to their red-stained hands, they didn't stop the hacking and the banging until enough human beings lay on the ground dead and dying for one side or the other to fall away screaming and weeping, or to run off in terror, and to plead to be allowed to give the victors whatever the hell they wanted.

No war is pretty, but this is the stuff of horror. This is the stuff of nightmare.

• • •

What did Hashem think of all this killing? Maybe you don't want to know. Maybe you want to think of the Lord as kind and loving.

Not then. Not that Lord.

Hashem had given the Jews an order: "You shall not leave alive anything that breathes."

That's the Hashem of the Old Jews.

In fact when Joshua discovered that his armies had left some women and children as survivors, he sent them back to rub them out.

Every last living one of them.

That's the Hashem who led our ancestors to the Promised Land.

• • •

During their battles for the Promised Land, the Jews brought the Holy Ark from the Tabernacle, and carried it with them into battle.

They took the Holy Presence of the Lord into the killing fields.

Maybe you've seen those little doll sculptures; a smiling robed Jesus playing Peewee football with some kids. A nice PC ethnically diverse bunch of kids. And the message of these sculptures is – bringing Jesus' Presence into every silly aspect of one's life.

Well our ancestors took that approach to its limit. They brought the Presence of the Lord right into the smoke and the mud and the blood and the shit.

Anyway, with Ark in the vanguard, the Jews won and won and won; they drove out the Canaanites from a big chunk of Canaan, and took that land as their own and called it Judea. So I guess you can't argue with success.

• • •

Now perhaps you noticed something when I described the Law. Perhaps you noticed that no mention was made of leadership.

Perhaps you, a modern Westerner, would think that Hashem would have set forth rules about that: a constitutional monarchy, perhaps, or a benevolent dictatorship.

A lot of Tea Party rhetoric talks about the American Constitution being a Divine Document. Why didn't Hashem institute something like the Constitution for his Chosen People back then?

For my money: Hashem had a clue. The Jews had a leadership methodology, based on tribes and tribal leaders; based as all tribes are on ties of blood, and on the changing personalities of the generations. Tribes change coherently and subtly and naturally, and they generally do OK making things up as they go along.

But there's one trouble with tribes, one that plays a big part in tonight's story. Have you spotted it yet? If not, don't worry – you will.

• • •

When they got to Canaan, there was a lot of death. The Canaanites were the easy part; but at the borders of Canaan, border alliances formed to drive the Jews back. But the Ark miraculously saved the day, again and again. The Jews and their Ark defeated everybody.

The leader of the campaign, Joshua, divided the Promised Land among the Tribes. The Jews spread out over the land and settled in. These tribal lands became known as Judea.

Not "Israel." Judea. We'll be getting to Israel soon. Hang on.

• • •

A couple of points to note relevant to the story of the Great Miracle:

One of the places the Jews conquered was Jerusalem, which had been the capitol of a Canaanite kingdom.

The displaced Canaanites headed west. They merged with other kingdoms and tribes along the Mediterranean. These merged peoples became known as the Philistines. They were fierce and brutal, and constantly making war.

Here's an interesting sidelight: The Philistines mainly occupied the area known as Gaza. From there they launched constant assaults on Judea. Constant warfare: skirmishes, battles, and all-out war. Gaza and Judea and constant war: Remind you of anything?

• • •

Once they'd created Judea, those Jews became insular, isolated, and mostly self-sufficient. They were bound by ties of blood and their adherence to the Law. They kept their heads down and did what they'd been told by Hashem, more or less. That sacrifice society of the Jews, created by the Law, worked more or less in state, more or less unchanging, for most of the next 1500 years.

So we're going to move pretty fast through the first thirteen or fourteen-hundred years that followed, and get to the points that have relevance to the Great Miracle. If you're not doing anything someday, you could look into those years: they're not entirely relevant to our Story, but they're still pretty interesting.

• • •

From time to time the Jews would find themselves in trouble. They'd explain these times of trouble as a sign that some of them had not been adhering to the Law.

The trouble would usually come in the form of marauders. Now thieves and brigands were always everywhere, and from time to time some big bunch of marauders would dash across Judea and kill and steal, and they would take the most valuable commodity the land had to offer. That commodity: Living People, captured to be sold as slaves.

• • •

When the marauders were loosely organized – a marauding tribe of slavers, for example, like today's Janjaweed in the Darfur desert in Sudan -- the Jews would do a reasonably good job of fighting them off.

But sometimes, the Jews confronted bigger challenges. The Philistines, for example, weren't organized by tribe, like the Jews. They had strong men – kings – and organized armies.

No single Jewish tribe could fend off the Philistines when they mounted an organized assault. The Jews had no well-regulated militias so necessary to the security of a free state. All they had were their tribal leaders, and men with scythes and axes and hammers.

Yet when organized armies threatened the tribes of the Jews, every single time, a central leader would appear, as if by magic: A combination of prophet and military leader.

As a prophet, explaining aspects of the Laws that the Jews had broken to cause their current trouble, and what they had to do to get back in good with Hashem. And also as an ad hoc military leader, establishing an interim central control, commanding a unified army.

These magically appearing leaders were called Judges².

• • •

The Jews won a lot of battles. They carried the Ark of the Covenant with them into battle many times. I'm convinced it helped.

Not like in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, of course. That's why the Nazis wanted the Ark, in the movie, to use as a secret weapon, like in the *Thrilling Conclusion*. But there's no Biblical record of screaming death banshees flying around, melting people's faces off. In fact, there's no Biblical record that anything special came out of the Ark during a battle, not even the fog that records showing up at other times.

But those were superstitious times. You and I just can't imagine how superstitious. It wasn't just man against man or army against army. It was god against god as well.

The Bible is full of god-on-god throw-downs, where Hashem makes some other god tap out: destroying an idol, sending down fire or thunder and lightning, like that.

The sight of the Jews carrying that Ark into battle must have put a fright into their enemies. I'm sure that word got around that the god of the Jews lived in the Ark. And even if screaming death banshees never appeared, their enemies probably shit bricks about what might the hell come out of that box.

The enemies of the Jews weren't bringing *their* gods to the battle. *Their* gods were big stone idols in temples; those idols weren't going anywhere.

So here are the armies of the enemy, regular armies, paid fighters or conscripts, like all men of the time, superstitious. Here they come, attacking the inhabitants who lived in the land, the Jews of Judea, and hoping somehow to drive them off. That sort of engagement is always the very toughest.

Particularly because the Jews were not paid, and not conscripted. They were volunteers, fighting for one reason: to hang on to their homes.

² Since I've brought topic up, I'll mention two of my favorite Judges.

First Deborah, the only female leader of Judea. She had quite a time of it: traitors among her people working against her, trying to make a separate peace with the enemy. Worse, some of her army captains even refused to follow her orders. Women leaders have always had always had a tough time getting men to do what they tell them.

But Deborah managed to face her generals down. She took command, motivated her armies, pushed through and in the end defeated her enemies. Also, here's a nice Bible story that never gets read in church: After being defeated by the Jews, the enemy general escaped to the encampment of a Jewish traitor, a tent-maker, and sought refuge. The traitor was away, but his wife invited the enemy general in, fed him (fed him rotten milk!), and when he fell asleep, hammered a tent peg through his skull. The best part is, this episode is recounted as a poem.

Another of these Judges is quite famous: Samson. Samson's mother had dedicated him to Hashem with a "Nazarite vow." Nazarites vowed not to eat or drink anything made from grapes, and never to come in any contact with the dead, and most important, never to cut or even comb their hair. Samson had the option to refuse the vow, since his mother had made it without his consent, but because he accepted its attendant great strength and blessings, he was bound by the vow. He was huge, strong, and scary. He killed a lion with his bare hands. Though unarmed, he single-handedly killed dozens of Philistines. He was like Arnold in *The Terminator*. I think he just scared a lot of them to death. But when he succumbed to the temptations of the Philistine spy Delilah, and the Philistines cut off his hair, and he came into contact with the dead, he was punished by Hashem for breaking his vow and lost his amazing strength. He was jailed and blinded. Eventually, however, his hair grew back: he reaffirmed his vow. His strength returned for one final act of vengeance, and he destroyed a Philistine temple, and everybody in it.

I bring up Samson for two reasons: First because I as part of my "research," I rewatched Cecil B DeMille's *Samson and Delilah*, which my Dad took me to see 3 times in the Williamsport Pennsylvania Odeon Theatre when I was a kid. It is astonishingly goofy and everyone should watch it at least once, if only to see Angela Lansbury as a Philistine Princess. Second, if you want an interesting afternoon, Google "Nazarite vows" and see where that leads you, particularly after you've read this book. You'll find a lot of interesting new detours.

Worst of all: the Jews brought their god with them into the battle, and the enemy had nothing to offset that. They were superstitious, and this made them scared. And scared superstitious men lose battles.

• • •

So between their fierce fighting in defense of their homes, and the actual Presence of their god, the Jews got a reputation for being scary and hard to beat. And remember, the Jews were a superstitious bunch too. The Jews also believed the Ark was a big part of their victories, otherwise they wouldn't have brought it into battles so often. The Ark gave them confidence. And confident men win battles.

And the Jews kept winning.

• • •

Now everything I've said so far is just an introduction to tonight's story, which as the thrilling introduction suggested, is about King David, and David's sons, and the building of the Temple in Jerusalem.

So I'm going to fast forward again, 1400 years after the Ten Commandments and the Law, to about 1000 BCE.

We're going to fast forward just about to the time King David enters Jerusalem. Just about. But not quite.

• • •

Instead, we'll pick up the story about fifteen years before, at the time the Philistines are once again mounting a great big invasion into Judea.

It's the Iron Age now: and the Philistines were among the first people to smelt iron, and this gave them an advantage over their Bronze Age enemies. And even though the Jews had started also making iron weapons and tools, they probably were still a few steps behind the Philistines. Some of the spears have iron points, some of the swords are iron, but the big metal, the shields, helmets, breastplates, leg-guards, and the like, those are all still bronze.

At this point in our story, Philistines had just invaded Judea, and their army was assembled at Aphek, across from Ebenezer where the Jews had gathered. Big forces on both sides. Armies in those days mounted short wars fought with overwhelming forces, so figure two armies, each with about a 100,000 men facing each other.

Well the Philistines swooped in. And the Jews drove down to meet them, carrying the Ark.

And despite the Ark, that day the Philistines beat the living shit out of the Jews. They killed 34000 Jews.

And the Philistines captured the Ark.

• • •

The Jews stood knee deep in corpses and watched as a Philistine war wagon carried the Ark away.

The High Priest fell dead when the Jews told him it was gone.

• • •

Now they had the Ark, the Philistines found they had a pile of troubles too.

Bad things happened. Really bad things.

They took the Ark to the temple of their god Dagon. You can imagine the scene. Soldiers shouting, and singing, and clapping each other on the back, and pouring tubs of Gatorade over their victorious generals.

They set the Ark on the Temple floor before the idol of Dagon and went home with big sloppy grins on their faces.

The next morning, when the Philistine priests opened the temple doors, they found their great stone idol had been thrown down. They found Dagon lying on his face before the Ark. That must have been disturbing

So they got a bunch of big strong guys and set the idol back up on its pedestal. But the next day again they once again found Dagon on the ground – this time smashed into a hundred little idol pieces.

Now at this point, the villagers living around the temple began to get sick. Their skin erupted with tumors. So the villagers picked up the Ark and carried it to a different Dagon temple. But the same things happened there. In fact, every place they took the Ark, the people of that city also developed tumors.

Now when I get to this point in the story, everybody's eyes bug out and they start imagining the Ark was radioactive or something. But before you start thinking that, let me tell you, I think the actual story is even creepier.

So nobody wanted that damned Ark, that was for certain. Finally the Philistine King put his royal foot down and sent the Ark to a city that I guess he didn't like much: Ekron.

I'm going to break my vow again, because this Bible passage is just too wonderful: 'the people of Ekron cried out, "They have brought the ark to kill us and our people." Death filled the city with panic. Those who did not die were afflicted with tumors, and the outcry of the city went up to heaven.' (And I'm making this exception, because as a writer, I have to say: the Bible occasionally has some pretty snappy prose.)

After seven months of tumor eruptions, the Philistines had enough. They consulted with their priests and everybody decided to send the Ark back to the Jews; and not just the Ark but a guilt offering too: Gold. And not just gold, but gold fashioned to look like the tumors that afflicted their people.

A big basket full of golden tumors.

And here's the interesting thing: not just golden tumors, but golden rats.

Because along with tumors, each of these afflicted cities had become overrun with rats.

At this point, of course, all the Hermione Graingers in the class are waving their hands.

What happened to the Philistines, obviously, was the first recorded outbreak of the bubonic plague. Called that because of the giant swollen lymph glands it causes: Bubos.

The frantic, rat-bit, tumor-ridden Philistines put the Ark on the back of a driverless ox cart and whipped the oxen down the road toward Judea. They were too scared to put a driver in the cart with the Ark, so the cart just showed up again on its own, like the ghost ship that brought the Bubonic Plague to Italy in the Middle Ages.

That is how The Presence of the Lord returned to the Jew: by oxen wandering into Judea pulling a driverless cart.

• • •

Now here's the thing about the Judges: Hashem hadn't given them a written authorization or anything. Samuel, the Judge at this point in our story, for example: He just woke up one night, hearing a voice calling his name. Eventually he realized the voice was Hashem's. Nobody else heard the voice. He had to tell people; he had to convince them with his sincerity.

I guess he was pretty sincere. But Samuel was only a Judge because enough people had believed he'd been chosen by Hashem. And it was lots easier to believe a Judge had been chosen by Hashem when the Judge was making decisions that led to good outcomes. But sometimes – like when 34,000 Jews get slaughtered in a battle during Samuel's Judgeship – maybe a little doubt crept in.

• • •

The Philistines, though they'd been scared a bit by the Ark, were still pretty scary to the Jews.

So the Jews started thinking they needed something better than Samuel's judging, and they began to beg Samuel to appoint a King.

The Jews wanted a King so they could be a Kingdom, like other countries, and have an army led by a King like other countries. And more to the point, not to have Samuel and his rotten Judging calling the shots.

Hashem conveyed to the Jews through Samuel that if they had a King, they would suffer from the dealings of the King. Boy was that profound. The Jews definitely should have paid attention. But at that point the Jews didn't care. "Bring it on," said the Jews.

So Samuel begged Hashem for help, and sure enough, Hashem pointed out just the fellow to be a right mess as the King: Some guy name Saul. Saul was tall man, a head taller than most Jews. The Bible makes a point of that. Probably because when you come right down to it, Saul's height seems to be his only Royal Qualification.

But after Hashem gave him the nod, Samuel anointed Saul's head with oil and made him King.

• • •

Things went south, fast.

Samuel told Saul to go someplace to get ready for the next big battle, and wait there for Samuel's arrival in a week. Wait as in don't do anything until Samuel got there.

The week passed and Samuel didn't show. So Saul, on his own, made his first Royal Decision. He made a big fire and sacrificed a bunch of animals in preparation for the battle.

Samuel finally showed up, just after the sacrifice was over, and he was so pissed at this (since Saul was not a Levite priest, and therefore had no business sacrificing anything), that he removed Saul's kingship on the spot.

Samuel then sent the newly unkinged Saul and the Jews into battle with Hashem's direct orders to kill and burn everything: men, women, children, babies, animals. Basically, to make a Holocaust of the enemy.

Saul (again on his own) sent warnings to some of the Philistines Saul knew – a Philistine tribe who had helped the Jews when the Jews fled Egypt – warning them that they should get the hell out of Dodge before the Jewish armies arrived and wiped them out.

And Saul continued to screw things up: he did set fire and sword to a lot of stuff -- but not only had Saul allowed a Philistine tribe escape, he had his army only kill the *sick* livestock, keeping the *healthy* stock for the Jew's personal loot.

When Samuel heard about what Saul was doing, he was pissed off, and pissed off again, and pissed off again, and pissed off again, and finally so pissed off he personally followed behind the marauding Jews, and with his own hands killed the King of the Warned Tribe, and the healthy animals Saul had kept alive.

• • •

It's not clear from the Bible what Saul's status was at this point.

Was he a king or not? Once a king, always a king? Or could the king be made and unmade at the anointing Judge's will? For that you'd have to go to the Talmud. Which would answer Yes. Or No. Or Maybe.

Anyway, after Saul's repeated disobedience, Samuel never spoke to Saul again.

As for Hashem, the Bible tells us that he regretted that he had ever made Saul King.

Did you know the Lord ever felt regret? That's such a human emotion.

• • •

The Jews still followed Saul as King, though. Maybe they hadn't heard about the un-kinging or Hashem's regret.

But Samuel, and Hashem, made other plans. They set out together, looking for another King to anoint.

And soon they found the boy who would become King: David.

• • •

Now we come to the complicated story of Saul and David, and this story could easily be a multi-season Game-of-Thrones-style HBO miniseries. But I'm going to have to move fast if I want to get through tonight's talk. When we're done, I suggest you go back and read the original.³ It's a great story, wonderfully told.

I'm telling you about Saul, because part of the Great Miracle is about how the Jews once had a King, but at the time of the Miracle no longer did.

And I'm telling you about David because a big, big part of the Story of the Great Miracle is about Jerusalem, and the Temple, and what happened there, and so much of that was David's doing.

And most, most important, the Story of the Great Miracle is about how people, all of us, relate to The Lord. And no one – no, not even Jesus -- changed and defined that relationship more than King David.

And anyway, it's a fun story.

• • •

Hashem led Samuel out into sheep country, to the tent of a man called Jesse, and told him to pick whichever of Jesse's sons would make the best King. Samuel didn't like any of them, though. Then Jesse, like an afterthought, sent for his youngest son, David, a shepherd who was far away, tending sheep. The minute he arrived and Samuel saw him, and he instantly anointed him.

At that point, I guess, Judea had two kings.

• • •

Naturally, Saul meets David. Life is nothing if not Ironic. Here's how it happens:

King Saul by this point is a Very Troubled Man, and that makes for a Very Troubled King. Finally somebody suggests that what The King needs is some nice soothing harp music, and he says he knows just the guy: a kid musician named David.

How nobody happens to know that this kid has just been anointed as the new king by Samuel is beyond me, but nobody does. They just send for the kid with the magic harp.

So David shows up, and plays his harp, and Saul calms down a bit. Saul likes the kid so much, he makes him his armor-bearer.

Now Saul's gigantic army is located in the Valley of Elah, sitting in a seemingly endless faceoff with the Philistines' gigantic army, and things are going nowhere. Nothing but skirmishes that kill a lot of people and give neither side an advantage. So both gigantic armies just sit there.

Finally the Philistines send out a giant named Goliath, who strides forth each day and challenges any Jew to single combat to decide the matter.

The only Jew who finally steps up to the plate is David.

We all know what happens next. Don't we? David and Goliath, the slingshot, etc., etc. After David kills Goliath, he chops off the giant's head with the giant's sword. (You may not have heard what happened to Goliath's enormous sword after that, but we'll get to that part.)

³ 1 Samuel chapters 16-24, if you're interested. It's only about 20 pages.

Anyway, one dead Goliath later, David is a celebrity. And Saul and his family enter into a rather complicated love/hate relationship with the Jew's newest hero.

• • •

Saul has three sons, and David becomes best friends with Saul's oldest son, Jonathan. As the two of them pal around in Saul's encampment, there's cheering: "Saul has killed thousands, but David has killed tens of thousands."

Of course David hadn't. He'd only killed like one really big Philistine. But that's what people were cheering, and that had to be tough on Saul, the King who had, in fact, actually killed thousands.

So while Jonathan loves David, Saul hates him.

• • •

Saul hates David so much, he offers his daughter to David in marriage. Go figure. But David rejects the King's offer, saying he doesn't own enough to be worthy of the offer.⁴ Then Saul started to hate David for rejecting his daughter.

After marrying off daughter #1 to some other guy, Saul still hates David so much he offers him daughter #2. To cut through David's expected refusal, Saul says the bride price is simple: David needs to bring him one hundred Philistine foreskins. Knowing that David can't refuse that sort of a warrior's challenge. Knowing that he can send David into danger and have the Philistines do the wet work for him.⁵

• • •

David took a bunch of guys and attacked some unsuspecting, uncircumcized Philistines and comes back not with just 100, but with 200 fresh foreskins, which he brings to Saul. He counts them out, one by one in front of the court.

This is the sort of gesture that people talk about, you know. That story would definitely make the rounds.

I'm guessing that by this time, the story of David's anointing is also making the rounds. I'm guessing everybody in the camp knew both stories, and that everybody had an opinion.

Saul certainly had an opinion. He follows through with the marriage: he has to. But he wants David dead. If he can't get him dead, he wants him gone.

• • •

Saul asks Jonathan to kill David. That's how bad it is: He asks his own son to kill his own son's best friend. Jonathan, bless his heart, tells Saul to Drop Dead, or words to that effect.

And yet while he's doing this, while he's begging his son to kill him, Saul still keeps David around to play his harp at the court.

One day while David is playing Saul gets so crazy, he throws a spear at him. David ducks. So then Saul gets up out of his throne and chases David around the room with a spear.

David, no dummy, runs away.

⁴ We haven't yet talked much about marriage among the Jews of those days, but they were set up as mergers of family fortunes. So the rejection was meant to appear polite. Really it was a thumb in Saul's eye.

⁵ This is the first time that foreskinning comes up explicitly, by the way. After this challenge, however, lots of stories mention it: the Jews cutting off the foreskins of their defeated enemies, alive or dead. But to this novelist's mind, it seems to me the Jews must have done this before. That's how it seems to me at least. I'd bet Jewish warriors wore foreskins on their belts like trophies, the way Apaches wore scalps. Another thing that made the Jews scary to their enemies.

All this in Saul's court. In Saul's tent. You can just imagine the gossip.

• • •

Things have gone too far to dissemble. Saul stops playing footsie: He sends a band of his trusted men to kill David, but his daughter, David's foreskin-won wife, gets wind of it and tells David to run away.

• • •

Away from the encampment someplace, Jonathan meets with David. For some reason, the Bible takes about two full chapters describing how the two of them try to figure out what David has done to displease Saul. Because, apparently, the two of them were pretty dense.

Later, when Jonathan talks to him about David, Saul gets so pissed at his eldest son for trying to protect David, that he even chases *him* around the tent with a spear. Saul then explains: 'As long as David lives, you won't be the King when I die.'

So Saul isn't just angry, or bitter. He's just greedy. In the end, Saul's just another goddam greedy king.

• • •

Jonathan then finds David, and tells him that Saul is sending more men to kill him. So David immediately takes some of his own loyal men and flees the hell as far as he can get from Saul.

David and his merry men, on the run, flee so fast that they flee without food, even without weapons.

• • •

Remember that the Tabernacle was always moving around? Remember the table of holy Showbread? Remember Goliath's sword?

• • •

David finds himself in the town where the Tabernacle is stationed and goes to the High Priest. He tells the High Priest a bunch of obvious lies and begs him for food.

The sympathetic priest says he has nothing but day-old showbread, which only priests were supposed to eat in a special ceremony. But David tells the High Priest some more lies, and the High Priest hands over the loaves of showbread for David and his men to eat. And, almost as an afterthought, the High Priest mentions that he happens to have Goliath's sword. Wrapped up in a cloth, no less. So David gets that too. Now well-fed and armed, he runs for the hills.

Saul finds out about this and has the High Priest killed. And the High Priest's family too. And all the priests associated with the Tabernacle, they're killed. And all their families. And all the men of the town. And all the women, children. And all the infants. And all the animals.

Jews. All of them. Saul's own people, rubbed out by their own King. Whatever mercy, whatever moral hesitancy Saul showed earlier that so infuriated Samuel? Well, that's gone now. Are we better off, now Saul doesn't hesitate?

Saul really hates David.

• • •

Meanwhile, David flees to a cave in the hills. People come to him, offering themselves to his service. While he's trying to figure out what to do about being pursued by Saul, David notices a town under attack by the Philistines, and takes his newly fed band to battle. Of course they triumph.

So here's David, on the run, protecting the Jews. And Saul, the King, mercilessly rubbing out Jews right and left, even priests and their wives and children.

Of course this comparison makes David look even better, and Saul look even worse.

• • •

Saul chases David all over the hills of Judea. At one point, Saul and his men are on one side of a mountain, and David and his men on the other. Before they meet, however, Saul hears that the Philistines are about to attack a nearby town, and reluctantly breaks off to go fight them. He actually has to make a decision. Things had gotten that bad.

So, without knowing it, even the Philistines were helping David.

• • •

At this point in the Biblical narrative comes the heartwarming story of how things finally work out between Saul and David.

Saul and three thousand men chase David and his couple of hundred men through some godforsaken hills in the Judean wilderness. When they see them coming, David and his men hide in the back of a cave.

Saul decides he needs to take a shit, and it so happens he likes privacy, and also it so happens he decides to go to this very cave where David is hiding.

While he's taking his shit, David creeps up behind Saul with a sword. Maybe Goliath's sword.

• • •

I'll let you think about that scene. The cave. The shit. The sword.

• • •

David must have been some creeper. Saul has no idea he is there.

But instead of killing him, David quietly cuts off the corner of Saul's robe. And Saul doesn't feel a thing.

• • •

Saul, now nice and emptied, strolls back down the hill. David goes back to his men and weeps. Not because he had his chance to kill Saul and didn't take it – but because he'd done something awful: he'd cut off the corner of Saul's robe.

"Saul's the King, and here I am cutting up his robe! I'm a jerk, that's what I am!" says David.

"What you are is fucked up," his two hundred men reply. "You should have fucking killed him."

• • •

David chases down the hill after Saul, little scrap of robe in hand. He tells Saul he could have killed him, but he didn't; and that he has never meant Saul any harm.

Saul weeps to hear this, and calls David his son, says that David will be King after him, and begs David to be kind to his family when he's King.

And the two get all mushy and everything.

• • •

But here's the thing. This is an Old Testament Bible story. I don't know if you've ever actually read the Bible, but here's how these things work. First comes the story. Then right after comes another version of the same story, like the first story never happened. Right after that, a third story that contradicts the first two.

In this instance, right after this dramatic reconciliation, there's a different version of David reconciling after sparing Saul's life (this involves a servant and spear, but the basic emotional outline is the same.)

And then comes a third version, which is a lot stranger.

• • •

In the third version, Saul doesn't take a shit, and David doesn't weep.

In the third version, David, the anointed King of the Jews, signs up with the Philistines.

If "my enemy's enemies are my friends," David thinks, "then me and the Philistines are Best Friends Forever."

David takes his wives and his family and six hundred men (in this version, he has three times as many men), and his wives and his and children, and his men's wives and families across the border. The Philistines give him a little town to call his own.

So David becomes the ruler of his own little Philistine town for the next 16 months.

Once David moves in with the Philistines, Saul stops coming after him.

Once David moves in, of course, he and his men get busy. They attack a half dozen nearby territories, and they rub everybody out. Men, women and children. David keeps the cattle alive though. David massacres everyone because – well because they have cattle. He keeps the cattle.

He had to do this, he tells his new masters, because he didn't want to be betrayed to Saul. David really hates Saul, he tells them, so much that he needed had to rub everybody out to keep them quiet.

Those suddenly dead Philistines don't seem to mean anything to their countrymen. They're pretty new as Philistines go, as they'd only been conquered a few years before. The other Philistines don't really give two shits now that they're dead. But David's new Philistine masters are impressed with how much David hates Saul. All that rubbing out took a lot of work! So they invite David to join a massive attack they plan to make on Saul.

• • •

Saul is so scared when he sees the size of the Philistine army arrayed against him – the one David is about to join – that he seeks out the services of a witch. This is the only time a witch is mentioned in the Bible. She conjures up the spirit of Samuel (who had died a few years before), and the dead Judge curses him.⁶ And Saul pays attention to the spirit's bullshit and weeps. He's unmanned. That's how bad it is for Saul, who only a few months before used to be a pretty competent general.

• • •

While David and his men are joined with the army arrayed against Saul, some other Philistines – who don't trust David one little bit – act on their mistrust. They attack David's territory, burn everything, and take all David's women and children captive.

When they hear about this attack on their families, David and his men leave the battle against Saul, and go after the Philistines plunderers. They beat the hell out of the plunderers, and rescue their plundered families.

Those plunderers had been doing a lot of plundering. There was more than enough plunder to go round. So David sends emissaries with the freshly captured plunder to the tribal leaders of Judea, wrapped up with a little gift tag saying "From David with love."

⁶ Although this is a famous scene, it has nothing at all to do with the story of Hanukkah, but I have to mention it because my wife has complained mightily every time I have tried to leave it out. She doesn't know much about King Saul, but she knows this scene, and she likes it. In fact, she's a little steamed I haven't given it a lot more air time, actually.

You may have heard about this witch's name, even if you don't know this about specific incident. She's called The Witch of Endor. That's why they named the mother-in-law-witch in Bewitched "Endora."

• • •

At the same time, the Philistines are beating the hell out of Saul. They kill all three of his sons, including our favorite, Jonathan. Then they come after Saul.

Saul tries to get his armor-bearer to kill him. The armor bearer won't do it. So Saul falls on his own sword.

Adios, Saul, first King of Israel.

• • •

This is one of those times when I need to take a moment. To rise on a point of personal privilege.

You see I feel bad. I know by now when I tell this Story that it's the first time most of my listeners have ever heard these tales of Saul and David.

Most tourists in India take the one day drive-by tour of Agra. High-speed morning train from Delhi. The bus that takes you the Red Fort, and to the restaurant next door for the tour-included all-you-can-eat buffet. Down the road to Fatehpur Sikri, past the camels and the men with the trained dancing bears. Then back to Agra, with a rest stop for tea, and the mandatory layover at some chotchke store selling snow globes of the Taj Mahal. Which you still haven't seen. Then your one hour guided tour of the Taj Mahal, which includes pointing out the place where the silver bridge would cross the river to the Black Taj, which never got built. Then hustled on to the bus, back to the train station, and on the way some wise-ass like me will tell you that the whole Black Taj story is a fantasy made up to impress the colonial British. Then the train to Delhi, everyone sleeping, so exhausted and slack-mouthed they drool and have no dreams.

That's the one-day tour of Agra.

And then there's the tour you make for yourself, where you spend four hours in the Taj Mahal gardens, seated beneath a tamarind tree filled with silver-headed crows, and you just stare at that huge marble dome because it's so beautiful, you can't yet bear to go inside.

On the one-day tour, as the tour bus chugs past it, the guide points to the left: That is the Rambagh, the garden of the Emperor Babar! All you see is trees, and a red sandstone gate. Some tourists look up, A few even get out their cameras. Click, click, click.

But I spent two full days in the Rambagh. Beyond that gate, an old deserted Mughal garden. Nothing much, I guess. Tourists don't go there because it's so Empty. And yet I spent two days in that Empty Garden and didn't see even half of all there is to see. It takes that long maybe, to realize that the Emptiness is what Babar had wanted there.

Did the drive-by tourists see the Rambagh? Yes. No.

So I have mixed feelings about being the tour guide on this drive-by Hanukkah tour of the Old Testament. I feel bad that this will be the first and maybe the last time many you will hear these stories.

• • •

I feel bad about King Saul.

After racing past the story of his life, I say: Adios, Saul.

What a wise-ass. What a wise-ass sendoff. Well, I guess that's my portion in this life.

But I chose that particular wise-ass send-off carefully, because I have a full, broken heart, and when I say adios, I mean it. With all my heart.

A Dios, Saul. Go with the Lord.

• • •

Saul's story is the first real heartbreaker in the Old Testament.

At least it breaks my heart. I'm a flawed man, and the story of the rise and fall of another flawed man really resonates.

When he first shows up, Saul's just some guy whose only flaw is being tall, and suddenly he finds himself standing in the Presence, oil dripping from his hair, told to be the King of the Chosen People of the Lord of Hosts.

Even Abraham didn't get made King. Not even Moses.

Saul alone was first made King.

Told to be a King, Saul instantly gets shot down by the man who anointed him, the very first time he tries to act like one.

Shot down because he tries act like a king; to offer sacrifices to the Lord he serves. Shot down because he shows compassion to his enemies. Shot down and locked out: the prophet who anointed him, his own patron Samuel turns his back on Saul within a week; within a week walks out, and never turns back.

How do we feel about what happens?

The Judge and prophet just walks out on him?

Hashem feels regret – but doesn't do anything more to help his chosen King?

Leaving Saul with what: all the responsibilities and no authority? No help? No guidance? And for sure, no fun?

No wonder Saul falls apart. No wonder the coming of David into his life breaks his soul in half. No wonder he hates David so much he gives him his daughter for a bride.

Could Saul foretell that David would turn traitor and join his enemies...did that insight drive Saul's anger? Or did Saul's desperate jealous hope to save his kingship give David no other place of sanctuary except with the Philistines?

I said earlier that the Old Jews were nothing like us: well this is where that changes. Saul is just like us. I know Saul's story because it is my story, too. Saul is just like me.

Adios, Saul. Go with the Lord.

• • •

Yes, I feel bad giving you nothing but this skimpy drive-by tour.

On your left, King Saul.

All I can say is: Come back some day. Come back and sit in the Empty Garden.

• • •

Oh, yes, I nearly forgot. I said I'd get to Israel.

Once the tribes had gotten the King they wanted, they wanted a name for their Kingdom. All the Jews trace their ancestry back to Jacob, the grandson of Abraham.

Jacob's ladder. Remember? Jacob's dream of malaks that were sort of like angels but weren't angels walking on a ladder that stretched from earth to heaven? When he woke up – or didn't wake up, maybe – he saw that pair of disembodied arms that wrestled with him all the rest of the night. Whether those were the arms of a malak, or of Hashem himself is something scholars love to debate. As if there's actually an answer.

When morning broke, the Owner of the Disembodied Arms spoke to Jacob, I guess with a disembodied mouth, and renamed him "Israel," which is supposed to mean "wrestled with the Lord."

The Jews, since they're all basically related to Jacob, Sarah's grandson, ergo, were the People of Israel. When Saul united them into a kingdom, they began to call themselves Israelites.

The Wrestlers. How appropriate.

In those times, names were a big deal. I guess they still are.

• • •

Well, keeping the next part of my Story short is going to be hard for me, because I could write a couple of books about David.

Again I'm forced to be the tour guide on the Great Miracle bus tour. Get out your cameras, folks: that's King David coming up on our right.

• • •

I think I'm going to have skip most of the history lesson. Here are the bullet points: David united all twelve tribes (Saul, up to this point had only united ten of them), drove away the Philistines, and made peace with the countries bordering the now united Israel.

But for our Story, those vast historical actions are nothing compared to this:

David was the first mystic poet. And his greatest legacy was not his kingdom, or his palaces; not even Jerusalem and the Temple.

His great legacy were his Psalms.

All the while David was on the run, hiding in caves, fleeing for his life or butchering his enemies, he was writing poems.

Songs, he called them: Psalms. And I wish that we had their melodies too, but only the wonderful words have been preserved.

And there had never been words like them.

• • •

David turned his brightest and darkest moments into poems; prayers really.

David really broke new ground with his poem/prayers. He told his deepest feelings, his joys, his terrors, his despair, his gratitude, to a deity that seemed to be so close that he could whisper. He spoke as if Hashem were listening; not just listening, but about to reply.

No one had ever spoken to Hashem like David.

For the Jews, it was like a light came on. David's psalms changed the Jews forever.

• • •

They'd had their prophets, their Judges, who railed at them about the Law, demanding renewed obedience. For the Judges, Hashem was like the Old Grandfather of the tribe, the elder leader, and the prophets were like the angry dad sent to whip the wayward children into shape. Fear of The Lord: that was the message of the Judges.

But here was David, speaking of Hashem without scolding, without anger. Hashem was a shepherd, David said, and if the shepherd raises his voice, the sheep run away. David's god spoke softly to his frightened sheep. David's god stretched out his hand..

David showed his people, the children of Israel, a different god, and a new way to be with the Him.

David counted his blessings aloud and thanked Hashem directly. He spoke of his doubts, his fears, of the dangers and betrayals all around him and begged Hashem for protection. Entirely confident that Hashem would answer his heartfelt prayer.

• • •

The religion of the Jews changed almost instantly. Their new King hadn't just brought triumph and peace. He'd brought a whole fresh, dynamic personal understanding of their god.

That the Lord wasn't some big cloud of angry thunder out in the sky someplace.

The Lord was a shepherd, right here on earth, caring for his sheep. Blessed be the name of the Lord.⁷

• • •

And let's then think, for just a moment, how it would feel to be Jew, worrying 23 out of every 24 hours that some damned infraction of the Law you'd made, or your parents or grandparents had made, would be met with an angry heavenly judgment that would completely destroy your life.

Instead, here were these songs, these prayers of consolation and compassion. Here was a Lord more gentle, more present.

Is it any wonder that David won the hearts and minds of Israel? A triumphant warrior king, yes, but also a musician whose songs soothed not only Saul's troubled soul, but the souls of all the family of Jews.

• • •

When it came time for David, the triumphant King of Israel to choose a place to make his home, he chose Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is the Oldest Continuing Character in my Story, except of course, for Hashem.

After the Great Flood, Noah took the Skull of Adam to a hill, and buried it there. The hill became known as Golgotha: the Place of the Skull. The town that grew up around it was Jerusalem.

The Jews of ancient times were nomads, and unlike other cultures they buried the bodies of their dead, they didn't burn them.

But as nomads, they moved with the seasons, and the weather, wherever grass was growing to feed their flocks. So after years after changing venues they could never be sure they'd be able to find the graves of their loved ones again.

So some of the Jews began using ossuaries – small stone boxes that held the bones of the dead. After a year or so they'd go back to the fresh graves, dig up the corpse, and place the dry bare bones in an ossuary. Then they'd take the ossuary Jerusalem, to Golgotha, to the Place of Adam's Skull.

They cut niches into sandstone hills and leave the bones of their ancestors there, near the bones of their grandfather Adam.

Over time the niches became rooms, and the rooms became tunnels. The hills around Golgotha became a warren of graves.

Naturally, a community grew up around the hill: inns, shops, priests with the blood of the Red Heifer.

Jerusalem.

⁷ Stop what you're doing right this minute and read your favorite Psalm. Any Psalm is way, way better than anything in this book. If you don't have a favorite Psalm, read one of these:

Psalm 19: The Heavens are telling of the Lord's Glory

Psalm 22: My Lord, why have you forsaken me?

Psalm 23: The Lord is my shepherd

Psalm 130: Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord

Or basically any Psalm at all. Really you can't go wrong.

The Book of Psalms is easy to find in a Christian Bible: In Sunday school they used to teach us to open the Christian Bible to the exact middle, and you'd find the 23rd Psalm. (Usually you'd find the 93rd, but that's pretty close.) If you've got a Tanakh, you'd want to go about 2/3 of the way in.

Jerusalem was the only truly permanent dot on the map of Israel. A city might be moved, but not its graves.

In the center of Jerusalem was a tall hill, Mount Zion.⁸

David decided to build a wall around the city on the hill. To place his palace there, and to make it the capitol.

Most important, for my Story, he decided to bring the Tabernacle to Jerusalem, and put it on Mount Zion permanently.

• • •

That's how we come to the story of David dancing naked before the Ark as he brought it to the top of Mount Zion.

Because nobody else could have gotten away with that cheeky bit of business.

Only a mystic poet warrior King.

• • •

For all his greatness, David was a man. Flawed as we all are. Facing personal confusion and tragedies as we all do.

He fell in love with Bathsheba the wife of one of his generals, Uriah. Bathsheba told him to bug off, she was married.

Not for long. David sent Uriah to a battle, and gave the commander orders to leave Uriah behind to be killed. Then David moved in and married Bathsheba.

Hashem was not pleased. Bathsheba bore David's son, and Hashem killed it.

When it comes to personal confusion and tragedy, consider the story of David's son Absalom. Another of David's sons, Amnon, grew enamored of Absalom's sister – Amnon's half-sister – and when she wouldn't have him, Amnon raped her. Absalom bided his time, and two years later he killed Amnon. David wouldn't speak to Absalom for more than two years, but eventually forgave him.

But Absalom had other ideas. He set himself up as a king in one of David's territories, and set up a rebellion against David. David fled Jerusalem, taking the Ark with him. Absalom entered David's palace and had sex with all of David's concubines, who had been left behind. Then he sent an army after David.

Outside Jerusalem, David mustered his own army. There was a battle, and Absalom fled on mule back. His long, lustrous hair – for which, the chronicles tell us, he was considered the handsomest man in Israel – got caught in the branches of an oak tree. There he was, hanging from the oak tree by his hair. Twisting slowly, slowly in the wind.

One of David's generals came with javelins and killed him.

When he heard the news, David cried: 'If only I had died instead of you, Absalom, my son, my son!' The first time I read those words, I cried too.

A few years and few more battles and rebellions later, David died.

⁸ Golgotha, of course, is the place where Jesus was crucified. Mount Zion may or may not have been the same hill as Golgotha. Whether or not it's Golgotha, Mount Zion has a lot of other history.

We haven't talked about it, because it has no direct relevance to the Hanukkah miracle, but Hashem ordered Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. At the last minute He called it off. Anyway, to do the deed, Abraham took Isaac to the top of Mount Zion.

Muhammad is going to get mentioned even less than Jesus, but he also flew into heaven from Mount Zion, which is why it's sacred to the Muslims too.

• • •

Now when he came to Jerusalem, David had promised the Lord that he would build a Temple; now that the Tabernacle was in a permanent place, why not also make a permanent building for it?

After his little peccadillo with the general's wife, Hashem came back with an order. Not you, said the Lord. You can't even keep it in your pants. I won't have you building a temple for me. Your son can do it, not you.

Now that must have stung.

So the task fell to David's second son, the new King, Solomon.

• • •

By the time Solomon assumed the throne of Israel, the country had grown rich. In those days, half the point of a war was to loot everything you could from the enemy. And David had conquered a lot of countries and looted a lot of loot.

Furthermore, other countries sent lots of riches to the Tabernacle. They were hedging their bets twice. If the Jewish god were stronger than their native gods, they'd shown respect: maybe Hashem wouldn't send tumors and rats. If the Jewish god was not stronger than their gods, maybe the Israelites wouldn't rub them out.

Anyway a lot of riches came to the Tabernacle.

So when Solomon began to build the permanent home for the Ark, the Temple, he had a lot of cash to spend on it. And he, believe me, spent it.

Tomorrow night I'll talk about the Temple. Tonight's talk is too long already, so we'll save that.

Tonight I'll finish up with what happened when Solomon dedicated the new Temple.

• • •

Remember, the Temple wasn't part of the Law. It was the bright idea of David, enacted by Solomon. So nobody was really sure if Hashem would approve of the stone Temple, built to replace the Tabernacle which was laid out in the Law.

How the Jews got satisfied that Hashem was cool with new Temple is this:

Solomon stood on the steps of the Temple's stone Tabernacle – the building meant to replace the tent Tabernacle. The priests had moved the Holy Vessels to their new home, and carried in the Ark and placed it on the Mercy Seat.

On the steps of the Tabernacle, Solomon called on the Lord to sanctify the Temple.

The skies opened up, and a great ball of fire fell into the courtyard in front of the steps.

The ball of flame swept across the courtyard, up the steps past Solomon, through the doors and into the stone Tabernacle. For hours, smoke and flame poured out of the doors and windows of the Tabernacle, so fiercely that no one dared to enter.

That was how the Jews knew the Temple had been sanctified: Hashem sent fire.

Remember this moment when we talk about the Great Miracle.

Night Four

The wayward thoughts that run through our minds as we light the candles and sing the blessings? I believe that those are the true unspoken prayers of our hearts.

I believe that the Lord hears these unspoken prayers more clearly than any that we say aloud. And I want so much for the unspoken prayer of my heart to be pure and worthy in the Sight of the Lord.

But typically my unspoken prayers go more like this: Wish I had one of those latkes. Or: She looks hot. Or: What if I get cancer. Or: – well, you know the sort of things I mean.

Oh to be one of those true lovers of the Lord, whose heart is filled with simple praise. I've met some of those people. Wish I were one. I wish I wish I wish.

• • •

Now in the history of the world no city has been more influential than Jerusalem, and no building more important than Solomon's Temple.

Yes, the back window of your pickup may still have a faded decal of the Twin Towers, with a big bald-eagle head in the background, and an American flag, but I'll bet the words "Never Forget" are starting to fade. Some die-hard Texans might still remember the Alamo, but do they remember that it was monastery? If so, do they remember which order built it, and when?

I'm about to describe a building that has been destroyed for twenty-six hundred years.¹

But it is one building that has never been forgotten. In many ways it's more influential today than the day it was destroyed.

It doesn't need a decal or a catch phrase: Three times a day, Orthodox Jews pray the Amidah: prayers for the Temple's restoration. Christians too remember it as they read the Passion story every year.

The memory of the Temple burns through great swaths of history. The Masons based their secrets on the Temple, whole libraries of mystical claptrap about its construction. The Knights Templar — who in the Middle Ages actually created a sort of uber-government similar to what the wing-nut conspiracy geeks imagine the UN to be doing in modern times — based their order out of the remains of Solomon's Temple.

The Temple Mount is one of the most fought over pieces of land on the planet. You can't count the souls or measure the blood that has fallen there. The ancient site has changed hands too many times to count; probably once or twice more since you started reading this paragraph.

• • •

The Jews — at least at that point in their history — were not a religion in the way we think of religions today. There was no way to opt in or opt out of being a Jew. You had to be a Jew because you were born a Jew. Jews were bound to Hashem by blood and blood alone. Jews were a family, and that family was inescapably ruled by its deity.

The creation of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem was the Jews' defining moment.

I choose the word carefully. Defining.

The Temple's creation defined them. And after the Temple was destroyed, its destruction defined them, and it continued to define them for the rest of time.

There is no other religion like Judaism, no other society like the Jews, no other building the Temple, no other event like its destruction. None. None. None.

¹ Or 2000 years ago, depending on which version of the Temple you're referring to.

So in the Story of the Great Miracle, Jerusalem and the Temple are characters as important as Hashem himself. So we're going to backtrack a little and fill in that backstory.

Now for me, it's interesting to have gotten to this part of the story at last. Up until now, about 99% of the Story has had to come straight out of the Old Testament: there simply were no other sources. Finally we've come to a point where there *are* additional sources. So now the Story gets richer and deeper.

And in an oblique way, we have King David to thank for this.

What's happening to the nature of the Story, in effect, is the same thing that began happening to the Israel, thanks to the changes David introduced: non-Jewish influences began intermingling with Jewish society.

In just a few years, David completely transformed Jewish society. Before David, the Jews were mostly tribal, mostly nomadic, mostly isolated, mostly living in fear of their neighbors, mostly poor.

Then David created the nation of Israel. He united all the tribes of Israel under one monarchy. He beat hell out of the Philistines, and then he beat hell out of the rest Israel's neighbors.

United under David, Israel became a military force to be reckoned with. Israel took a lot of loot from the Philistines, and then started getting lots of tribute from its neighbors. David spread the wealth among his people: he was a generous King. So poor old Israel became not-so-badly-off Israel.

The Jews had never before had a ruling King (the first king Saul had been so busy scrambling on battlefields, trying to keep his struggling kingship alive, he never really had time to rule).

When the victorious David brought the Ark to Jerusalem, he also established for the Jews for the first time a central government. And even though there still were tribes following their flocks around the hills, now they had a government, and the government was staying put.

Not only that, the Tabernacle was staying put too. So David had established both a political and spiritual nexus for the Jews. And anywhere the political and spiritual get nexused, the commercial quickly nexuses right along beside it.

David's government had a lot of cash, cash looted from its defeated enemies. And David started spending it, building, building, building as Kings with cash like to do.

He built a magnificent palace. He started fortifying. He fortified the hell out of everything. That meant building walls and towers and moats and redoubts.

He formed a standing army, and armed them. He stationed troops at strategic locations. He doubled the height of the walls of Jerusalem. He expanded Jerusalem's water supply, and built a siege-proof network of underground tunnels that carried water from the area's many springs (and water still runs through them – you can walk through them beneath city today).

He turned what had been a graveyard into an actual city.

Because the Tabernacle now lived in Jerusalem, constantly and consistently, and because the Law required every Jew to visit the Tabernacle at least three times a year, Jerusalem needed permanent ways to accommodate visitors: inns with rooms and food. These popped up overnight. You know the laws of economics: demand creates supply. And since they were empty during the non-festival times -- you know the laws of economics -- supply created demand. Because people had three reasons a year to go to Jerusalem, because there was so much going on there, they soon found even more reasons. So shop owners, craftsmen, builders, soldiers: they and their families began flocking to David's Holy City.

To help all this flocking, David built roads throughout his kingdom, radiating from Jerusalem like threads of a spider web. He built a big main road, the King's Road (every kingdom eventually gets a King's Road), from Israel's northern to its southern border. Jerusalem sat smack in the center of everything.

Thus David began one of those Golden Ages. Every great kingdom has a Golden Age at the start of a rich peace, when there is more work than people, and more than enough money to go around. This was Israel's.

Money began to pour through of Jerusalem. They don't call it liquidity for nothing. Money flows. Nothing changes a desert like liquidity. Think of what happened to the dry Middle East once OPEC got started. That was just a monetary change: Now imagine adding unquestioned military superiority to that river of money. David had, after all, made Israel a superpower.

Go ahead, imagine what a fast-flowing, churning river of money would do to a insular society of hard-scrabble farmers and nomad herders. And all in the space of twenty years.

• • •

David's changes drastically altered the daily life of the Jews. Their nomadic, agricultural economy quickly became a stationary market economy. They made money by selling and buying, and soon simply by lending and spending, not even by harvesting and herding. They started paying others to harvest and herd. Instead of being slaves, they started buying them.

With so much money floating around, and with so many jobs to be filled, outsiders, non-Jews became attracted to Israel, and especially to Jerusalem. To endear themselves to their new Jewish neighbors, these newcomers made gifts to the Lord of the Tabernacle.

Similarly, the rulers of the countries around the newly Israel sent gifts to the Tabernacle.

Everybody was pretty superstitious in those days, and superstitious people hedge their karmic bets. You could never really be certain your big stone idol would measure up to the Ark that held the formless Lord of Israel. Better just to send some gold and a few oxen to stay on His Good Side.

Suddenly, thanks to David, Israel, Jerusalem, and the Tabernacle were on a roll.

And under David's son King Solomon, things really got rolling.

Solomon wanted to build a hell of a Temple, one he and the newly mighty People of Israel could be proud of. And did he ever succeed.

Solomon's Temple was, in every sense of the word: Awesome.

• • •

Awe.²

These days, we have so much wealth, so much grandeur in our modern world; centuries upon centuries of cathedrals being torn down so even grander skyscrapers might be built where once they stood that we really can't imagine a world without height, without glass and steel walls soaring, without concrete rising so high we need to crane our necks.

But the world at the time of the Great Miracle and at the time of Solomon was mostly plain and flat with nothing very grand at all -- particularly the world of the nomadic Jews, whose god required they never stray too far from the Tabernacle.

Some Jews might remember tales they'd heard of the great pyramids their forefathers helped to build, but none had ever seen them. No -- for these Jews, the tallest things they'd ever seen were mountains, trees, and high clouds in the clear sky.

Houses were small. One small story high, except in Jerusalem, as more people moved there: there the outside staircase to the flat rooftop with a second bedroom was a major innovation.

² I wanted to make sure I got just the right word: **Awe** (n.): A mixed emotion of reverence, respect, and wonder inspired by authority, genius, great beauty, sublimity, or might.

Nailed it.

The towering walls of Jerusalem would impress no one today. But they astonished the Israelites. A walk along Jerusalem's twenty-one foot walls was dizzying enough; they'd cling to the edges and look down in terror; and the heart-stopping climb of the extra seven feet to the top of a redoubt tower would be reserved for the cold-blooded city guards, and for young men who wanted to show off for their sweethearts.

Modern persons like ourselves would scarcely notice the height. Modern persons like ourselves ride glass elevators up the sides of buildings 20 or 30 times that height while we chitchat, and blow our noses and complain that there's advertising on the elevator's internet video.

• • •

So you need to imagine yourself actually living in that ancient time to understand what it was like to see Jerusalem. To understand the awe of seeing Solomon's Temple.

You need to clear your head of every major structure you have ever seen. No skyscrapers. No office parks. No shopping malls. No stadiums. No universities. No elementary schools. No city halls. No McMansions. No Seven-elevens.

No airports. No train tracks. No highways. No planes, trains or automobiles.

No roar of leaf blowers in the morning. No traffic whine. No fog of mercury lamps at the edge of the horizon when the sun goes down.

At night, an endless emptiness of sky, and stars big as pearls, so brilliant white they seem to hang just out of reach. And pinprick stars that form clouds of silver light that dance across a sea so black you think you might fall into it.

You need to imagine waking at dawn, and walking as the sun rose, and then walking for mile upon mile on a silent dusty road as it grows light, and seeing nothing but hills of green grass and brown, and white outcrop rock, and when you look ahead to see exactly what you saw behind you, and here and there an olive tree, and one or two gnarled fig trees, and maybe a flock of fat, dirty sheep, a yapping yellow dog chasing some scurrying, bleating brown goats.

Every so often, a dank, still pond surrounded by short, thick date palms, home to dozens of yammering, flapping crows, but not much shade.

Otherwise everything so quiet you can hear a shepherd's reed pipe miles away.

And after an hour of walking, as the sun moves by inches higher in the sky, and another hour, and another, everything, everything, just the same, just the same, except the always burning sun.

• • •

So when at last you see the white walls of Jerusalem, you blink a little. You rub your tired eyes.

And as you walk another hour, and that ring of white stone around the hills of Jerusalem looks no more close than it did an before, you realize just how huge what you're seeing must be. And now, despite your weariness, you begin feel an urgency.

Just about the time you first see those white walls, you also notice that king has planted tall palm trees along the road. And from here to the city the road is wide, and flat, and smooth. There's shade from those tall trees, which means your eyes can rest, which means you see more colors: Like blue bird wings in the green fronds, tipped with yellow, orange and red.

Squat, sand-colored houses cluster along the roadside now. There are wells beside the road, and near the wells, little boys splash in puddles. Dogs chase cats. You can smell bread baking near the houses.

The closer you get to the city, the more crowded the road becomes. Suddenly, it seems, everyone is coming or going to Jerusalem. Here the robes women wear are more colorful. Some wear ribbons in their hair. There are oxcarts now, and donkeys, and that means you have to watch your step.

• • •

If you are fortunate, you reach the city gates in the late afternoon. That's the best time to get there, when the sun is behind you, over your left shoulder, turning the white sandstone walls the color of melting butter.

You've been walking on the new King's Road, from the south, and now you approach the Great South Gate. The city walls tower above you.

The gateway is the tallest thing you have ever seen built by the hand of man. You have to tilt your head to see the top. You can't believe what you see. Walking above the gate, as if in midair, two guards with bright spears and billowing capes: the sun makes their bronze armor gleam like beaten gold. They chat casually as they stride across the battlements. Have they no fear?

The doors of the South Gate are made of cypress logs as thick as a man's chest and bound by black iron. Three hinges, each bigger than a house door, secure them to the wall.

(What's missing from those gates, though? Long iron spikes to face the road. No one in Israel has ever seen an elephant, so no one knows about elephant spikes. They'll be sorry for that, someday. Not now of course. Not for centuries. But someday. We'll talk about that soon.)

• • •

Jerusalem is beautiful. We can't imagine how beautiful. In those days, everything was new. Everything fresh, clean, freshly painted, freshly planted. The best and finest money can buy.

It wasn't that way before, and it wouldn't stay that way long. But that's how it is on this perfect day. This is the Golden Age. Twenty-six centuries later, William Blake would write a hymn about it David's Royal City. Two hundred years after Blake, Ronald Reagan would speak with tears in his eyes of a shining city on a hill. This is that city. This is that moment. People's hearts would ache for this place and this moment for generations to come, even though all they knew of it was an emptiness: the Jerusalem that was and is no more..

• • •

King Solomon lives in David's Royal Palace. If possible, he has made it even more beautiful. The marble walls and gates of ebony are open, blue sashed guards stand watch beside it; you see it almost as soon as you enter the main city gate.

Ahead of you is the Royal Way. In a few years this street will be crammed with wineshops and inns and curio shops and brothels, and everyone will call it Temple Street and it will have a doubtful reputation, but today it's a beautiful wide greensward lined with palms that leads to the Temple Mount, and every morning Solomon and his wives process on foot with banners unfurled, and drums pounding and trumpets beating, up to the Tabernacle on the top of Mount Zion.

• • •

The Temple walls look taller than even the city walls, thought that might be an illusion, for they're so white that sun's glare stings the eyes. The stones of the Temple walls are huge. How could they have been lifted to such a height? How could each stone be cut so precisely, fitted so perfectly? And then polished so smoothly, so the wall has no blemish? How many hands did it take to do that? How many hours?

The Temple gates are tall and wide, and these are bound in brass that shines like gold.

Across the entrance is a single seamless sheet of linen, the biggest piece of weaving ever seen, and it seems not to billow in the breeze like a sail, but rather to breathe as if the whole Temple were breathing, as if the cloth were a veil that hides the face of shy and beautiful bride.

• • •

Ahead of you stands the inner gateway that leads to the Temple courtyard.³

• • •

The Beauty of the Temple. So beautiful even its description would challenge the best of writers, which, as you might have figured out, I'm not.

The writers of the Tanakh, bless their hearts, just gave up. They simply made a list of its materials. I don't blame them.

Tonight we talk about The Temple. Tonight we talk about the earthly home of the Lord of Hosts, and how it was destroyed. But you need to know the glory of that place. What it meant to the people who built it for that home for their god.

To understand the Great Miracle, you need to get a sense of What Was Lost. So, pitiful writer that I am, I'm going to take my shot at describing it.

• • •

There's a famous psychological experiment, repeated often, in a lot of different forms. Put a man in a room. Sit him in a chair before a table. Put an empty glass on the table. Wait an hour. Take the glass away. That man's just fine. Put a second man in the same room. This time put a full glass of water on the table. An hour later take the glass of water away. Practically speaking, the second man is no worse off than the first – no more thirsty than the first. Yet the second man will try to attack you as you move the glass away. Sometimes the second man will threaten to kill you if you try to take away his water.

His water.

Oh how readily do we humans possess. How deeply do we humans feel loss.

And this place of Awe, this Temple. Has there ever been a possession more worthy the human heart's desire? And for the Jews to have held it in their grasp for centuries, and then to have it destroyed. Destroyed so utterly!

• • •

The whole Temple complex was white, almost miraculously white, relentlessly white. White because of sun and the pale sandstone of Jerusalem: for most of the Temple was made of sandstone, and that had been polished smooth, so the sun gleamed when it fell on it.

So the light in the Temple courtyard was like no light on earth. The sunlight wasn't hot, but its brilliance blast into the eyes like the heat of a furnace. So keep that in mind. Light so bright it hurt.

• • •

Now the form of the New Temple reflected the form of the old traveling Tabernacle the Jews had used for a hundred generations, except that everything in the New Temple was on a scale grander and more beautiful than had ever been imagined.

³ Actually, I'm skipping some over a very big element here, the Temple arcade, where a lot of Temple business got transacted. Pilgrims needed to deal with a lot of items before they went into the Temple proper: they needed a mikvah bath, they needed a place to store their sandals, they needed a temple shekel, they probably needed a sacrificial offering and so on. They'd attend to these needs in the arcade before they entered the courtyard. A lot of business went on the arcade, and the amount of business transacted there increased as years passed and that has a lot of bearing on the story, and I'm going to go into that so thoroughly that I'm saving the description of the arcade for a later time.

For example the Courtyard: The New Temple Courtyard was the largest enclosure any Jew had ever seen.⁴ Do you like soccer? Or do you prefer American football? Never mind which: the New Temple Courtyard would have been big enough to play a football game right next to the soccer match.

Solomon had laid out the New Courtyard to be big enough to hold many more than a million Jews, and also thousands of sacrificial animals, as well as to hold the massive worship building.

Instead of the cloth screen that enclosed the Old Tabernacle Courtyard, the New Temple Courtyard was surrounded by high walls of polished sandstone. The floor of the Temple also was tiled in sandstone. White white white white white.

• • •

Now what inspires Awe? You don't need me to tell you. Sight. Overwhelm the eyes, and awe will fill the mind. And the Temple overwhelmed the eyes as no sight had overwhelmed the eyes before.

The Egyptian kings had tried their hand at this, centuries before. First by piling stones on top of stones. A great big pyramid, I grant you, is impressive. But it's just a big pile and though quite grand, it doesn't inspire awe.

Realizing this, the Pharaohs tried a different tack: giant statues of themselves, ten times life-size or more. The effect worked backwards. Those very impressive stone figure invited one to consider a comparison with their very puny human models. Too bad for the Pharaohs: the viewer would end up rolling his eyes and shaking his head at the comparison: big statues are impressive maybe, but not awe-inspiring.

No, to inspire true awe, one needs an abstract shape, where the viewer sees a form never seen in nature. The Parthenon, for example. Or the Pantheon. Or the Taj Mahal. Shapes not seen before. Buildings that shake the foundations of the viewer's world.

The first seriously awe-inspiring building ever built was the Tabernacle of Solomon's Temple.

• • •

The heart of Solomon's Temple was the Tabernacle, set in the middle of the Courtyard. Just as the ancient traveling Tabernacle had been a tall tent set in the middle of a tent courtyard, Solomon set a tall stone tower in the middle of a stone courtyard.

Solomon's Tabernacle was Tall. The tallest building any Jew was had ever seen.⁵ A huge tower sitting on a huge base.

Twenty-five feet wide, forty-feet long, and seventy (whole) feet tall.

How big is that? I've been trying to think of how to help a modern mind to imagine those dimensions; this is the best I can come up with:

Imagine your typical double-wide mobile home. You've know the kind I mean, a big fancy one. Got one in mind? Good.

Now imagine a second double-wide dropped on top of the first. And another on top of that.

That's a stack of double-wides that's thirty feet tall. And that's pretty tall. Taller than most church steeples.

Imagine a second triple-decker stack. Place the whole second stack on top of the first stack. Now you have a sixty-foot stack of double wides. Wait, because you're not done yet.

⁴ Oh yes. You're right. I completely forgot that at some time or other some Jew or other some place or other had seen something bigger. Thank you so much for reminding me.

⁵ See previous footnote.

Add yet one more double-wide on top, and *now* you have a tower as tall as Solomon's Tabernacle. Seventy feet.

You know those gas signs on the interstate. The way, way tall ones you see from more than a mile before the exit? Those are seventy feet high, some of them. Some of them are that tall.

So picture that tower of double-wides. Lean back. Tilt your head back. See the front door of the top one? You can just make it out, way, way up there, way at the top. Remember how it looks – take a picture in your mind, okay?

Now -- Take a long mental walk around that whole stack. It's really tall, isn't it? Whew. It's twenty five-feet wide – wide as a typical house. When you get to end, turn the corner and keep walking. Keep looking up as you're walking. It's forty-feet long. That's a pretty long walk. That is one big honking stack of double-wides.

• • •

Now we need to get that pile on to a base, so let's imagine a platform:

The Tabernacle sat atop a stepped base: so let's imagine a stepped platform for our double-wides. And a wide porch with enough room that our priests can walk around the stack.

That means base of the platform will have to be big: a hundred and twenty feet around. Having trouble imagining it? That's the size of typical small-town house lot.

I went to the College of William and Mary in Williamburg Virginia. William and Mary's frat houses were flat-roofed two-story brick dorms about one-hundred foot square. The Tabernacle platform was a stepped sandstone platform twenty-percent wider than of one of those frat houses.

The top of the platform was the same height as the huge sandstone walls of the Temple.

So imagine that you've hoisted that big seventy foot-tall stack of double-wides on to the top of that frat-house. Remember how you were craning your neck to see the door on the top double-wide before? Now the top is even twenty feet higher. Now you'll really need to lean back to see it.

• • •

I'm putting this nutty image in your brain for a reason. I do indeed hope that the notion of a giant pancake stack of doublewides hoisted onto a frat house stupefies your little brain.

Because stupefied was how the Jews felt.

When they stepped out off the dusty roads of the sparse brown plains, and they saw at last the lush hills and palm-lined streets of the Royal City,

And they saw amidst those city streets the holy Temple Mount.

And they saw at the top of Mountain Zion the gleaming walls of the Temple.

And they saw the Breathing Veil of the Temple Gateway.

And they saw bright smooth Courtyard of the Temple

And they saw the wide Steps to the Tabernacle Platform

And they then saw the glistening Tabernacle of the Lord towering above them,

They saw the grandest thing built by human hands that any human eye had ever seen.

• • •

It was just as hard for them to integrate what they were seeing into their understanding of the Nature of the World as suddenly stumbling onto a stack of doublewides hoisted onto the roof of a frat house would be for you.

• • •

But it wasn't simply the sheer size of the Tabernacle that made it awesome. It was much, much more than its size. Size was only the beginning.

Consider the Tabernacle's materials. Of course, the polished sandstone. But those brilliant, gleaming facings were decorated with abstract, graphic designs. Embedded in the bright stone were onyx and carnelian and jasper and hair-thin bands of gold, crisscrossed over the entire surface of the Tabernacle, glistening in the afternoon sun; as though the whole tower had slipped through a magical spider web, and jeweled threads still clinging to its surface.

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Consider the windows and door of the Tabernacle: At the top of the platform, two tall dark doors of precious cypress, themselves twenty-two feet tall, opened to the inside of the Tabernacle. These doors were framed with carved columns of dark variegated marble, so thick that four grown men could not join hands around them.

Except for those doors, the bright walls of the Tabernacle seemed to be seamless – from the bottom to the very top: where there were four small square windows. Remember when you imagined the very top double-wide, way, way way up top? That's where those small windows were. Extra small, to make them seem extra far away

And the designers of the Tabernacle added yet another trick to make the tower seem even impossibly taller. They gently tapered the edges of the tower; using the taper to give an illusion of perspective and distance. And the small windows weren't really square, they reflected the same angled taper, enhancing to those below the illusion of soaring height. So the tower now seemed perhaps twice as high.⁶

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If you were lucky, you might see the inside when the cypress doors of the Tabernacle opened.

⁶ The sleek seamless white tower of Solomon's Tabernacle probably inspired the Isengard, the White Tower of Saruman in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. Like the Other Oxford Inklings, Tolkien was hugely affected by Old Testament study. As I began to study descriptions of the Tabernacle, I noticed lots of similarities with Tolkien's descriptions of Isengard.

Nobody knows precisely what the Temple looked like, least of all me. I fancy that I have read every scrap of information I can get my hands on, and looked at every artist's conception, and every self-taught hobbyist's model. I have studied the construction of buildings of similar antiquity the middle east and in other parts of the world. But obviously, I'm guessing, just like everybody else.

A few years ago, I started having dreams about the Temple. Not that my dreams would be any more or less accurate than any other images, but they were consistent with historical records. In one of my dreams I explored a series of underground treasury rooms, one of which I took to be a gold refinery. A few weeks later, I found a monograph that described the discovery of an underground room below the site of the Second Temple which appeared to be gold refinery. I also saw a strange room to the side of the Tabernacle, apparently carved into the guts of Mount Zion, with a set of benches made of living rock. Only later did I see my first reference to the so-called "Room of Hewn Stone." So.

Anyway, certain parts of my description the Temple are my own elaborations on the source material available in the historical records. The most significant additions are my ideas (a) that white polished sandstone was used almost exclusively as the primary facing material and (b) that the Tabernacle and its steps were tapered to create a sense of greater height. There is no reliable source material for these ideas. But similar architectural features were employed consistently in other major buildings of contemporary cultures, and these elements figured in my dreams of the place, and those dreams have proved accurate in other ways, so I am including them. As with many other speculations I have included in this book, I believe these descriptions are relatively harmless and evocative notions.

Those windows set at the very top of the tower would create, in all probability, that really cool Sunbeam of the Lord effect – you know what I mean? With light pouring down into the room in a brilliant narrow Golden Stream from Above, just like in the movies.

Inside the tall doorway you'd see, to either side, two enormous graven images. Two enormous painted statues of cherubim: tall, unfurled eagle wings, lion's bodies, giant swords, fierce, frightening faces.

By Enormous I mean REALLY BIG: so tall that you'd need a ladder to look into its eyes. And the wings covered in gold leaf, so they shone in the sunbeams. Graven images of the Lord's Guardians, to guard what the Tabernacle held: the most precious objects in the world.

The everburning censer of incense. The everburning lights of the Menorah. The table of showbread, the ever present offering to the Lord of Hosts.

And just beyond those holy vessels, long cloth drapes, woven with images of cherubim, that stretched from the top of the tower to its floor. The drapes that hid the most precious object of all: the Holy of Holies, the Mercy Seat: the Ark of the Covenant. The earthly throne of the Lord of Heaven.

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Only priests might enter the Tabernacle. So we today are no different from the Jews that worshipped there three thousand years ago. Like them we can only imagine what it was like to be other. And in my mind's eye, I see it all the time now.

But those ancient Jews might have caught a glimpse of the Tabernacle's interior. When the Tabernacle doors swung open, they might have seen the fierce painted faces of the cherubim, and their gold-leaf-covered wings.

But if we had been priests, we could have stepped inside that awesome place. We might have heard the thud of the huge cypress doors echoing through the tower as they closed behind us. The sudden dark and quiet as they closed.

The vast emptiness in this tall cavernous spire of that room. The air charged and fogged with incense. The sting of incense in our noses, in our mouths, in our lungs, now beating through our blood.

The smoke swirling in a single beam of sunlight so bright it looks almost solid, bathing the whole tower in refracted light diffusing through the incense smoke. And far below that fierce bright sunbeam, the tiny flickering lights of the menorah's seven oil lamps. And beside them the showbread loaves, golden on their golden table, as if any moment Someone might come to eat them.

And the drapes that shielded the Ark, shimmering in the light and shadow and muffled quiet of that vaulting space, gently moving as if with an unseen breath.

It would be as if we had stepped into another world. A world of silence and great space. Unlike anything anyone else had ever seen or ever felt. As though we had come into a place where cherubim were real, where fiery seraphim might sing their constant praise. As though we'd stepped into the emptiness that connects heaven with the earth.

This is all that we would see if we were priests.

But if *you* had been the High Priest...

...then – consider this – then...

...once a year, then you might see...

(...Oh what you might see...)

...On Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, you might come forward -- holding in your hand in a golden bowl the blood of the scapegoat -- and you might walk to the very heart of the Tabernacle, and step up to the veil, and cast the drape aside,,,

...and then you might see a sight so rare that only a handful of men who had ever walked on earth had ever seen it...

...and everyone who had ever seen it before you now was dead...

... a cloud would gather around the top of the Ark, and then gather above it...

...and the cloud would start to glow until you saw, within the glowing mist...

...the Face of the Most High...

...The Face of the Most High...

...The Face of the Most High.

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Now the city of Jerusalem alone would have been awe inspiring. The Temple Courtyard alone would have been awe-inspiring. The Tabernacle and its platform would have been, holy cow, the most awe inspiring place on the planet. But the Temple complex had a lot more going on.

First of all, music. And I mean some serious music. The Jews were still high as kites from King David's Psalms, so about fifty yards in front the steps that led to the Tabernacle was a courtyard full of musicians. There stood solo singers, dancers, choirs, harpists, trumpeters, and percussionists of every imaginable variety. Psalms echoed constantly from courtyard walls.

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And between the courtyard of musicians, and the grand stairway of the Tabernacle was the Holy Altar of the Lord. And that, I have to say, must have been pretty jaw-dropping.

Now we've seen things like this in our modern day. Every four years they build something roughly the same shape and awesome size for the Olympic flame. Of course in our day they build it out of steel or something, and keep it lit with propane. Not so easy for the Jews.

The Temple Altar was a tower built of stone: huge boulders: huge chunks of stone, unhewn stone, pulled raw from the earth, each boulder the size of a small sports car. Who knows how the Jews wrangled them together, or got them to sit there in a tower thirty feet tall without collapsing? Somehow they managed it.

So the top of the stone tower was higher than the Tabernacle platform, taller than the Temple Walls. Taller than a church steeple. Pretty honking tall.

On top of this huge tower of rock had been set the Altar brazier: a great brass bowl the width and depth of a good-sized wading pool.

The Altar fire burned in the brazier continually. It was a big fire. Again, big means Big.⁷ Hot. The grate of the Altar would get so hot that they had to forge it from iron, any softer metal would just melt.

That big hot fire burnt continuously, day and night. That was the job of a special group of priests. And it took a Lot of wood. I don't know if you can imagine how much wood, but I have an idea of how much: I've been to the Burning Ghats of Varanasi on the Ganges River where funeral pyres burn day and night. They have monster piles of wood there, wood in stacks so massive it looks like blocks of row houses in Brooklyn; that's the amount of wood we're talking about. And that's what I imagine they had at the Temple.

They had a special gate on the west wall of the Temple called the Wood Gate, where wood got carted from a big staging area to the Altar.

⁷ It would take a pretty big fire to keep burning in a big metal bowl that size. You have to keep the bowl hot, or the heat will sink into the metal, and the flames will go out. So you need a big hot fire.

From the sandstone courtyard to the top of the altar, two long, wide ramps of tamped earth had been built. One of these ramps was the wood ramp (we'll get to other in a moment). The wood priests made a constant procession along this ramp, carrying wood from the carts up to the fire, and the carts made a constant procession from the Wood Gate to the ramp. And one of the Twelve Tribes – a different tribe each month – had to come up with the mountains of wood needed to keep that monster Altar fire burning day and night.

Imagine the heat pouring out of the mouth of that enormous brass Altar. Imagine the sight of it, burning constantly, whipped by the wind in front of that magnificent tapering sandstone Tabernacle that seemed to reach to heaven. Imagine the flash of yellow and green flames leaping high, the echoes of the roaring fire mixing with the singing and the cymbals and the trumpets, and all that sound cascading from the stone walls and stone floors of the courtyard.

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Now we need add one more overlay to our mental image of the Temple -- one last awesome sight, perhaps the most awesome sight of all. Because the Temple, most of all, was a place of sacrifice.⁸ I said earlier that there were two earthen ramps leading to the top of the altar, and that one was used for fuel.

⁸ In the time since I started showing early versions of this story to readers, I've found that most are OK when they read about pieces of meat being cooked on the altar fire, but that some readers are a more than a little squeamish about the details of animals being killed for sacrifice. So I'm including that information here, as the Most Interesting Footnote Ever. BUT if you are Squeamish, it's now time to turn the page.

If you're squeamish, stop reading now. Last warning.

It's helpful to realize that the Temple of Jerusalem was probably the Largest Slaughterhouse that had ever been built. Hundreds of thousands of animals were slaughtered there every year.

I've been imagining the Temple for so long, I scarcely realize that this fact might take some getting used to. But you have no options. The Temple was a slaughterhouse. Get used to it.

In the Temple's heyday, there were about 750,000 to a million Jews in Israel. In the course of a year some percentage -- let's say sixty percent of them -- would be making an animal sacrifice. And it wasn't only the Jews offering sacrifices. Gentiles from other countries were making sacrifice offerings as well. Everybody wanted to get in good with Hashem, or with Israelites. Sacrifices offered a double whammy for foreigners. They would get the karmic benefit of the sacrifice, and because the cooked sacrifice meat would be distributed to people of Jerusalem if they weren't there to receive it personally, they got the material benefit of the Jew's good will. So that was an easy and relatively inexpensive way to win favor. But it just added to the huge number of animals being killed each day.

Here's the math: Since Temple was closed on the Sabbath, that meant 313 days of sacrifice each year. So on any Temple day, you'd expect to have around 2000 sheep, goats, and oxen getting sacrificed. More on Holy Days. And that, friends, is a shit ton of animals.

If you can't imagine it: there are pictures of flocks of 2000 sheep on the internet, if you're interested in what a crowd that size looks like. In October 2012, some Spanish shepherds brought 2000 sheep into downtown Madrid to protest some new regulation or other, and there a lot of pictures of the event. So you can see that 2000 sheep, crammed together, will pretty much fill up a regulation football field.

In the Temple, they wouldn't all be present at once, of course. These animals would be killed on a kind of an assembly line: the Tables of Sacrifice. Long tables, where specially trained Jewish Priests were waiting with sharp knives. They had bare chests and wore leather aprons. They were standing before the Tabernacle, and beside the Altar and so they stood on ground as Holy as any Jew had ever stood on.

Those priests and those tables stood on a specially built false floor -- a real masterpiece of ancient engineering. A porous floor that drained onto a watertight subfloor; where a constant flow of fresh water diverted from some nearby springs sluiced across a subfloor, and eventually drained into a open sewer at the northeast foot of Mount Zion.

Maybe the gentlest way to say this is that the drainage water would not be pure. You would not want to drink it. It would have a lot of animal residue.

You see, the reason why the ancient engineers set up that hidden drainage system beneath the Courtyard because there was a lot of nasty residue to drain. A lot of nasty stuff would pour off those Tables of Sacrifice. Animals being sacrificed meant animals being slit open, and when animals get slit open, a lot of nasty juice pours out: blood and pee and shit what not. Also, to keep things tolerable, the priests would sluice clean water over the tables, and their equipment, and of course themselves between sacrifices.

All that nasty liquid had to go someplace, and where it went was through the false floor, and into the subfloor and drainage channel below, and eventually, to the open sewer at the foot of the Temple Mount.

All the sacrificial killing was done according to the Law, by a sharp knife, with one quick deep cut through the throat; the animal bled out quickly and relatively painlessly. The priest that did the killing slid the carcass down the long table. Following the killing cut, what passed down the table was the carcass and a series of trays, or pans. Priests cut pieces off the carcass, and put the pieces into trays. Some pieces were acceptable for sacrifice, some were not. So one priest flayed the carcass, another cut off the head, another broke the carcass in half along the breastbone, another cut off the head and spine, another cut out the Law-forbidden organs, and so on.

The other was used by priests carrying sacrifices to the Altar fire.

They carried them in large silver trays, held over their heads. Dozens of priests, walking constantly up that long earth ramp to the blasting fire, bare-chested because the fire was so hot. Trays heavy as they hoisted them, with grain, with flesh, with fat. That fire, mighty hot.

Fire priests took the sacrifice trays. A tray of grains they'd scatter with a great flourish, and this would make the flames leap up with as sudden whoosh and roar. A tray of fat they'd toss into the middle of the Altar's iron grate, and there wet flames would lick it greedily and thick dark smoke would pour. The flesh they'd place near the edge of the brass altar bowl, where the embers were hot and the flames were low, and the flesh would brown and roast.

The flesh they returned to a priest's tray so it was carried back down to the worshippers below.

By the time the sacrificial animal reached the end of the table, the animal had been reduced to a set of trays: Useful, non-edible animal parts (like hides and horns), animal parts that non-Jews might eat (like kidney fat, which some folks find quite tasty), Jewish-edible parts (similar to what we today call Kosher) – one of flesh and one of fat. A final tray, basically, was the bits no one wanted; bones, sinews, like that. Stuff that would be fed to the pigs, except that Israel didn't have pigs. Not yet.

Of the parts that could be eaten, the priests took ten percent for themselves as provided by the Law.

The useful parts that could not be eaten or sacrificed were sold by the Temple, which kept the proceeds. The priests sold their ten percent of the sacrificial flesh to local shops, and split the proceeds. Israel ate a lot of meat and priests got rich.

The nasty bits that nobody wanted were carted away to some dump on the edge of town, I suppose. I imagine that was where the poor people lived.

Let's talk about the logistics of the sacrificial slaughter. If the Temple day started at sunrise and ended at sunset and the day was twelve hours long, and 2000 sheep needed sacrificing that meant killing a sheep on average about every 20 seconds, every minute, every hour for 12 full hours. No lunch breaks, coffee breaks, or bathroom breaks.

From bleating, beating, breathing, furry beast to 5 trays: 20 seconds.

I use sheep as the size reference point for this activity because most of the sacrificial animals were probably sheep or goats. There going to be calves and full size oxen; those would need special handling, and there were going to be newborn lambs and so on, but most would be about the size of sheep. Anyway the same basic setup would apply.

Birds: A lot of minor sins required birds for expiation, doves in particular. Dove catching or dove farming was probably quite an industry. Bird sacrifices were done standing at the bottom of the altar: the bird's head was torn off at the neck, its blood was squeezed onto the stone of the altar base, and its body was tossed onto the fire. That must have been quite a scene, little bloodless dove bodies being tossed in thirty foot arcs. I get a kick out of this image, but some people find it gross.

For the animal sacrifices, you'd need probably three or four bird priests at the bottom of the altar full-time, plus substitutes. You needed (by my count) 7 or 8 priests at each Sacrifice Table to do the butchering, more priests to sharpen knives, clean, clear and cart the trays, water carriers and table cleaners, herders to move and hold down the sheep. You'd probably need multiple tables running simultaneously. You need to give priests breaks from the blood and guts and what not.

I'm going to guess that there were at least two hundred to two hundred men on the temple floor actively their hands bloody killing sheep, goat and oxen the entire time the Temple was open. That's in addition to all the other priests I talk about carrying sacrifices up and down the altars.

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Every day, the Jews brought gifts to the Lord of Hosts – to David’s Holy City, to the Holy Mountain, to Solomon’s Temple, to the courtyard filled with song, and watched as the priests prepared them, and carried them lifted above their heads before the towering Throne that held the Mercy Seat, and carried them to Altar of the Most High, and cast them on the Ever-Burning Flame.

• • •

The first sacrifice in the morning and the last sacrifice in the evening was a holocaust, a whole-burned lamb. And when the priests placed that holocaust upon the fire they threw in great handfuls of salt as well. The salt made great blue flames that roared up high. Quite a sight, against the dark sky, and the golden light touching the white stone, the blue flame of the Altar fire, the brilliant light of the holocaust.

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When Solomon dedicated that Temple -- that magnificent Temple --that day was the Day of Days for the Jews, I think. One of those astonishing days where when it’s over, you hit the sack thinking: Well, I can keep on living, but that’s basically it; I’m never going to have a cooler day than that one, so really what’s the point?

The Temple was Brand New and AWESOME on that Day of Days. I hope I have made it seem to you at least a little awesome. Because it really was.

Imagine how great it felt for the Jews to have that totally sweet Temple of their very own, after a couple of thousand years of running around worshipping the King of the Universe in a tent – in a puny, smelly TENT.

For that matter imagine how great it felt for the Jews to have a totally sweet nation of Israel after a couple of thousand years of running around as nomad tribes fleeing from the Invading Horde of the Month.

Imagine how great to have that totally sweet city of Jerusalem, and a King, and a Royal Palace, and an army and a government, and all that Civilized Stuff after a couple of thousand years of acting like something out of the Stone Age.

Imagine how great to have all the Kings and Queens of the border countries coming into the Courtyard of that sweet new Temple, all kneeling and heads down to Solomon, and bringing peace offerings. Like “Oh Solomon, please don’t hurt us!” After a couple of thousand years of Jews doing the kneeling, how sweet to see somebody else doing the kneeling for a change?

Imagine how great to watch the faces⁹ of those Kings and Queens when they saw the Holy Temple of the Awesome New Nation of Israel. When they saw what the Jews and their Awesome Lord could accomplish.

• • •

But on that day when the Solomon dedicated the Temple, it wasn’t just the Kings and Queens of many lands who got served.

The Jews got something too. The Jews got a dose of Shekinah.

Remember Shekinah? The Presence of the Lord in flame? She came. Did she ever.

That huge walled Courtyard, that towering Tabernacle, that great flaming Altar. Brilliant in the sunlight. The courtyard filled with kings and queens and practically every Jew in Israel. Flames leaping to the sky, voices lifted echoing in cheers and song.

⁹ The editors won’t let me say “O-faces,” but that’s what I wanted to say.

King Solomon himself, arms stretched before the open doors of the Tabernacle tower. Behind, the gleaming golden faces and bright wings of the cherubim guardians, glimpses of the veil that hides the Ark. Solomon, calling on the Lord to bless his Temple.

And as he calls out, a white cloud above the altar fire rises and turns dark, and spreads across the sky, and hides the sun, and every eye in the courtyard looks up in fear.

Suddenly the dark cloud falls to earth like a great blue-black ball, and it fills the courtyard space where the Tables of Sacrifice will go. And it changes from a ball into a tall blue flame flickering, a brilliant flame taller than the altar, stretching so high it seems to reach the very top of the Tabernacle. It burns, but does not give off any heat. Bright blue, yet you can see right through it.

No one, of course, can take their eyes from that blue flame. It rotates, swirls, tightens until it is no taller than a man. Then it seems to walk, or float, up the Tabernacle steps, lingering for a moment as it reaches King Solomon, then passing into the Tabernacle itself so the Cherubim seem lit from within.

Then the blue flame passes through the veil that hides the Ark. And then from the high windows of the Tabernacle, light blasts out in all four directions, as if the Tabernacle itself were a beacon to all the earth.

Then finally the bright blue light fades, and the Courtyard, which everyone now realizes was utterly silent and utterly still, returns to some sort of life.

Now that, for the Jews, was the Day of Days.

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Of course, the Temple completely changed everything for the Jews. I mentioned this earlier, but I'm not sure it's possible to beat that dead horse adequately. The Temple changed everything. Jerusalem changed everything.

Almost overnight there was a new normal. A normal based on living in a city with walls and streets and houses, instead of a living in a cluster of tents. A normal based on worshipping in a temple built of stone that stayed in one place, that what was grand and beautiful, instead of a traveling tent you never really knew for sure where it would be next. A normal based on military might, a confidence that enemy hordes would not be raiding your tent in the middle of the night, that you could tuck your children into bed and find them there the next morning.

The Jews were a nation now. The Jews had a King.

The Promise Hashem made to Abraham had truly been fulfilled.

• • •

But.

Here's the final punchline for this night's installment. Something else had changed: The Jews had stopped being a moving target. They had become a big fat sitting duck.

Allow me to explain.

The nomadic Jews always felt like they were being singled out for attack by hostile neighbors. But I think this wasn't how the neighbors saw it. The nomadic Jews didn't have a lot of assets, and they were always on the move. Kingdoms with armies like to attack a place that's easy to find (like a city) and that has a lot of stuff to pillage when they get there (like a city). The nomadic Jews, to their hostile neighbors, were simply Targets of Opportunity, not Strategic Targets. There just happened to be lots of opportunities.

Now that David had united them into Israel, now that they had an army, and a fortified city, the Jews had pretty much ceased to be a Target of Opportunity.

In the course of years, however, Jerusalem would soon become a Strategic Target. An Increasingly Vulnerable Strategic Target.

So Vulnerable that a day was coming in about 350 years when Jerusalem would be rubbed out. Gone. There would be nothing left of the Temple. Not a stone left standing on that holy mountain.

Remember the experiment? How bad the subject felt when the glass of water was taken away? Imagine how he would feel if the experimenter were to spill the water, smash the glass in his face, and take a shit on the table.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Let's go back to the Day of Days, before all that happened, when Everything Was Beautiful. Let's see how seeds of tares were sown amidst the good seeds of Jerusalem.

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As I described, Jerusalem really just sort of showed up one day in the desert, thanks to David. It all happened so fast. But sometimes things do happen fast: there are modern day analogs to the sudden appearance of the Jerusalem and Temple in what had been, essentially, the wilderness. It brings to mind, for example, the sudden appearance of a railway stop in places like East Middle of Nowhere, Wyoming when the Union Pacific drove west, and how a town and city and metropolis might spring up around it overnight. Or how Las Vegas basically showed up out of nowhere when Bugsy Seigel opened the Flamingo Hotel on the day after Christmas in 1946. Or how Orlando turned into whatever the hell Orlando is today thanks to Disneyworld opening in 1971.

If you look at a map of the Ancient Middle East before David, you'll find this big blank space between Antioch and Alexandria, just waiting for Jerusalem. All you need to do is lay down a city, and some roads – and most of all, I can't emphasize this enough, a serious tourist attraction, which the Temple surely would become, and you've basically guaranteed that Jerusalem would become a bustling metropolis.

Which it did. The insular, tribal Jews, who up until then had practically no dealings with the Outside World, a world who cared about them not at all, now suddenly found themselves at a commercial crossroads. Not only that, that Temple itself was drawing people from all over the Outside World to Jerusalem.

The Temple was the Cool New Thing to See. Like I have said repeatedly, it was Awesome. There was nothing like it. People wanted to see it. And Solomon anticipated this: His Temple Courtyard had been laid out so the largest area, facing the Tabernacle, was reserved so Gentiles and others who technically were not allowed to worship there.¹⁰

The people who could afford to make the trek and see the Temple for fun were rich. You would need to be rich to make that trip. And the rich people who saw it would be superstitious. I say that confidently, because in the world at that point, everybody was superstitious.

So while you were at the Temple, since you were rich, you'd probably buy some oxen to sacrifice to the god of the Temple, just to hedge your bets, just like you spin the slots a few times at Vegas, even if you're not much of a gambler, because, why not? You might get lucky. And a rich, superstitious tourist might bring a few golden trinkets to hand off to the Temple treasury. The Temple Treasury certainly started to get quite a few golden trinkets.

The Rich Touristas wanted nice places to stay. Nice things to eat. Not mutton and olives and sheep cheese, thank you very much. So the Jews built nice inns, with nice feather beds, and imported chefs cooking imported food to cater to rich tourist tastes. They built those inns on the quiet hill that led to the Temple, so the touristas wouldn't have too far to walk. Soon it became known as Temple Street. The imported chefs and the chefs' wives and kids needed houses. The featherbeds needed fluffing, and the Jews imported maids to fluff them, and the maids brought their husbands and children, and they also

¹⁰ Ironically, this was called the Courtyard of Women. Because, obviously.

needed houses. And all those chefs and maids and families needed food like they had at home, so import stores sprang up next to their houses, and on and on.

And beautiful as it was, inspiring as the Temple was, let's be frank: You can stand and watch the gorgeous dancing fountain light show at the Bellagio in Las Vegas, but when you turn around, you're surrounded by an army of pimps. Because the only thing tourists want more than food, wine, and a bed, is a pleasant new companion to share them.

Jerusalem's only material industry was tourism. When you've got a tourist-based economy, which Jerusalem was quickly becoming, let me tell you how it works. There's a fabulously rich part of town that gets cared for by incredibly poor people who live in jaw-dropping poverty. It's that way in every tourist town.

The only other businesses in Jerusalem were government and religion. I can't think of a worse place to put the seat of a government or the seat of a religion than in a high-roller tourist town. It's tough for the wives of government officials or the wives of priests to watch the wives of the tourists driving off in a stretch limousine to a fancy late night dinner wearing a mink coat and diamond earrings. It's hard for their husbands not to imagine how easy it would be to lay hands on some fast untraceable cash. It's a bad mix, tourism and government and religion, but that was Jerusalem's mix.

• • •

I say rich tourists, but who were those tourists, and how had they gotten rich? Merchants, of course, but some would also have been royalty and government officials of neighboring lands. When they weren't standing awestruck in the courtyard, or enjoying the easy delights of Temple Street, they probably were chatting noisily with one another and with the increasingly well-off Jews of Jerusalem in wineshops, and cooking up deals. The rich love to cook up deals.

And these superstitious foreigners brought with them their beliefs in other gods. At that time living in the middle east was like living in an X-men comic book populated with gods instead of mutants: So many gods, each with different powers. Hashem may have had a really snazzy temple, but those other gods had cool powers, and lot of those gods had followers, many of whom, it turned out, were really hot women, the kind that Jewish men seemed to go for.

Anyway, almost immediately after the Day of Days, things started to go into a nasty nasty spiral. Solomon's own wife started worshipping idols, and Solomon went along for the ride. Wise King Solomon, for Pete's sake!

And then when Solomon died, and his son became king, the southern half of Israel seceded, and formed its own kingdom, Judah. Bam, just like that, half of Israel, gone.

And I just can't stand to write about the reigns of the next the next fifteen or twenty kings of Israel. They aren't specifically relevant to the Great Miracle, thank the Lord. So I'll sum up. It's a pattern: a weaker king; followed by a real stupid-ass putz king; then an even stupider ass-putz king; then a kind of mostly benign king who tries to get things back on track. Then the cycle starts again. It's a long horrible boring spiral down to blah-town.

There are two really surprising elements on the spiral. One surprise is how many of the ass-putz kings actually started setting up idols in the Temple.

Idols!

Idols in the Temple!

Of course those ass-putz-kings were also looting all the gold they could lay their hands on from the Temple treasury. I mean you could pretty much write that story, but it's still discouraging.

Gold, that's kind of a given. But really? Idols?

So naturally during the ass-putz-king periods prophets would show up and condemn the king and the people for their wicked ways, and there'd be plagues and drought and famines and boils and what not.

And naturally, enemies would come and start marauding and looting and reducing the holdings of Israel, and generally making things uncomfortable. And the Israelites would be wailing and gnashing their teeth, and eventually the ass-putz would die and then finally the benign king would come to power and tear down the idol, and things would be ok again for a couple of years.

And then it would all start up again.

But just sad, you know? After the Day of Days. Just sad.

The great military might of Israel was fading. Nobody was scared of Israel any more.

• • •

But everyone was getting scared of Babylon. Babylon was on Israel's northern border. A bunch of northern countries had gotten tired of killing each other, and finally decided to unite and form Babylon and kill everybody else instead, and they were getting really, really good at it.

Babylon was scarier than any other country anyone had ever seen. Babylon made the Philistines look like children.

• • •

So we'll pick up the Story of the Great Miracle again here, as Babylon begins to threaten a weakened Israel. Great hordes of Babylonians are heading south toward Jerusalem.

There's a prophet in Israel, Jeremiah, and as you can probably guess, he's running around telling everybody that Hashem is angry at the faithlessness of his people, that He's angry how they have forgotten his Law. And all you need to do is take a walk down Temple Street, and you'd know exactly what Jeremiah is all worked up about. Jerusalem is a moral cesspool.

Tonight, standing on the Temple walls you can see the campfires of the Babylonian forces. There are thousands of them sitting out there, sharpening their swords. The Israelite army has fallen back a dozen times. There is no defendable perimeter except the city walls. And the Babylonians have elephants. That's their secret weapon.

• • •

The prophet Jeremiah takes matters into his own hands. That fateful, final night, with a half dozen followers, he breaks into the Tabernacle and carries off the Ark of the Covenant. Under cover of darkness he carries it out of the Temple, out of the city. He takes it to some secret place. The next morning, even the men who hide it with him forget where they have taken it. Jeremiah tells the Jews that the Ark will be recovered when righteous men return to walk upon the earth.

• • •

The next day, the Babylonians attack. Remember the great city gates of Jerusalem? The Babylonians have brought elephants from India. In India the gates have long iron spikes so elephants can't ram them. Because in India, they know all about elephants. In Israel, no one has seen them before.

The elephants tear through the gates like they're paper. They stomp through the streets, trampling people underfoot. They push through the walls of homes and shops, burying families beneath the rubble.

They storm up Temple Street, leaving destruction behind them. It looks like a town in Alabama after a tornado. Jews are standing in the smoke and ruin with blank, empty stares.

By noon, half of Jerusalem is rubble. Rubble.

The Babylonians break for lunch. The army has "fallen back." They fled the city. They've given up and are saving their own skins. In Jerusalem, it's every man for himself.

By early afternoon, the elephants have reached the Temple. While soldiers mill through the Temple looking for loot, the elephant masters form the beasts into clusters. With their great heads joined together, they push against the smooth stone temple walls and the white stones tumble like children's blocks.

They use tow ropes to pull down the Altar, because the unhewn stones would hurt the elephant's tender skin. Soon it's just a pile of rocks.

They wait until sundown to move on the Tabernacle. Everyone wants to be there to see. It's a little dangerous; it takes a little planning. They'd love to see the whole thing pitch over like a chopped-down tree, but it's made of blocks, so that's not what actually would happen: If they set the elephants pushing at the bottom, the falling blocks would crush them.

But there's a smart fellow who figures out the method: long thick ropes attached at different heights, pulled from the corners of the Courtyard so the tower tumbles down in pieces. He's figured it so it all falls at once, quite dramatically.

• • •

And just like that, Everything is gone.

• • •

The Tabernacle. The Ark. The Stone Tablets. The Altar. The Temple.

Even Jerusalem.

• • •

The Babylonians have commandeered a few thousand women. They have had them bring some jugs of wine, and food, and of course beds and blankets to the Courtyard.

They made them watch the Tabernacle fall. They got a big kick out of the tears.

There's plenty of wood at the Temple. They'll use it for bonfires. No one's going to be using it for sacrifices.

Now that the day's work is over, now that the city of Jerusalem has been completely demolished, now that there is nothing left to destroy, the Babylonians are patting themselves on the back and throwing a little victory party, right there on Mount Zion. They're going to stay up all night, and everyone is going to have a great good time. The men will have good time, anyway.

Tomorrow, the Babylonians will round up all the Jews they can find and march them north to Babylon as slaves. The Jews are going to be captives for the next eighty years.

The lucky ones are on the run right now. But among the ones that remain, some are already beginning to wonder: if the Promised Land is gone, and the Tabernacle is gone, and the Ark is gone, what remains of the Covenant? What remains of the Law?

What does it mean to be a Jew?

• • •

The Jews are starting to realize that Hashem has abandoned them.

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The Jews are about to wander in the wilderness again.

This time there will be no ark to lead them.

Night Five

This is my favorite night. We've crossed the halfway point tonight. Did you notice? When we lit tonight's candle, there were more full candle holders than empty. More light than darkness. Even if we don't notice it consciously, our hearts are lighter.

It's a great night for our Story too.

When I tell this story out loud, at home, this is the night when I usually get asked for an encore, because it's almost unbelievable the first time you hear it. Particularly if you a Jew. Tonight's story contains a lot of surprising facts about the Jews that have been hiding in plain sight for centuries: the unexpected origins of modern Judaism. And tonight's story also clears up a lot of murkiness that runs through the New Testament's Gospel stories.

It's really amazing what happened to the Jews after Jerusalem got destroyed. All within the space of about seventy or eighty years. Tonight's story totally makes my head spin. I hope I can make your head spin too.

• • •

A personal note – not like this whole book isn't a personal note. Maybe this will help explain why it's so personal: I keep saying that this Story is my story, and it's at this point the Jews' story becomes very personal to me. Because my miserable life has been saved more than once by the Twelve Steps. And when I read the story of the Jews in Babylon, I recognize how similar their story was to my own, and to the stories of many others who have been helped by that astonishing program.

When you are in the midst of your long, boring downward spiral you hardly notice. And then one day, you wake up in a wrecked car, covered in pieces of a shattered windshield, or face-down in a gutter, or listening to the squeal of the tires as your wife drives off into the night with the kids, never to return, or find your hands cuffed to a table in a police station, and only then do you realize, Holy Jesus. I have really screwed the pooch this time. I am really and totally fucked.

Well if you like me have faced one of those horrible moments, brother, you have all my sympathy. But consider this: no matter how fucked we were, I seriously doubt we were ever as fucked as those Jews.

But I was fortunate. Maybe you were too. Someone, sometime took me aside, and said to me: there's hope. No matter how bad, there's hope. The problem is you. The problem has always been you. You dug this hole, and you keep digging it, and now it's too deep for you to pull yourself out. You're going have to turn to a higher power if you want to get out of it.

Of course I didn't listen. But in the midst of my black despair, I remembered those words. Somehow, like so many broken desperate men before me, I reached out into the black vacuum, hands shaking, tears falling, and I made my vain, hypocritical, half-hearted offer to turn my will and my life over to my higher power.

And I discovered to my humiliation and my delight, this wonderful blessed open secret: as the great mystic poet Rumi says: The Lord in His Mercy accepts bad coin.¹

¹ I like this quote too: "Even if we can't honestly long for love, we can long to long for love. That much is always open to us. If our prayers for love are insincere and mechanical, we can at least pray to become more sincere when we pray. If we cannot run towards the Lord, at least we can walk, and if we cannot walk, we can crawl. And even if we cannot crawl, we can pray for the ability, someday, to be able to crawl. And we may be surprised to find that even crawling is not necessary, because the Lord Himself has come to us and is carrying us on His back." From a man I actually met named Eruch Jessawalla. Remember how I said I'd met true lovers of the Lord? He was one.

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The Jews were about to do the same thing.

• • •

Of course the Steps wouldn't be written for twenty-five centuries, but the principles behind them have been around since forever. The Old Testament prophets were constantly delivering the message of the first three steps: You've lost your way. Only Hashem can restore you to sanity. You must once again turn your will and your life over to Him.

The most recent prophet, Jeremiah, had been saying this just minutes before the Babylonians stomped Jerusalem into the earth and rounded up the strays. So I suppose the message was pretty fresh in everybody's mind.

And it's interesting how the Jews framed their plight. It's really admirable, in my view.

They might have said: Well, we're Babylonian slaves now, so let's make the best of it. Or: We are prisoners of war: our duty is to harass our enemy and attempt escape. Or: We can do what our forefather Joseph did, worm our way into our captors' good graces and take over the government. Or: Run for it: It's every man for himself! Or any number of other things.

But what they actually said was: We are Jews in Exile.

• • •

We are still the same Chosen People of the same Lord of Hosts. We are still Jews.

But we have been exiled from our promised land. Exiled, meaning we might hope to return.

• • •

It's a long, long walk to Babylon. Plenty of time to think. Plenty of time, as your sponsor says, to make a decision.

And that definition of themselves as Jews in exile pretty much established that there was only one choice worth making.

I imagine that by the time they'd finished their five-hundred mile trek across the Syrian Desert, about the time they were crossing the Euphrates, the Jews had made the decision to rededicate themselves, and once more turn their wills and their lives over to Hashem.

+++++

Anyway, almost as soon as they reached Babylon, they started on what most of us who have gone through it would recognize as The Fourth Step. For many of us, it's the toughest step: to make a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves. And rarely has a moral inventory been more fearless or more searching than the inventory done by the captive Jews in Babylon.

The Jews may have thought that Hashem was so angry He had sent the Babylonians to drag them into slavery. To me it sounds a lot like He had sent the Babylonians to drag them into rehab.

• • •

Now the amount of study, discussion, and thought that I'm about to describe may seem incredible. So we probably need to do a little historical contextual housekeeping here. Ostensibly the Jews had been taken to Babylon as slaves, but from what I can gather, there wasn't actually a hell of a lot slaving for them to do once they got there. For one thing, most of the major Babylonian building and what not had already been done. The Babylonians weren't building any pyramids or anything. Also the Babylonians had been conquering other countries and taking captives right and left for years.

In addition, Babylon was undergoing a lot of internal strife, and to top things off, the Persians were gathering strength on their eastern border, so the locals had a lot on their minds besides the Jews. So it seems like they put some half-hearted effort into making work for the Jews, but not a hell of a lot of it.

The Babylonians seemed basically to have left the Jews more or less together in a group, and to have given them plenty of free time. Their captors weren't into whipping the Jews, or torturing them or sending them to the salt mines or anything like that. Instead, as near as I can make out, they just gave them some isolated farmland and left them alone: kind of like cat owners who go on vacation and leave those automatic food and water dispensers behind. It might not have been all that great, but the Jews got along OK.

So the Jews had time to weep by the rivers of Babylon, and to focus on their Fourth Step. And how they undertook that moral inventory was to review in minute detail the 673 Commandments, and their own lives in relation to those commandments.

In fact the Jews probably didn't have anything else interesting to do except to study the Law, and to argue over fine points, and to think about their lives. When I say their time in Babylon was a lot like rehab, honestly, it was a lot like rehab.

This period was hugely productive. The Jews never lost focus, and they were serious, complex, and creative. Which led to a whole set of interesting developments. In fact, modern Judaism was born while the Jews were in Babylon.

• • •

I think the best place to start is with a concrete example, so let me ask this question: Why will a modern, observant Kosher Jew not eat a cheeseburger?

Now some of you smarty-pants will now be waving your hands and saying eagerly "I know! I know! Oh! Oh! Ask me!" and you are all set to answer "Because the Bible says: 'Don't eat meat and cheese together.'"

And you would be so very very wrong.

But someone else, I'm sure -- some very clever, Hermione-Grainger-type -- at this moment has her hand raised, very politely, to answer: "Because of what happened in Babylon during the Exile, that's why."

Go to the head of the class, Ms. Grainger.

You see, the Jews did have a pretty clear starting point for establishing their moral inventory. They had a list of what was Right and Wrong. Unlike we poor lost souls today, those Jews had the Law.

Or at least they thought they did. But it turned out they didn't.

Unlike the stone tablets that Moses had brought down from Sinai (which were still in the Ark, wherever the hell *that* was), the rest of the Law, the 673 Commandments -- those were not to be found in a nice, fixed form in a book some place. Not yet, anyway.

I've talked about the Torah -- the scroll of first five books of the Bible. The Torah didn't exist yet. Those books hadn't been written up yet.

All that existed were chunks of story, scraps of the Laws, some written on parchment, some in people's heads: inconsistent, repetitious, contradictory, and full of gaps.

Even the Hebrew alphabet had not been standardized yet, so even what had been written was written in different alphabets -- the writing of the place and time. So even what was written was just a mess. And never mind the countless errors of addition and omission that are inevitable in hand copying.

The Jews had always had this impression that they had The Law. All their Lives they heard that they had The Law. But now when they actually tried to find The Law, The Law turned out to be a giant jigsaw puzzle.

It was heartbreaking. Everything had been taken from them -- everything but The Law, and they hoped to rebuild with that as a foundation, and now all they found were scraps.

• • •

I can't be a wise ass now. These homeless, broken-hearted Jews had one wan hope and now even that hope gets taken from them, and that breaks my wise-ass heart too.

• • •

In the midst of this utter despair a hero arises: to me one of the greatest heroes of all time, and he is completely ignored and completely forgotten and completely nameless. As I looked at the history of this horrible moment, the before and the after, I began to see the handiwork of this unknown hero. I gave him a name. I started to call him Some Smart Guy.

Some Smart Guy looked at this complete mess and saw that the whole thing the Book of The Law that everybody was hoping to find actually *was* sort of sitting there already. It was just in pieces, sort of like the bookshelf you bring home from IKEA.

All that needed to happen, Some Smart Guy figured out, was:

- to create a standardized Hebrew alphabet,
- teach a bunch of guys to use the new alphabet,
- translate all the existing scraps of writing into the new alphabet,
- organize the newly translated scraps into some sort of coherent narrative,
- edit the narrative,
- and establish a canonical version.

And all it would take to do that, Some Smart Guy figured out, would be to convince – oh, I don't know, maybe five or six hundred other smart guys – to work like mindless zombies for next three or four years.

Somehow, Some Smart Guy – we'll never know his name – did it. You know that game, who would you invite to dinner? Some Smart Guy; that's my invite. Some Smart Guy, how the hell did you make that happen? That would be a story worth hearing.

Some Smart Guy standardized the Hebrew alphabet, organized the scraps of text, collected the unwritten, memorized elements, assembled those chunks into books of the Law. Clearly it was a team effort, and it must have been a hell of a big team, with a hell of a lot of smart people. But Some Smart Guy led the Charge.

Just think of the effort involved. Everybody on that team of smart people needed to be able to read and write, and since what they needed to read and write was the New Standard Hebrew that had Just Been Invented, there had to be New Standard Hebrew as A Second Language classes, and New Standard Hebrew as a Second Language Teacher Certification Classes.

And yet more: I don't know if you've read stories of how the King James Bible was translated, or the Dead Sea Scrolls, or how the Oxford Dictionary was assembled – who am I kidding, of course you haven't – but those stories are fascinating accounts of teams facing almost insurmountable intellectual challenges and creating clever creative methods for cataloging, comparing, assessing, and finally deciding the final form of an idea. And here was this ad hoc team of Exiled Jews who was developing and performing a similar massive undertaking, on the fly, in very short order, in a whole new language no less, and doing a pretty honking good job of it.

Probably the hardest part of this task was dealing with the constant discouragement and exhaustion and doubt. Some Smart Guy managed against all odds to keep the effort going.

What developed very quickly among the exiled Jews was a whole new class: the scribes. Scribes became a very important class in the Jews religious life from this point forward.

Priests, of course, had been born into the priesthood. They performed rites: circumcision, sacrifices, mikvahs and the like, and they learned how to do them from other priests. Most didn't know how to read, and since the Law had been until then a chaotic mess, they certainly didn't have a clear understanding of its subtleties.

The scribes, on the other hand, were men who could read, and could teach others to read, and made it a point to know the Law, now that it had been standardized.

Jews began to value those who were familiar with the Law. Jews began to value those who could read. Jews began to send their children to tutors so they could learn to read the Law. In Babylon, the Jews quickly became the most literate people on earth.

Nice going, Some Smart Guy.

• • •

But getting back to cheeseburgers.

There is nothing in Law about meat and cheese. But this is this Law, that shows up in two places, Exodus and Deuteronomy: “Thou shalt not boil a kid in its mother’s milk.”

Thanks to Some Smart Guy, the Jews now had something tangible to think about as they considered their Fourth Step. What about it, they said to themselves. What kind of moral creeps have we been anyway? Just how many kids have we been boiling in their mother’s milk?

And of course, the obvious answer was, probably not a hell of a lot. Or maybe they had been boiling a ton of kids in their mother’s milk – I mean, how would I know? I’m no culinary historian. Maybe cream of kid soup was a real fave around Jerusalem, and maybe the Jews hadn’t been all that careful about whether where the milk had come from.

But that isn’t my point. My point is, the Jews were considering this Law with reference to their Fourth Step moral inventory. Thinking about this law, and what it meant to their relationship with Hashem.

It was during their consideration of laws like these – and this is a very famous example, actually – that a whole lot of issues got raised. These discussions are so thoroughly and deeply documented, it’s clear that they went on for days and nights, and probably got pretty loud at times, and may have been accompanied by a few bloody noses and missing teeth. And this is just one simple little law, and don’t forget, there are 672 others.

The discussion went like something this: Sure, this law about kids and mothers’ milk sounds simple. But first off: How do we guarantee that any milk used to boil a kid is free of its mother’s milk? Even a drop would violate the law.

For that matter, when does a kid cease to be a kid? In effect, boiling any goat of any age in any milk puts you at risk of violating this law.

To risk violating the law is to decide that you are willing to sin.

Write that down on your fearless moral inventory. Any goat in any milk equals: I am a creep who is totally willing to sin.

Get the idea?

And now the discussion gets more abstract: Is this Law a specific prohibition? Or is it rather an Example of a Principle?

Why should Hashem regard a kid differently than a lamb or than a calf? If the Principle applies, shouldn’t it apply to any flesh we cook?

Further, why would boiling the flesh in milk be different than baking, roasting or other methods? Or different from serving it in a nice cold milk jelly? Or different from having a tall milk shake with your mutton gyro? It’s all going to the same place, right? Wouldn’t any of these things make Hashem angry?

At this point in these discussions, when some people are very anxious to stretch the interpretation to its extremes, and others pull back saying: What, Hashem couldn’t just say: don’t eat milk and meat at the same meal? – that’s when people start throwing punches.

You see, there's a new, new normal now. There's no Altar anymore. No Ark. No place of sacrifice for expiation of sin. The Jews are already in the midst of some serious suffering of the consequences of disobedience. Hashem has made it abundantly clear that he will visit the sins of individuals upon the entire Jewish nation. The third strike rule is in effect.

They have got the hell to get things right. They wanted to do more than avoid Hashem's anger; they wanted to please Him. And if this meant trying harder to parse the intent behind the 673 commandments, they were going to parse the hell out of them.

Anyway, this is when dietary rules began to get pretty honking complicated.² This is when observant Jews stopped going to McDonalds, much as they might crave one of those totally sweet cheeseburgers.

• • •

But in the middle of these fist fights over goat's milk, a whole new range of even hotter discussions broke out. Some of these discussions started with leprosy, but they sure didn't end there.

I mentioned earlier how it wasn't just animals that were clean and unclean: that people could be clean and unclean too. I talked about coming into contact with blood or death could make you unclean. Well, there was a much worse way to be unclean. Leprosy.

In our modern world people we think people are lepers if they have an active infection of one of two bacteria: *Mycobacterium leprae* or *Mycobacterium lepromatosis*. We all know what those bacteria do from the movies: some guy's nose falling off in the soup, like that.

But in Old Testament times there were no germs. So leprosy was much more common because it had nothing at all to do with bacteria. The biblical definition just describes ugly scabs, and all kinds of things can cause those. Some people were infected with leprosy bacteria, but any nasty skin condition might be called leprosy: Psoriasis, scabies, skin cancer, even bad acne; practically anything that looked nasty to a priest could potentially be defined as leprosy.

How leprosy got diagnosed was that a priest looked at some skin problem and called it leprosy. If a priest said you were a leper, then you were unclean, and anything you came into contact with was unclean. Even touching your shadow would make something unclean. It meant the end of your normal life. There was no mikvah to clean you, no red heifer blood to fix you. The only interactions left to you were with other lepers. The end.

Now the actual Law about leprosy³ is explicit, disgusting, and completely vague. Since priests couldn't read, and since the Law was not consistently available in written form anyway, priests had been defining leprosy on instinct and hand-me-down experience. This meant of course that leprosy was being over-diagnosed and under-diagnosed based on which priest was doing the diagnosing.

A single Bible verse about kids and mother's milk led to days of discussion and fist fights over dietary laws. Imagine discussing 25 verses about leprosy.

And it really came down to this: A whole crowd of Jews, a whole faction, became convinced that the priests sucked. I'm saying this as mildly as I can.

Eventually this the-priests-suck faction will be called Pharisees, but right now they're just The Troublemakers. But we'll be polite and call them Pharisees.

² I am sure as hell not going to get into Kosher here, which is mind boggling to a non-Jew like me. But I will note that many of the principles associated with animal sacrifice laid out in the Law became ingrained in the rules of Kosher. The debate between the Pharisees and Sadducees about whether parts of the Law applied to all the Jews or to the Levites only fell squarely in the Pharisees favor, at least insofar as Kosher butchery goes.

³ Leviticus 13, if you can stand it.

The Pharisees' hypothesis, in a nutshell, was that the tribe of Levi who had been assigned the role of Priests by Hashem, were not merely supposed to be the Jews permitted and required to perform all rites and rituals, but were also supposed to be the Moral Leaders of the Jews. And that they had, over the centuries, completely fucked that part up.

Instead of moral leadership, the Levite priesthood had been content to learn how to kill sacrifice animals, do circumcisions without cutting off too much of the important parts, and most of all how to take, and sell, their tenth of the sacrificed flesh, and make money.

If you are making a moral inventory and considering where we Jews have gone off track, said the Pharisees, put the Levite priesthood at the top of the list.

The Pharisees prized the learning of the scribes, and more than that they prized the application of that learning to the daily moral actions of the Jewish people. They saw the need for direct moral leadership in every aspect of the community, by applying the majesty and the subtlety of the Law.

So in this instance, the Pharisees took it upon themselves to explore the subtleties of the 25 verses of the Law associated with leprosy. Then they set leaders in each group of Jews to check everybody in their community for leprosy, and to bring candidates to the nearest stupid priest, and then demand that whoever the Pharisees happened to think was a leper -- based on their new-formed re-definitions of leprosy -- and get that person kicked the hell out of Dodge.

An activity that, as you might imagine, won them both a lot of friends and a lot of enemies, and certainly got them noticed.

The Pharisees promoted a name for these proactive moral community leaders. They called them *rabbis*.

• • •

These new rabbis were a whole new phenomenon. They weren't like the rabbis of today: they had no formal training or organization. They were self-appointed experts with no other credentials. But like the scribes, they quickly became a very important and highly obvious new part of Jewish society. They used their familiarity with the newly available and codified written Law to engage and instruct their communities. In my view, they were buttinskies, but the exiled Jews seemed to dig them.

The Jews, very concerned with their Fourth Step inventory, very concerned that they wanted to do better in the eyes of Hashem, listened, learned, discussed, and considered how to change their ways. Like by giving up cheeseburgers and so on.

It was also during this time that the books of early Jewish history, Genesis and Exodus, also got collected and codified by the scribes. The Pharisees began to give the Jews a sense of their history.

• • •

So here's an interesting sidelight on that: I told you that all religious stories have an agenda (except mine, of course. My Story has no agenda).

Well the Pharisees definitely had an agenda. And the stories they collected into the books of Genesis and Exodus reflected it. The Pharisees believed that the Lord worked his will through history, that you could see Lord's hand at work in the history of the Jews.

Now this view was exactly the opposite of the Party Line held by the non-Pharisees (a group that doesn't yet have any other name, but will eventually be known as the Sadducees).

The Sadducees had a problem with this Pharisee idea of Divine Intervention, because if Hashem was influencing History, that meant He was influencing People. And if He was influencing People, that meant People did not have Free Will. And if People didn't have Free Will, how could People decide for themselves between Righteousness or Sin? And if People couldn't decide, what difference did it make?

But, gosh darn it, if you look at the history of the Jews and all those parting of the Red Seas and Moses being Saved From the Bulrushes and what not, and how the hell do you explain all those amazing, wonderful coincidences without concluding that there must have been at least a touch of Divine Intervention?

Well obv. You can't avoid that conclusion. Which makes it tough for the Sadducees.

So an ongoing dispute broke out. The Pharisees began to edit whole chunks of Genesis and Exodus with particular emphasis on Divine Intervention, and the Sadducees made a concerted effort to make sure that those edits never saw the light of day.

Not a popular position among the rabbi-favoring Jews who were suddenly feeling like they were involved with their faith in a whole new way.

But not all Jews favored the Rabbis.

Remember the Priests still had a lot of street cred. The Jews recognized that they were the Chosen Tribe of the Chosen People. Only the Levites could make the atonement for the sins of the People. The Ark might be MIA, but any minute it might show up again, and when it did, only a Levite High Priest would be able to make the Yom Kippur sacrifice to make things right with the Lord.⁴

All this was happening very fast, in just a few years. It might remind you of the Protestant Reformation. If so, it's going to be even more resonant soon. One difference is that the Reformation took place over centuries, this all happened in course of a few decades.

• • •

As the Pharisees and rabbis became more and more popular, however, even those Jews who sided with the Priests found themselves asking a hard question: if the Priests *had* been doing what was needed to keep Hashem happy, why had He destroyed everything the Jews held dear?

Event the Priests found themselves acknowledged their part and joined in with the Fourth Step, and admirably for them, they did not turn away from the ugly reflection in the mirror.

They took to heart the criticism of the Pharisees. They found themselves shaking their heads contritely: Yes, perhaps they *had* neglected the law. They *had* misinterpreted and erred in their duties.⁵ They *had* paid more attention to the rewards of their positions than to their obligations.

A lot of the priests had learned to read. They studied the Law, and discussed it with the scribes, and soon they were discussing with the Pharisees and rabbis, in a sincere and good-hearted debate. Many

⁴ In fact, some End-time Fundamentalist Christian churches are actually currently funding schools in Jerusalem where Jews who can prove that they are Levites by blood can be paid to learn how to perform animal sacrifices and other Old Testament priestly duties, so when (as the End-timers believe) the Jerusalem Temple is finally restored these Levites will be available as priests to do the required sacrifices. Why would Christian churches fund this? Because only when this all happens will Jesus return, which is what they really want. Of course when Jesus returns, thanks to these highly skilled Levites, the Temple, Israel, and all the Jews will be destroyed in a cataclysmic war, and all the Levites that the End-timeres trained will be sent straight to hell and torment for eternity, for failing to accept Jesus as their Personal Savior. But what the heck: that's just collateral damage, I guess. They should have thought of that before they signed up. The important thing is that the End-Time Christians will all go floating up to Heaven. The irony here is so deep you need hip waders.

⁵ It's kind of surprising that the Levite Priesthood had been performing their duties for 1500 years without ever having precise written instructions of what these duties were: Crucial, critical rites, like Yom Kippur, or the Red Heifer sacrifice, or like any of them, for that matter. So no wonder they found errors of omission and commission when they did a review. I was reminded of Eric Berne, the founder of Transactional Analysis, who had a gimmick where he would have his clients examine their birth certificates. About 20% of his clients found that the name or birthday they'd been using all their lives was different than the one on their birth certificates.

took to spending days wearing sackcloth and covering themselves with ashes, publicly mourning their failure to have done a better job. I truly think this was sincere.

After all, here's the thing: at this point they had nothing to gain really. The whole Jewish religion based on priestly sacrifices had just evaporated, and with it any need for the priesthood. So they were going to a lot of trouble with very little external gain beyond a very small measure of approval from their community.

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Even so, these newly learned, newly sincere, newly dedicated Sadducees started to raise a couple of interesting points, which unsettled the Pharisees and rabbis quite a bit.

For one thing, the Sadducees spun that whole Divine Intervention paradigm rather neatly. If you go along with whole "The Lord Controls Human Affairs" thing, they said to the rabbis, it's a very rather small step from "The Devil⁶ Made Me Do It" to "Hashem Made Me Do It." So how do you handle *that*, Mr Rabbi? the Sadducees asked with a wry, but respectful smirk.

For another, they had a very different, much more literal take on the Law than the rabbis and the Pharisees. They held that the bulk of the Law applied only to the Levites, particularly the parts about cleanliness and so on, which were the most burdensome parts for the average Jew. Also, they were much more literal: They agreed that the "kid in the mother's milk" law should apply to all goats and all goat milk, but they were not willing to stretch it further to all flesh and all milk and all forms of cooking. They weren't even certain it applied to all Jews – maybe only to the Levites.

• • •

Well, these interpretations, by the Tribe that The Lord Had Selected As His Personal Guys To Make The Sacrifices For the Whole Nation Of Israel For The Last Fifteen Hundred Years, indeed carried some weight among the Jews. Which naturally drove the Pharisees completely nuts.

Because the Pharisees had been promoting this new idea: A New Society of Jews Guided by The Rules of Daily Life Established by The Law As Brought to You by The Scribes and Thoughtfully Enforced by Your Local Rabbi.

The Sadducees now propounded an alternative: a sort of modified version of the old ritual. What say we make a tent-style tabernacle again. Recreate the holy vessels, they said: We have the technology. The Levites will get it right this time. And the nice part is: YOU don't have to do all the fasting and mikvahing and what not. That's the Priests' problem. Leave the heavy lifting to us Levites. And cross our hearts, we'll get it right this time! Best of all, no buttinski rabbis.

• • •

Now consider the situation from the point of the Jews who had not been quite as actively involved in reading, discussing, debating, or propounding, but who had been willing passengers, as it were, in the Fourth Step Moral Inventory Bus, and glad to be there. They were entirely willing to admit the defects of their collective character, and have the Lord remove those shortcomings.

But suddenly there was a tussle over the steering wheel, and everyone was arguing over who ought to drive.

They'd been riding along on the Scribe and Pharisee Freeway, and everything had been going smoothly until the Sadducees had popped in like the Loyal Opposition and suggested an alternate route.

Now the Jews had to decide between two different ideas: a Pharisee and a Sadducee version of How Jews Ought to Live.

⁶ Of course, at this point they didn't quite yet believe in the Devil. But that belief, like a belief in angels, was right around the corner.

Gosh, said the Jews. That Pharisee version sounds like Work.

Look, said the Pharisees calmly, at the top of their lungs. Are you going to keep listening to the idiots who got you into this mess? You're seeing Hashem's Will at work. He destroyed the Temple for a Reason. This is the Divine Intervention we've been telling you about.

That's a good point, said the Jews. Do we really think Hashem wants the guys who fucked things up to be put back in charge?

What? said the Sadducees. You should listen instead to a bunch of guys who are making it up as they go along? Hashem is on record choosing Us as his representatives on earth. Sure we fucked up, but we Got The Message. Has Hashem said ever said Thing One about choosing Pharisees over Us?

That's also a good point, the Jews replied to the Sadducees. This is very puzzling. You know what would really help us? A sign from Hashem.

And just as the Pharisees and Sadducees were about to roll their collective eyeballs at the naiveté of Jews' request, Hashem, that sly son of a bitch, did indeed give everyone a sign.

• • •

Now I don't know why the Babylonians were paying so little attention to the fact that these Jews were doing all this arguing and inventorying and so on in their backyard, instead of any useful slaving, but I speculate that at this time they had their hands full with the Persians.

The Persians and the Babylonians had been mixing it up for decades, but the Babylonians had been spreading themselves thin, what with all the conquering and tearing down and everything, which they'd been doing a lot of all around the Middle East, not just in Israel. The Persians took advantage of how many fronts the Babylonians were fighting, and one day they basically tore through and beat the crap out of them.

The Jews didn't really have a clue that any of this had happened. They just woke up one day, and instead of a bunch of Babylonian slavemasters standing over their beds, they found Persian slavemasters instead.

• • •

Now there had been Conquering Hordes for centuries, Horde after Horde after Conquering Horde, but the first great Empire was Persia. They basically wrote the book on Empiring For Dummies, and everybody other Empire, from Alexander, to Rome, to Victoria, has since read it and followed the instructions.

Look at what the Babylonians had done: tearing down the great city of the Jews, gathering up captives. They had destroyed a gigantic asset capable of generating huge amounts of revenue, and instead of leaving a citizenry capable of taking care of themselves, they quickly acquired instead a gigantic number of dispirited mouths to feed.

Remember the famous Arnold/Conan the Barbarian Line? "To crush your enemies, to see them driven before you, and to hear the lamentation of their women..." That's the Conquering Horde Ideal. Babylonians lived to hear those lamentations.

The Persians didn't give a shit about hearing lamentationss. They wanted a Great Empire, i.e.: *real* domination. Remember the Neutron Bomb that killed every living thing but left all the buildings in place? The Persians would have appreciated a weapon like that, but they would never have used it. Even that would have been too unsophisticated.

When the Persians conquered a city, they destroyed as little as possible. (Sometimes as little as possible was a hell of a lot, but they were careful nonetheless.)

They didn't kill everybody in sight, just anybody who resisted them. There's a difference.

They offered mercy to anyone who abjectly surrendered and brutal painful death to anyone who feigned surrender or double-crossed them.

They publicly killed everyone in the city government, and with great pomp installed a puppet government made up of carefully selected locals.

Then late one night they would kill most of the priests at the city temple and steal all its treasury. The next day the conquering general would publicly apologize profusely to the city populace -- like it was a terrible error. He might even execute a few renegade soldiers just to show how sorry he was about the mixup.

Then the general would install the second or third string temple priests to lead the temple, and hand over some Persian gold (not as much as he'd stolen the night before) -- and with it put in place at the temple a Persian overseer and some Persian guards to make sure nothing bad like that would ever happen again.

Suddenly instead of a strong defiant enemy, the Persians had a compliant, hardworking client city with most of its assets intact. And the locals would be worshipping at a Persian-run client temple. And the Persians would be sucking in the client state's revenue. In today's parlance: Pwned.

It's a playbook that every empire has run by the numbers ever since.

• • •

So. Here's the Sign from Hashem:

It took a little while for the Persians to sort out what the hell all those Jews were doing in Babylon, but once they did, they wanted them out. The Persians had done the math and decided it would be cheaper to fund the rebuilding of Jerusalem and send everybody back there than to keep the Jews in Babylon.

Oh, by the way, not just rebuilding Jerusalem. The Temple, too.

How's that for a Sign from Hashem?

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Well, obviously, it's a Sign that we got it right, said the Pharisees. Because what have we been saying all this time? About Divine Intervention? And what could be more Divine than Intervention like that, intervening about the Temple and all?

On the other hand, said the Sadducees, it's a sign that Hashem wants his Priesthood back in place, doing his sacrifices, just like The Good Book says. Sadducees rule: that's what the Sign means, said the Sadducees.

Can you two just shut the hell up? said the Jews. We're going home. Isn't that enough?

• • •

I'll tell you how the Persians inserted themselves into this dispute, which is pretty interesting and led to some pretty wild developments, but I have a few other things to talk about first.

I could try to make the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple interesting and exciting, but the hell with it. That would be work.⁷

I'll sum up: Essentially, some Jewish stewards selected by the Persians took some money the Persians had given them, and duck-taped the walls of Jerusalem and the Temple and Tabernacle back together from the bits that the Babylonians had left behind. Doing that was was a long, laborious undertaking.

What they ended up with wasn't great, but it was a hell of a lot better than nothing.

⁷ Read Nehemiah and Ezra in the Old Testament, if you can manage to keep your eyes open.



Now for any readers that are Christian, or happen to be interested in Christianity, here's an amusing detour. The Gospels are full of references to Samaritans: the Good Samaritan, the Samaritan woman at the well. And so on. All the Sunday school teachers manage to tell us about this is that there was Bad Blood between the Jews and the Samaritans. They never tell you where the Bad Blood came from. So now I'm going to tell you The Rest of the Story.

The Samaritans lived in (of all places) Samaria, a little area near the northern border of Israel, and claimed that their citizens were two parts of the original twelve tribes of the Jews. They claimed that they descended from Abraham, that they too were Jews. The Jews scoffed at this and said they weren't. The Samaritans had even built their own Temple years before the Jerusalem temple, and kept the Law faithfully (as they saw it), with their own priests. The Babylonians had blown right past Samaria, leaving the Samaritans untouched.

The Samaritans regarded the capture of the Jews as the capture of their own kinsmen. To them, the Captivity was an outrage and a family tragedy. They felt it personally and deeply, and prayed for all the Jews to be reunited.

So when the first Jewish emissaries returned from Persia, the Samaritans came to welcome them. They believed their prayers had been answered.

They invited the Jewish emissaries to join them. They offered to give the returning Jews homes in Samaria. They said, since their Temple had never been destroyed or defiled – why not make this the place of worship for all the Jews?

Well, the Jewish emissaries scorned the offer. Scorned it.

Nobody likes being scorned. The Samaritans took it hard. They wrote a nasty letter to the Persians saying the Jews were being a bunch of jerks, and misusing the money that the Persians had given them.

The Persians wrote a nastygram to the Jews to stop everything until they had investigated the Samaritan claims. The Jews wrote back, telling the Persians that the Samaritans were a bunch of jealous assholes with no business calling themselves Jews. It was a big scandal.

Eventually, after the Persians looked into it, they agreed that the Samaritans were in fact a bunch of assholes. At least, that's how it's recorded in the Jewish histories. At the time of the Gospels, the wounds were still pretty fresh. Even today, twenty-four hundred years later, The Samaritans and the Jews still don't like to talk to each other.⁸



I'd like for you to imagine what's happening in Babylon while Jerusalem was being rebuilt. The Jews had been there for more than sixty years. Every adult Jew who made the trek from Jerusalem is dead.

The Persians have been combing through the Babylonian treasury, and they've actually found the Holy Vessels stolen from the Temple: the Menorah, the Censer, the Showbread Table. Other things too: Vials of holy Menorah oil, the High Priest's seals still intact. Boxes of the Sacred Incense. Even the last loaves of Showbread, now stale and hard as rocks, wrapped up in linen. Everything cushioned in wool and straw and packed in wood trunks, marked and sealed. The Babylonians, the most destructive force the world had ever seen, had for some reason been scrupulously careful about these treasures.

The Persians returned these to the custody of the priests, so they could bring them back to the rebuilt Temple when the exiles returned.

⁸ More about animal sacrifice; not for the queasy. The Samaritans, to this day still practice Mosaic-style ritual animal sacrifice much as was done at the Temple, including the slaughter, flaying, dismemberment and burning, and there are videos of the practice online. Google Samaritan Paschal Lamb Sacrifice

Realize that the priests had been born in captivity, after the Temple had been destroyed. They'd never seen these things. They'd only read about the Holy Vessels.

And in a few days, they're supposed to carry them back to Jerusalem and start using them? Really?

It dawns on them: no Levite in Babylon has ever sacrificed a lamb, or splashed a dove's blood on the altar base. None of them has formed the holy incense, or kept an Altar fire burning all night long.

Have you heard the term Performance Anxiety?

They realize that there hasn't been a High Priest for years. There hasn't been an Tabernacle, or an Ark, or the possibility of a Yom Kippur rite. There hasn't been a need for a High Priest.

But now, thanks to that sly son of a bitch Hashem and his Sign, there's a need for one now.

In the Old Days, the outgoing High Priest would whisper the True Name of the Lord to the New High Priest. Does anyone even know the True Name of the Lord anymore?

If there had been among the Sadducees before any lack of focus, any smugness in their discussions with the scribes: that's gone.

• • •

After you complete the Fourth Step, after you admit your failings, you ask your High Power to take away your shortcomings. That prayer⁹ gets answered, it seems, with a swift and an often devastating power. And when I say this Story is my story, it's moments like this that make it resonate for me. For suddenly the Lord reaches out, and takes your half-hearted prayer with its dubious sincerity, and turns it into a laser beam pointed at your heart.

That's what he had done to the Sadducees. He had answered their prayer.

• • •

Things were going to get interesting for the Pharisees as well. For one thing, they were going to the get the name Pharisees. Here's how.

The Persians were smart cookies. They needed to figure out how to establish a compliant client leadership with this bunch of exiles. They'd sent some smart contractor types to do the rebuild down to Jerusalem, but those were not the People People.

The People People were the Pharisees, the Persians reasoned. They'd quickly gathered that there were two conflicting camps: those Pharisees and the Sadducees. They'd scored big points with the Sadducees by returning the Holy Vessels. Right now, the Persians owned the Sadducees. They needed to figure out how to own the Pharisees.

Then they needed to figure out how to play those two sides against the middle and own the Jews.

But first things first: how to own the Pharisees?

Actually, it turned out not to be that hard.

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I suppose you've seen a TV show or something where early humans are supposed to have come in contact with extraterrestrials and learned algebra or creole cooking or how to make eyeshadow or gunpowder or something.

Well the Persians had been following a religion for a few thousand years (and it's still followed by a lot of Iranians today), called Zoroastrianism, and when the Jews came into contact with it those Zoroastrian Persians in Babylon, Judaism began to change, quite dramatically.

⁹ Here's the Fourth Step Prayer: I am ready for Your help in removing from me the defects of character which I now realize are an obstacle to my recovery. Help me to continue being honest with myself & guide me toward spiritual & mental health.

Although the Jews of that era were extremely isolated compared to the Persians, it would not be surprising if some of Jews spoke the Persian language, Farsi. The Persians, however, prided themselves on learning, and probably could scare up quite a few people who spoke reasonably good Hebrew.

Anyway, the Persians and the Pharisees began to talk about their respective faiths, and they discovered that they had a lot in common. Both believed in the Flood, for example. Maybe more patriarchs than Noah had survived.

Maybe they found common ground because both believed in a single, all-powerful deity whose only visible manifestation was through fire. Unlike practically any other culture in the known world, where deities were just enormous versions of animals or people, the Persians and Jews worshipped something abstract and essentially invisible.

I like to think that the discussion took the form of the Persians asking questions; questions that set the Pharisees to thinking.

Questions like these:

Is there a soul that survives death? If the deity is immortal, is His creation mortal? If Jews are judged for their adherence to the Law, what about non-Jews? If non-Jews are judged, what form will that judgment take? Are there unseen forces of good and evil working in the world? Are human affairs affected by those forces? The Deity that felt that the world had become so evil that he intervened with the Flood – could He feel compelled to intervene again? If so, what might that intervention consist of?

Now in fact, a lot of the sayings of the Jewish prophets, and the psalms, and the words ascribed to Hashem that were scattered in writings and remembered snippets that would in the near future be gathered into the Tanakh touched on these various topics. And the scribes among the Jews had been actively gathering these words. But when the Persians asked these questions, this way, those snippets seemed suddenly to light up, and to fall into a kind of order. They seemed to form a pattern. It didn't quite make sense, but...it formed something, like a shadow in the fog.

So the Jews took these words back to the Persians, sort of excited, and showed them, and discussed them. What made you ask these questions, they said?

Because our faith teaches us of these things, the Persians answered.

Like what? The Pharisees asked.

So the Persians told them.

They told the Pharisees about angels¹⁰, bright spirits who looked like men with wings, who the Persian god had made to bring goodness to men. But some of these angels rebelled against their god, and sought to make men do evil.

They told the Pharisees that although some men were fortunate enough to know of the Law, all men would finally be judged for the goodness of their acts – judged by whether they had listened to the angels of the Lord or to the fallen angels who had rebelled.

They told the Pharisees that their god had promised after the Flood not to destroy the earth again except once more, and that by fire, so he was waiting until he could not abide its evil any more.

They told the Pharisees that when their god could finally stand no more, he would be born in human form, as a king who would cleanse the earth of evil.

They told the Pharisees that there would be a great and terrible war, and all the forces of evil would be on one side, and all the forces of good on the side of the incarnate god, and that the good would triumph, and the god-king would reign for a thousand years.

¹⁰ I told you that there was a day that the Jews first heard about angels. After this, angels start appearing in human, winged form in Bible stories, and they start having names.

And at the end of the thousand years, there would be a Last Judgment. And all the dead would come back to life, and rise from their graves, and stand before the throne of the god-king.

And the king would judge them one by one. The god-king would open up a bridge to the sky, and invite the good to live in joy for eternity in his heaven with the angels.

Then the god-king would set the earth to endless fire the evil would burn in that eternal hell in torment with the fallen angels – that some might call devils.

That's what we believe, said the Persians.

Holy cow, said the Pharisees, looking over their snippets of prophets, psalms, and sayings of Hashem. It sort of looks like we believe that too!

• • •

They'd been looking at it all this time, the Pharisees realized; they just hadn't seen the pattern. All the dots were there, and Persians had basically helped them draw the lines. Angels. Devils. Heaven. Hell. Resurrection. A Messiah. A Last Judgment. All there: In the words of the prophets; in the words of the psalms. How had they been so blind?

You can just imagine their wonder, their excitement as they raced back to their discussion buddies, the Sadducees.

We just had the most amazing talk with the Persians! the Pharisees told them.

Oh, yeah? said the Sadducees. Like what?

So the Pharisees went on and on. Angels. Devils. Heaven. Hell. Resurrection. Et cetera.

Hold the phone, said the Sadducees. Where exactly is that bit about the Resurrection?

Well, stammered the Pharisees, maybe it's not *explicit*, but if you read between the lines...

You've been speaking with those Farsi guys, haven't you, said the Sadducees, like scolding parents. Look, you start talking with a Farsi, next thing you know, you're *thinking* like a Farsi. This is Farsi thinking. This isn't Jewish thinking.

It's right there in the psalms, protested the Pharisees.

It's right there in the psalms if you're thinking like a Farsi, replied the Sadducees. Farsi, Farsi, Farsi.

The Pharisees frowned, and some of them pouted. We are not either Farsis, they said. But we'll call ourselves Pharisees from now on, which is a nice Hebrew word meaning separate ones, because we sure as hell want to be separate from you.¹¹

• • •

So the Pharisees and rabbis started spreading this message of Heaven and Hell, Resurrection, the coming of the Messiah, Angels and Devils to the Jews as they waited for the Great Return.

And it really caught on. It became almost an alternate Judaism.

But nobody quite knew how the Pharisees' New Teachings fit with the traditional Judaism of the Sadducees.

Don't trust this stuff, the Sadducees said. It's some sort of mind game being spread by the Persians. They want to destroy our traditional religion!

Are these the same Persians that just rebuilt our Temple so you priests could restart our traditional religion? the Jews asked.

¹¹ I can't think of a cute way to say this, so I'll just say it. The other group called themselves, in Hebrew, the "Sons of Zadok," after the first High Priest of the Temple at the time of Solomon. When the King James translators worked this word into English, it became the Sadducees, and every English translation since has used it.

Er...yes...the Sadducees replied.

Just checking, said the Jews.

Don't worry about the Sadducees. They're just being wet blankets. We'll tell you what to do from now on, said the Pharisees.

But didn't you tell us before that our failure to obey the priestly Law was how we ended up in exile in the first place? Asked the Jews.

Er...yes...the Pharisees replied.

Just wanted to be sure, said the Jews.

• • •

The Persians meanwhile had figured out the structure of the client state they wanted for the Jews.

The Temple had a Room of Hewn Stone¹² where the seventy Chief Priests would meet on special occasions, such as when they elected a new High Priest. When the Babylonians destroyed the Temple, the Room of Hewn Stone was one of the few structures left standing. Perhaps the Persians regarded this as an omen.

The Persians told the Jews to select from their ranks a Council of Seventy Elders. The Council of Elders would elect a High Priest. The Council could choose whoever it wished.

Of course by Jewish Law, the High Priest had to be of the Levite tribe, and he would have had the specific religious duties laid out in the Law. The Persians understood that.

But the Persians decreed that the High Priest would also be the temporal authority for the Jews, establishing the civil law for Jerusalem and the client-state of Israel. The High Priest would report to a Persian governor, who then might veto the High Priest's temporal actions.

The only powers the Persians reserved to their governor were the two biggies: capital punishment and taxation. Pay attention to that, because that will start to be a big deal over the next few years: capital punishment and taxation.

The Persians concluded (correctly) that the Jews would divide the council pretty evenly between Pharisees and Sadducees, and that the Council would need to find a leader who would work with both groups and keep compromises going. That if either side got too upset, that Council would get voted out in classic parliamentary fashion. And if things got too far out of hand, the Persian governor could put on the brakes.

And that's how things worked out. Until everything changed for the Persians a few years later. But that's tomorrow night's story.

• • •

So the Exile is about to end.

The Jews are about to troop back to Jerusalem and the Persians are going to wave bye-bye and sit back and collect the revenue.

Do you think that Persians were pretty smart cookies? I do.

They had conquered the Babylonians, and basically taken over everything Babylon had.

They had won the hearts and minds of the Sadducees by restoring the Temple and returning the Holy Vessels.

They had won the hearts and minds of the Pharisees by convincing them they were kindred spirits.

¹² See Night 4, footnote 5

They had won the hearts and minds of the rest of the Jews by sending them back to their restored city and Temple, and giving them the authority to choose their own leadership within a traditional framework.

Nice going, Persians.

• • •

The Jews had come to Babylon broken-hearted and empty-handed, with their Temple destroyed, their city in ruins, and their religion effectively wiped out.

Today the Jews return from that Exile with:

A new alphabet

A highly literate population

Multiple identical copies of the Torah, now canonical

A rededicated and trained (at least, book-trained) priesthood

A new class of persons (scribes) familiar with Jewish Law

A new class of persons (rabbis) concerned with morality in daily life

A newly rebuilt Temple

A newly rebuilt capital city

A newly established temporal and religious authority based on parliamentary elections (the Council of Elders)

New religious concepts¹³ that are going to dominate all future Jewish thinking: Angels. Devils. Heaven. Hell. Resurrection. A Messiah. A Last Judgement.

Not bad for eighty years of exile that everyone thought were going to be simply eighty years of hell.

¹³ I want to be perfectly clear here that I am *not* saying that these concepts were simply taken or absorbed or whatever from Zoroastrian thought. Maybe they were, maybe they weren't. It is just as reasonable and just as legitimate to suggest that they were *revealed* within existing Jewish thinking as a result of being seen in the light of Zoroastrianism. And there are two ways even of understanding that hypothesis: that those concepts may have been widely promulgated in an oral tradition, but never written down, or that they had been written, but lost, or forgotten or not included in canonical texts collected previous to the Exile, but after contact with the Persians who shared similar notions, those expressions may have seemed more worthy of publication.

Night Six

It's kind of fun doing this, isn't it? I'll bet you thought it was going to be totally boring. It's not *totally* boring.

If you're reading this, it's like 99% probable that you're living in a Judeo-Christian culture. That religious heritage impinges into all kinds of aspects of our lives, yet we're blissfully unaware.

Our seven-day week. Weekends. Why wine is sort of hip and sophisticated, but beer or whiskey is kind of slutty or derelict. Why practically every man my age is circumcised. Why...

I should really make a list. You should really make a list.

The thing is: it's everywhere. We're like fish, we're swimming in this heritage and we have no idea there's such a thing as water.

Like tonight, you're going to find out about the origin of synagogues. Won't that be interesting? Do you know that they started 2500 years ago?

I love knowing stuff like that. Even if there had never been a Great Miracle, it would fun to hear this Story, just so you could know stuff like that.

But the fact is, a Great Miracle Happened There. And the story of that Great Miracle gets closer with each candle we light. There are only two more candles to go. I can hardly wait.

In case you're wondering, here's my plan for the rest of my Story:

Tonight	Night Six	475-175 BCE
Tommorow	Night Seven	175-165 BCE
Final Night	Night Eight	165 BCE – the Great Miracle

Tonight's installment covers a lot of really amazing change. Last night we talked about changes in the ways the Jews thought about the world and about their relationship to Hashem. Tonight we'll talk about the way world was changing all around them. And was it ever changing

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But first things first:

The Jews left Babylon and returned to Jerusalem.

Some of them, that is; not all of them. Not by a long shot.

The strange thing is, how few of the Jews actually returned. You can never be sure of numbers in the Bible. But only about a tenth of the Jews who might have returned actually came back to Jerusalem. Maybe that was five thousand, maybe it was fifty thousand. Anyway, it was a lot fewer than all the Jews living there.

After living in Babylon for eighty years, people thought of themselves as Babylonian Jews or Persian Jews or something, not as Israelites. They had farms. They had families there and friends. None of them had ever lived in Israel.

Those that made the trek came back to a not so wonderful, patched together version of what once had been a pretty nice city. At the top of Mount Zion was a patched up version of what once had been a pretty awesome Temple.

The Persians, who were pretty smart cookies, appointed a Jew to be the governor of the client state of Israel: Nehemiah. Even the Jews must have thought he did an OK job; he got his own Book in the Old Testament.

Nehemiah, and Ezra, a Levite Priest and a scribe, accompanied by the new Temple's first High Priest, a fellow named Joshua, then dedicated the rebuilt Temple.

Nehemiah asked everybody in Jerusalem to gather in the Courtyard. The crowd, from all accounts, wasn't that big.

Then Ezra read the whole of the Law aloud, pausing from time to time, to make sure everyone understood. It took all afternoon.¹

When it was done, everybody went home.

• • •

But the blue flame of Shekinah did not fall from the sky and walk through the courtyard into the Tabernacle.

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When Yom Kippur rolled around, the High Priest didn't have to worry about pronouncing the Secret Hidden Name of the Lord correctly. Remember last night, when I asked, rhetorically, whether anyone even remembered it? Turns out, nobody did. The Name had been forgotten.

And it came time for the High Priest to sprinkle the goat's blood on the Ark...well there was no Ark to sprinkle. No righteous man had yet come to recover it, I guess.

So on that Yom Kippur and every Yom Kippur to follow, the High Priest just stood in the Tabernacle, next to the place where the Ark would have been, and sprinkled the goat's blood on the floor.

The Ark was gone.

I don't want to spoil your evening, but no one was going to see the Face of the Most High in a cloud. Not then. Not ever again.²

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I'm going to let that scene settle in for a moment.

Oh, why hold back? The winter rain drizzles on the courtyard. Your hair drips and your clothes are damp and chilly and they cling to your skin. What little sunlight that manages to sneak past the dreary heavy clouds only washes the color out of everything.

So what do you think, Exiled Jews, standing in the cold rain? Are you glad to be back?

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Now by the end of tonight's installment, three hundred years will have passed, and the scene will be quite different: The courtyard will be filled almost to bursting with beautiful well-dressed people, the altar will be roaring with flame, the Tabernacle will be faced with gorgeous white marble and decked out with gold. The Temple will be more beautiful and more grand than even it was in Solomon's day.

It might confuse you that no one in the Temple is speaking Hebrew; that everyone is speaking Greek. It might surprise you how gloriously rich everyone looks, even the Temple priests.

And when you walk through Jerusalem, you scarcely know what to make of it. Along with being a great spiritual center, it has become, in three hundred years, one of the most important financial centers

¹ A lot of the Jewish men who hadn't been captured and stayed behind in Israel had married non-Jewish wives. Ezra declared that all those marriages were nullified. He sent the wives out of Israel. If the men didn't like it, they could leave as well. Or, as Ezra pointed out, stay, and pick a nice Jewish girl from the new arrivals. Most chose option two. That Ezra was a piece of work.

² Even though I'm not sure it fits here, I need to put this somewhere, so here goes. Those wonderful giant statues of the cherubim in the Tabernacle were gone too, never to return. The newly strict Pharisees and Sadducees agreed that they just did not belong.

on earth. All the trappings of wealth: huge, rich houses, vast estates, fabulous shops, all the rest, things you might expect to see in Athens or Alexandria or Antioch; that's what you see in Jerusalem that day.

A lot of things will have changed since the day the duck-taped rebuilt Temple was rededicated.

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So first let's talk about the Jews. We talked about what happened to the Jews involved with the Exiles. Let's talk about what happened to the Jews that *weren't* involved.

Without a King, the Jews that didn't get rounded up and exiled returned to their nomadic, agricultural lives, most of them. They formed ad hoc tribes again, ad hoc alliances. A lot of farmland had been owned by Jews that got taken to Babylon, so who owned that land now? Anybody who grabbed it, essentially. So families started trying to stake out property for themselves, and there really was no one to stop them. You can imagine that scene. There was no government. The tribal leaders were long gone. Things could get pretty brutal.

The Jews used to have to stay close enough to Jerusalem to get back to the Temple three times a year. Well, the Temple was gone, no what was holding them back now?

With so much uncertainty, a lot of Jews just headed for the seaports. Jews spread out in every direction. They called this movement the *Diaspora*, the Dispersal, and it became a great big deal in the years to come.

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What happened to these Jews, the Diaspora? Though they were very different, they appear to have had a lot in common.

Even though they settled in different countries and different communities, even though they took up a variety of jobs and trades, they rarely adopted the local religions or joined freely into the community. They typically lived in enclaves with other Jews. They still circumcised their sons, and got drunk for Passover. They kept speaking Hebrew among themselves, and they didn't teach it to outsiders. (That, by the way, is an important fact.)

And here's an interesting item, mentioned in more than one history: the menfolk in the places they settled found the Jewish women uber-attractive. It's like those women gave off pheromones or something: There's a real Penthouse Letters quality to the descriptions of the expat³ Jewish women. But the Jewish women would not anything to do with those men unless they got themselves circumcised. If the menfolk did that, however, the women would take them as husbands and give them hot sex, and the men would be accepted into the expat Jewish community. Those were among the first converts to Judaism.

Along with the sort of typical trades you might expect, a lot of Jews took up mercenary soldiering. They'd gotten a reputation for fierce fighting, and a lot of armies hired them on; forming scary, elite units of Jewish mercenaries, the Inglorious Basterds of their day. I swear this is true.

So within a few years after the destruction of Jerusalem, all over the world there were communities of Jews. And remember, you were a Jew because of blood, because you were part of a family. All the Jews were cousins. Judaism wasn't a religion, or rather it wasn't simply a religion, it was a birthright.

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So if you were to imagine a sort of Old Testament Professor Xavier with a sort of Old Testament Cerebro that could track every Old Testament Jew on the planet: before the Exile, there'd be about a

³ My daughter is in the US Foreign Service, and over the years I've just gotten used to using the term expat, short for expatriate, for persons living abroad. Make it your Word of the Day if you don't already know it.

million little Jewish lights, and all of them would be in a little area about the size of Rhode Island, and most of them would be in Jerusalem.

Eighty years later, after the Return, Professor X would see roughly the same number of lights, but not so localized any more. Now they'd be scattered all over the Cerebro's map; little glowing pockets all over Greece and Macedonia, and all along the sea coast of the Mediterranean, and lots along the Euphrates in Babylon (what we now call Iraq), and some in Antioch, and quite a few in Persia (Iran), and a little bunch in Jerusalem, and scattered like sparkles over the territory that used be so full, Israel, and down into Egypt and North Africa.

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The Jews in Jerusalem didn't much like their crappy duck-tape Temple. They wanted a nice Temple. And they wanted to share some of the glorious new learning that they developed: the new Hebrew alphabet, the written Torah. And the Pharisees, in particular, were anxious to spread their vision of the moral application of the Law in daily life.

The Pharisees did not much like the Sadducees. They even had a catch phrase: A learned momzer⁴ has more value than an ignorant High Priest. They wanted all Jews to be learned. They set themselves up as rabbis – a term which has come to be translated as teachers – and many became missionaries to the scattered Jewish communities.

So over the course of a few years, many of these communities had rabbis. The rabbis brought with them copies of the Torah, in the new Hebrew script. They taught the Jews how to read.

While they were at it, the rabbis taught them their cool new interpretations about how to live according to Hashem's Law, even if you couldn't make it to the Temple, which of course, a lot of the Jews were too far away to do. These expat Jews were kind of feeling themselves in a bind: they really wanted to be on Hashem's good side (remember the whole sins of the father visited on the sons thing), there was no honking way they were getting to the Temple to sacrifice a dove, and here was this rabbi making them read aloud every damned little misdemeanor that they could screw up. So they worked like hell to keep things the way the rabbi said to keep them, and if that meant no cheeseburgers, so the hell be it.

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Now the Pharisees, as I have said a gazillion times, were big on prophecy, and this was the golden age of Prophecy. In fact, there was a kind of Prophecy of the Month club. The Pharisees were regularly sending out these Latest and Greatest Prophecies from Ezekiel and Zephaniah and Hezekiah, and a lot of other prophets who never made it into the Bible, prophecies full of Angels and Resurrections and Last Judgments, and all the other cool stuff the Pharisees had picked up in Babylon, to all the Pharisee rabbis at all the outposts all over the world.

Of course these Prophecies were scary as shit: the world was going to go kerblooey in a minute or so, etc. So the Jews at Antioch, or Alexandria, or wherever, would read the prophecy, have a heart attack, and then beg the rabbi to please send back with the messenger a few shekels to those wonderful, thoughtful Pharisees who had sent the prophecy, and oh by the way, a few extra shekels for the priests at the Temple to sacrifice a few lambs in hopes the world wouldn't end right away.

(And wasn't long before the Sadducees began to piggyback their letters with the Pharisees'. Requests for Love Offerings: The Altar could really use a nice polishing: only 500 shekels. We'll even put a nice plaque with your name on the base. And so on.

⁴ Momzers were Jews who could not enter the Temple. Momzerhood started with a Jew of born of an incestuous or an adulterous union, or to be more precise, if the father could not be *proven* to be woman's spouse. Not a child born out of wedlock...it was just fine to be a bastard. Momzerhood was then passed on: The offspring of momzers were momzers for the next ten generations. Momzers could only marry other momzers, or non-Jews.

You see, the Jerusalem of those days wasn't that much different than in our own times. When I said that the Exile planted the seeds of modern Judaism, you may not have realized how broadly that statement applied.)

Of course the Pharisees went along: they wanted a nicer Temple as much as the Sadducees did. Maybe they thought the Law required a different level of daily behavior, but they didn't deny the importance of the Temple.

And the Sadducees needed the goodwill of the Pharisees to maintain the continuity of the High Priesthood; the Persians had seen to that. So they had set aside offices in the Temple for the Scribes, and set aside special colonnades along the Temple walls where the Pharisees could sit in the shadow of the Tabernacle and discuss with anyone who wanted the finer points of the Law.

The Pharisees liked that, and they didn't want to mess with it. There was cooperation if not peace.

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But perhaps you were very observant? Did you just notice something? Something rather important?

That messages were going back and forth from the Temple to the expat Jewish communities? And money?

The expat Jews certainly did. Those expat Jews were sharp.

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While you're sending a note back to Benjamin the Scribe at the Temple, said an expat in Antioch to his rabbi one day, could you ask Benjamin the Scribe to pass along this note along -- to my expat cousin Jacob in Tarsus? Here's a couple shekels for your trouble.

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That's all it took.

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Of course Benjamin the Scribe would be happy to do that. And soon, in Jerusalem, the Pharisee scribes and messengers were coming and going with notes to all the expat Jewish communities on a regular basis, along with the usual prophecies and news from the Temple.

It had been so simple to start adding message delivery to the mix. A central sorting station at the Temple, that was all it took. Shake the incoming bag of messages on the table. Sort them into the outgoing message bags. For a small fee. Done.

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Of course it wouldn't take long before somebody in Antioch, let's call her Sarah, wanted to send a few shekels to her cousin Elizabeth in Alexandria. But that gets dicey. Carrying cash money gets very dicey. So the rabbi, hearing this request, would say no. Forcing Sarah to weep. Which is never pleasant.

After Sarah wept on several occasions, Sarah's husband -- let's call him Uriah -- had enough. He went to the rabbi and a long heart-to-heart. Then he told Sarah he was going to Jerusalem.

When he got to Jerusalem, Uriah met with one of the Pharisees, and offered this plan. Uriah would give the Pharisee some money, say a hundred shekels. The Pharisee would keep fifty, and give the other fifty to the rabbi in Alexandria.

When Sarah wanted to send money to her sister in Alexandria, the Antioch rabbi would send along a note to the Alexandria rabbi, who would release some shekels to the sister. If funds ran low, the Alexandria rabbi could always ask the Pharisee to cover for some of the remaining fifty, and the Pharisee would provide it.

The Pharisee thought about this, and it all seemed pretty reasonable.

But then Uriah added a few twists.

Now suppose somebody in Alexandria wanted to send some shekels to Antioch, said Uriah. Okay, said the Pharisee. Tell the Rabbi to collect the money, and have him send a note. I, Uriah, will cover the amount in Antioch. And there will be money with the rabbi in Alexandria the next time Sara wishes to send money to her sister.

What? Said the Pharisee. For suddenly, he got the idea.

That's right, Uriah said. This way, instead of sending shekels, all we need to do is send notes. And at some point, when we want, we take our notes to the Temple and settle up.

What you're describing, said the Pharisee, is a brilliant concept that has never been seen before. In a few centuries however, it will become very popular, and it will have a name. It will be called "The Modern Banking System."

Is that so? said Uriah.

Yes, said the Pharisee. In the meantime, I'm off to see the High Priest. You just stay here. I'm going to tell him the whole thing was my idea.

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You see, money is a pain in the ass. Particularly in those days, when money meant metal. Money back then was heavy. Money was hard to carry and easy to steal.

(There were other problems with money, which we'll get to later: For one thing, it was hard to guarantee its value. Gold and silver were easy to adulterate and coins were easy to counterfeit. Another simple trick was clipping: take a gold or silver coin and snip a little from the edge. I've found buried in the ground an actual Mogul coin that should have been as big as a quarter; what I dug up was the size of a dime; it had been clipped that many times. That's why modern coins have milled edges, to discourage clipping, but milled edges wouldn't be invented for a few more years.⁵)

But for now, let's just focus on the problem of theft, which is big. Because it's not just the theft, is it? It's the violence.

Those messengers returning from Antioch or Athens to the Temple would clearly be carrying Love Gifts for the Temple, and every brigand on the route would know it. They would be sitting ducks. And brigands wouldn't care if they had to kill the poor messengers to get the dough; or worse maim them for life; that wasn't their problem.

But if funds were going both ways – both to and *from* the Temple, then the amounts and distances being carried would be much less and that reduced the potential for death, or worse.⁶

In fact, if you could convince someone to accept a *note of guarantee* in payment – another Jew, perhaps, who didn't need shekels in coin right away – you might be able to transfer funds without moving any actual cash at all!

But this concept -- moving money with notes of guarantee – by checks, so to speak – only works if there is a whole network of trust. The Temple, and the priests and rabbis, and the families of the Jewish Diaspora provided that network of trust.

And believe me, sending a check sure beats moving big bagsful of heavy coins.

This was an idea that had legs.

⁵ In around 2000 more years, to be exact, in England in the 1560s.

⁶ If, for example in Antioch, someone was to receive 50 shekels via a temple transfer, and other Jews in Antioch were sending donations to the temple of 30 and 20 shekels, then the shekels could be moved around within Antioch, without going back and forth from Jerusalem.

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So the Temple had a kind of a Post Office, and a kind of Central Bank.

At this early point in their development, these were just nice little family conveniences for keeping the Jews connected, and for keeping lines of communication and finances open between the Jews.

But Jews doing a little business in different parts of the world found it much easier than other, non-related people in different parts of the world were finding the same sorts of tasks.

If you were some guy in Alexandria, you might never know that some guy in Antioch had exactly the sort of lace that would be a big hit with Alexandrian widows. Even if you did, how would you manage to find a way communicate – let alone to pay that guy?

But the Jews, with a central messaging system, and a central banking system, had those methods.

What the Jews didn't have, yet – what nobody had yet – was an easy way move goods from Antioch to Alexandria.

If the goods were little, like a few pieces of lace, the Jews could probably use the Temple Post Office. Nobody else could do that.

But: Really: who cares about a little lace? What if they wanted to move something important, something big, like a ton of wheat, or some cypress lumber? That wasn't happening. That was still a pain in the ass. There were still so many different borders and laws, and dangerous passages full of murders and highwaymen and corrupt border guards. And everyone spoke different languages at every point along the way. Yikes.

But over the next few decades, all of that was going to change, and all the world was going to change. And when it did, Jerusalem was going to become the center of the World.

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What made it all change was Alexander the Great.⁷ I do so love Alexander. He wanted to change the world, and he totally did it, and he had a terrific time, and then he died. When guys like me first heard our therapists tell us we were narcissists, and we replied, oh really, what's a narcissist? and the therapists stumbled around for answers and then finally gave the example of Alexander the Great, we instantly Got It. And then the therapists elaborated and said Except you're not as Great as Alexander. And then we Really Got It. Because that's the thing about Alexander. He was Really Really Great.

Alexander been trained by Aristotle himself, and he so loved the brilliance of the Greek thought, and Greek governance, and Greek language, and Greek culture, and Greek art, and Greek everything; and when he looked in the mirror, he recognized that nobody else in the world was smarter than him, or prettier, or braver; so one day he just decided that he was going make the whole world Greek, and be everyone's Beloved King.

It took Alexander a little less than ten years to conquer the entire civilized world, from Greece and Serbia and all those eastern bloc countries all the way across the middle east and Asia Minor to Pakistan and Afghanistan and down into India, and down through the Middle East, completely conquering Persia and Babylon (and of course Israel and Jerusalem) and Egypt, and a lot of North Africa.

Not a bad decade. Nice going, Alexander.

And smart? Was he ever. He didn't just beat hell out of every army he met. Following behind the army was the Alexander the Great Government in a Box™. The Neocons got this bright idea from Alexander and tried it when they invaded Saddaam's Iraq, but they weren't as smart as Alexander.

⁷ With this passage, we step out of the Tanakh -- traditional Old Testament. The outline for the rest of my Story comes from the Books of the Macabbees found in the Apocrophy, which you'll find in Catholic Bibles. Macabbees I begins with the history Alexander the Great and the division of his kingdom following his death.

Alexander killed or exiled the government officials of the conquered land, and replaced them with a government smart, benevolent, highly-trained Greeks. The new government only spoke Greek: if you wanted to get something done, you had ask them politely in Greek, so pretty soon, everybody in the conquered country was learning how to speak Greek As A Second Language.

Alexander's newly installed Greek-based governments were democratic, mostly, which were a refreshing change from the nasty autocracies they replaced, so the conquered countries didn't mind being conquered. Alexander was Their Hero. A lot their young men signed up to join his army for his Next Big Battle, as he always won and he rewarded his soldiers well. But to join, you had to learn Greek, dress Greek – eventually think Greek.

This started to happen in Judea⁸. The High Priest stayed the Same, the Council of Elders stayed the same; but there was a Greek-speaking governor, and a flurry of interest in joining Alexander's army.

Israel was no different than any other place that Alexander conquered: an incredibly short amount of time later, the entire civilized world began to unify around Alexander's vision of Greek culture.

It reminds me so much of modern times when no matter where you go in the world, everybody speaks some English, everybody wears blue jeans and a Nike tshirt and a Lakers cap with the brim turned backwards. Throughout Alexander's Empire, which is The World My Story Cares About, everybody had learned a little Greek, and women started wearing the himation and peplos, and sewing up their hair in braids, and men began to wear short skirts and to shave.

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So almost overnight, Alexander changed a fractured multinational, multilingual, multicultural world, into a (diverse, but) unified world. With one government, one official language, one default culture.

Suddenly the complexity of transporting a ton of wheat from Antioch to Alexandria became possible.

All the paperwork: the orders, the invoices, the bills, the content declarations, the bills of lading, all the bureaucratic hocus-pocus that existed three thousand years ago, maybe even worse than today, now needed to be done once, not dozens of times, and in Greek only, not in dozens of languages.

Now the road and seas were (relatively) safe, and there was only one guards' command to bribe for safe passage, not dozens along the way.

Trade over long distances had just become much simpler, thank to Alexander. But knowing what to trade – and paying for that trade – was still a pain in the ass.

Unless, of course, you happened to be an expat Jew.

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Alexander may have *unified* the world, but he had not established anything remotely like the amazing communications and financial network that the Jews had in place. There was nothing comparable to that network. And in fact, there was probably no way anything would ever be remotely comparable.

As the potential for longer distance trade became real, merchants realized the value of the Jews' Temple network. They wanted in.

When they explored it with the expat Jews, they could not believe their luck.

You see, cash wasn't the only thing that robbers made a trade in stealing. They also stole messages between merchants. Knowledge is more than power. Knowledge is money. Communications between tradesmen could be quite valuable: getting hold of a merchants frantic order for a purchase for wheat, sending the order to a different supplier, and the wheat to a different merchant – well, there was money to be made, and it was dishonest maybe, but it wasn't technically a crime.

⁸ By this time, the Persians had started to call their client state Judea instead of Israel, so we'll use that name too.

But the communications to and from the Temple were written in Hebrew. And no one wrote or read Hebrew but the Jews. If one of those messages went astray, it was a pain in the ass, but no long-term harm was done.

Same with promissory notes, or notes of guarantee. Easy to forge a note of guarantee in Greek or Persian maybe. Not so with Hebrew: only Jews could write it, none but Jews could read it.

So the Temple-based, Hebrew-only network of the Jews had a character similar to the encrypted internet communications that make Amazon and other e-commerce websites possible: Trusted communications that can't easily be deciphered or misused.

It didn't take long for merchants and traders to realize the value of what the Jews had put in place. It didn't take long for them to persuade the Jews to let them piggyback into the Temple network.

The merchants were glad to ante up to do this. There was Big Money to be made, and making a generous Love Gift to the Temple was simply the Price of Entry, and not such a steep one, really.

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The increase in the volume of trade in Alexander's newly unified world, and the dependence of that trade on the Jews, the Temple, and Jerusalem, is absolutely astonishing. It reminds me of the way we've embraced the internet in modern times.

Suddenly, Jews weren't those people over there at the edge of town that kept to themselves thank heaven. Jews were those people you wanted to have over to lunch, even though you had no idea what you could serve them to eat. The locals started calling the Jewish enclaves *synagogues* – the Greek word for assembly – instead of the nastier words they used to use.

Every major trading house wanted its in-house Jew. Jews in major cities could form consulting firms, and hire out their service on as needed basis.

Naturally, since they were writing up secret messages and moving secret funds, they were privy to all sorts of tantalizing information, and they might, even without breaking or even stretching confidences, find ways to utilize some of that information to enrich themselves and others; other merchants and other Jews.

Of course, thanks to the Pharisees and the rabbis, all the Jews had learned to read and write Hebrew, and they could write to one another anywhere in the world. But the Jews in Babylon spoke Babylonian at home, the Jews in Alexandria spoke Egyptian. Now all of them were picking up a little pigeon Greek, just to get along.

In Jerusalem however, the bright young Jews were learning Greek as fast as they could. Knowing serviceable Greek and Hebrew was like having a law degree and a Harvard MBA.

Alexander had come back from India, married a nice Persian girl, decided he didn't feel so good, went to bed early that night, and died.

And the Jews were about to take over his world.

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Of course, that's not how Alexander saw it. Before he died, he called his four closest generals to his deathbed and divided his world between them.

The two divisions that concern us are named for their first rulers, Ptolemy and Seleucis.

Practically all the descendants of the first Ptolemy kept the same name, which is confusing, but nice and simple. The Ptolemaic Empire, basically was Egypt and North Africa, and the coast of the Mediterranean, where Gaza, Israel and Lebanon now sit. They also owned Cyprus, and a chunk of Turkey. The Ptolemies' capitol was Alexandria.

The Seleucids owned pretty much everything else in the Middle East, from Turkey east to Afghanistan, including Persia and Babylon. The names rulers of the Seleucid Empire typically alternated

between Seleucis and Antiochus. The Seleucids' capitol was Antioch, in what is now Turkey, just north of Lebanon.

Alexander thought he'd given Ptolemy a nice, but much less valuable chunk of real estate than Seleucis. But he didn't realize how wrong that would turn out to be. He'd given him Jerusalem, and Jerusalem was about to become the richest place on earth.

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The Jews had just begun to discover the Wonders of Banking. There are several wonders. The first wonder is Reasonable Fees

They would charge a Reasonable Fee for transferring funds, which the merchants would gladly pay: after all, a slight fee for a guaranteed transfer is way better than the paying no fee and having some robber take everything. But these fees were presented like a tithe: ten percent, and that seems reasonable. But ten percent meant: ten percent when the money goes into the Temple, ten percent when it goes out from the Temple. In other words, twenty percent. Which isn't a bad deal for the Temple, since in fact, nothing would really be changing hands at all in most cases, except a piece of paper with some Hebrew words.

Next they discovered the magic of Exchange Rates. Although these countries had been conquered by Alexander, they all had different coins and currencies. The merchant in Antioch had Crescents, the merchant in Alexandria wanted Talents. How was this to be managed?

The Temple solved the problem by establishing a standard currency, the Temple shekel.⁹ The established uniform exchange rates between various currencies and Temple shekels. With a Reasonable Fee for the exchange. On both ends.

Finally, they discovered the Float. Eventually, somebody would actually demand cash payment for the note of guarantee they had receive. But for the longest time, it would notes changing hands, not actual cash. As long as people *believed* the Temple had the cash, the Jews realized, it was practically the same as having the cash. (This principle, by the way, is exactly the way banks operate today. This is why George Bailey freaks out when his depositors show up at the savings and loan and start asking for their money. He doesn't have their money.) As long as the cash isn't specifically being asked for, the Temple realized, it could be used for other purposes. Like lending to others.

So the Temple began not only to *exchange* funds, it began to *lend* funds. When that merchant in Cyprus heard about a great deal on a load of frankincense in Tarsus, but didn't have the cash, his staff Jew might suggest he borrow the money from the Temple. And presto, the deal would happen. For a Reasonable Fee.

And within a very short time, the Temple expanded its lending from merchants to the royal houses of the world.

In a few short years, everybody owed money to the Jews.

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Let's talk about Jerusalem. A lot was happening there, a lot of change was going on.

That nasty little duck-taped city was The Place to Be. It was Where The Money Was. People who wanted to be in the Center of the Action started flocking there.

⁹ This actually was a requirement of The Law – everyone entering the Courtyard of the Tabernacle was required to pay a Shekel for the privilege. At the time the Law was written, lots of countries made coins called shekels, but two thousand years later, nobody was making them except the Temple, purely for ceremonial purposes, until it became a bank. The moneychangers that Jesus drove out of the Temple were the men who were selling Temple shekels at inflated prices to pilgrims who sought entrance.

You know the kind of people I mean. Well heeled people wearing sincere ties with power-handshakes, or whatever the Old Testament equivalent was. Actually, I'll tell you what the Old Testament equivalent was. People who spoke Greek, who wore fancy Greek clothing, who ate Greek food, who lived in Greek-style houses, who washed at Greek baths, and had their hair sewn into Greek-style braids or had shaved Greek-style chins, who begged favors of Greek gods at the Greek temples that had sprung up around the city, and to show how with it they were, went to those fun Greek-style orgies.

I'm talking about Jews.

How bad was it getting? Jewish men of this era, the second book of Macabbees tells us, were so embarrassed at the Greek baths about having their circumcised penises hanging out there for all the world to see, that they were taking steps to restore their foreskins.¹⁰

The city was rich. Temple Street was a kind of Rodeo Drive. Touristas came to the Temple not to be awed, as they had in Solomon's day, but to show the scribes and Priests and Pharisees that they were Rich and Decent Men of Good Character, totally deserving of a Big Fat Loan. A good way to show this was by making a substantial gift to the Temple, or to sacrifice a few oxen. The Priests would never take a bribe directly, but they'd take their tenth share of a few oxen. Jerusalem was rich in sacrificial meats.

• • •

The Temple itself, once duck-taped together, now looked great. All those Love Gifts alone would have made it shine, but let's be frank, the Temple had money to burn. The New Tabernacle wasn't as tall or as fine as Solomon's, but it was faced in marble now, and beautifully inlaid with gold and onyx and jasper. The courtyard of musicians played constantly, and the instruments were the finest money could buy. The Altar roared with fire, animals were being slaughtered in cartloads, priests carried sacrifices up the earthen ramps in pairs, rich dark smoke hung heavy over the Courtyard.

The hill behind the Temple was a magnificent community of great walled houses; where the priests made their homes. To be selected as a chief priest was to be guaranteed a lifetime of wealth and ease.

But I should point out that the Priests had kept the faith. Solomon's Temple had descended into idolatry almost overnight, remember. But the new Temple had stayed complete free of idols, completely true to the Law ever since the Return. The Sadducees had maintained a fierce adherence to the Letter and the Spirit of the Law so far as the Temple rituals were concerned.

But beneath the Temple, where once had only the tunnels built by King David to provide fresh water, now there were treasure rooms, and those rooms were filled with gold.

The Pharisees and Sadducees continued to work together in the Council of Elders as the Persians had defined. They continued to cooperate. Who could argue with success?

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In the countryside of Israel, life was not quite so wonderful, but it wasn't bad. Farmers farmed, herders kept their flocks, life went on as usual. Every village had its rabbi and its priest. All the village priests longed of course to go to Jerusalem; otherwise they were content.

The city was rich and paid well for what the villages provided.

¹⁰ In case you're wondering how this gets done, circumcised Jews used a device known as the *Pondus Judaeus*, which resembles a trombone mouthpiece, a heavy piece of brass that fits over the glans of the penis, and gets attached, by string or adhesive, to whatever bit of foreskin remains. The weight is allowed to hang free, and it tugs on the foreskin, in time slowly stretching it over the glans. I probably don't need to tell you, this whole procedure can go horribly, painfully wrong. The process takes several months. In the second century, the Jews changed their circumcision techniques to reduce the amount of residual foreskin, making it harder to restore. A number of modern devices are available that take similar approaches.

Three times a year, the Jews made their pilgrimage to the Temple, but now they felt like strangers there. They felt like bumpkins.

• • •

The Ptolemies, as rulers of this land, were not ambitious. They taxed it, but lightly. They were content. They replaced Alexander's Governor with a man of their own, but it had been so long since they had had a country of their own, the Jews hardly noticed.

The Seleucids, on the other hand, were different than the laid-back Ptolemies. The Seleucids had ambition.

Israel sat at the edge of The Seleucid border, right there for the taking. And it wouldn't be long before they decided they would take it.

• • •

Now the thing was, nobody but nobody wanted a war fought in Israel. Why? Because the Temple was the Goose that was Laying Golden Eggs. The Temple was Where The Money Came From. The Temple was how business got done in the wide world. So when the Ptolemies and Seleucids started puffing their chests and threatening each other, everybody in the whole wide world with any influence sent word to the kings of these two countries to work things out, to fight things out if they had to, but to make goddam sure that Jerusalem didn't get hurt.

This would be the first of many battles between these countries about the ownership of Israel, and none of them got fought in Israel.

Anyway, this battle, like most of them, got fought in Gaza, north of Alexandria, and the gentle Ptolemies totally crushed the much more warlike Seleucids.

• • •

But that battle put some worry in the Ptolemies. They'd been lax in protecting Jerusalem. So they built a big round tower next the Temple wall, called the Citadel, and put a garrison of soldiers there, just to show the Seleucids they meant business.

• • •

Life went on.

A couple decades passed, and the Seleucids had another go. Same result.

Another decade, and another attempt.

This time the Seleucids won.

Now Israel was in Seleucid hands.

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Well, not much changed at first. The Seleucids installed a Seleucid governor. Probably the only person to pay much attention that was the High Priest, who reported to him. The Governor raised taxes a little. Then a little more. The Judeans might have expected that. They hoped it wouldn't be a habit.

The Judeans did notice, however, big time, what was going on at that big Citadel tower next to their Temple. First it had been emptied, as the Ptolemies frantically sent every man they had at the Citadel down to Gaza to do Battle against the Seleucids. So the Citadel, meanwhile had just sat there, like a ghost mansion, gathering cobwebs for months, even after the new Seleucid Provincial governor was installed.

Hmmm...the Judeans thought. Maybe the Seleucids are even more laid-back than the Ptolemies. At first they the idea pleased them. Then they weren't so sure.

They needn't have worried. The situation resolved quite obviously soon enough.

• • •

The Seleucid Kings had a different view of themselves than the Ptolemies. It was surprising, really – sort of the opposite of what you might expect. The Ptolemies ruled Egypt, where the ancient kings had thought themselves to be gods. The Ptolemies didn't go for that. They knew that they were human, and acted like it. The Seleucids, on the other hand,, totally bought into that whole “Us kings are Gods” idea.

To the Seleucid kings, since any temple belonged to the gods, and since they believe themselves to be both gods and kings, any temple sort of de facto belonged ... to them.

Now this particular Seleucid king, called Antiochus, the one who had just beat hell out of the Ptolemies, was one greedy son of a bitch, and he had made up his mind to start looting the treasures of his temples.

He meant to loot a lot of them, of course, but the one he really had his sights set on was the Temple in Jerusalem.

So he sent a great big mean-ass garrison of troops to the Citadel.

These were not his run-of-the-mill soldiers, not like the ones the Ptolemies had sent when they were in charge. These were his shock troops, the Seleucid equivalent of the SS. They were the scary, black-hearted, take-no-prisoners mercenaries that gave little children nightmares: the world's deadliest tag-team -- Spartans and Jews.

The Ptolemy garrison had kept its patrols quiet. The Seleucids marched noisily through Jerusalem if full shiny armor, spears raised, shields held high, banners flying, stomping hard, knocking things down if they got in their way, making a big show of intimidating strength.

Who, the Judeans wondered, was the show for? Not the Ptolemies. They'd scurried back to Egypt with their tails between their legs.

No, the Judeans realized: they were the ones meant to be intimidated.

And they were.

• • •

Like I said, Antiochus was a greedy bastard, and the kingdom's temples – his temples, as he perceived them – seemed ot him to be easy pickings. Those temples might not have been as rich as the Jerusalem Temple, but a lot of them were pretty rich in Love Offerings. So Antiochus sent a trusted general around, with an elite squad of soldiers, and a bunch of wagons, and started carting off their gold.

And after a few successful forays at some of the lesser temples, Antiochus decided to send his man to Jerusalem to have a go at the Mother of All Temples.

• • •

Things did not go as expected.

The general brought his band of troops and wagons right into the Courtyard. Assuming that the treasury would be inside, he personally stormed up the steps and into the Tabernacle.

When he entered he saw, clearly, angels. (Lucky for the Jews that they had discovered angels!) First an angel on an angel horse, who ran him down and knocked him to the ground. Then two very handsome, well dressed, muscular angels who stood on each side of him and beat hell out of him with scourges.

Eventually the general's men came in and carried him out on a stretcher. The general rounded up his men, and galloped off empty-handed, straight back to Antioch.

The king, of course, was anxious to meet him,. He expected to get a favorable report and some nice prize Love Offerings.

What he got instead was the general's sword right through his heart.

While he wiped the blood from his sword, the general declared that because of the king's sinful actions, the general had been forced to take the throne, and was now the rightful king.

A few days later, Antiochus' son and heir, named (you guessed it: Seleucis) asked to speak with the new self-styled king. The general agreed, and the son stabbed him to death with a hidden knife.

The Seleucids rejoiced. Justice had been done.

A few weeks later, Seleucis' brother (yet another fellow named, wouldn't you know it, Antiochus) poisoned his newly-crowned brother, and declared himself to be the new king.

• • •

I want you to go over that last section in your mind again, and this time, imagine it by picturing yourself as someone living in Jerusalem, hearing about those events.

Imagine yourself in a Jerusalem where a garrison specially chosen to be scary is tramping in full armor, right past your house.

Now what do you make of that story?

What's your confidence that the New, New God-King Antiochus (the Fourth of That Name) is any less greedy or less murderous than the rest of his crazy family?

What's your confidence that those evil looking mercenaries who just marched past will decide to obey an order from that crazy New, New King?

You know that Jewish mercenaries are supposed to be the scariest people on earth, but it's just crazy: Who would send Jews to scare Jews? Yet actually, it is even scarier, even crazier because it is so crazy.

You think about the New, New God-King's father sent men to loot the Temple. How long will it take before this one gets the same idea?

Jerusalem, you realize, is in deep doo-doo.

• • •

Well there's a guy in Jerusalem thinking about those questions, really, really hard, and he's going to make something big happen. The curtain's about to go up on the penultimate episode of our story.

But before we talk about him, let's get up close and personal with the villain of our piece. The man we've been waiting for since Night One.

Antiochus the Fourth. Or as he likes to be called, Antiochus Epiphanes. Antiochus, God on Earth: that's what he calls himself.

That's a hell of a title to crown yourself with, isn't it? Gives you an idea of the man's personality, doesn't it? Kills his brother, plops the stolen crown on his head, and calls himself God on Earth. What a guy.

Yes, he's crazy as a loon, and he has no moral compass. He is also smart as hell. He was brought up in Athens, tutored in the same academy as Alexander was, where he was the Star Pupil. Like Alexander he's a great believer in Democracy and Republican Principals. Like Alexander, he believes it's his destiny to rule the entire world. Rule it? He believes it belongs to him already, and he can't figure out why other people haven't figured it out. He's like Caligula, except with less self-control.

I'm imagine him right now, sitting by himself in his throne room. He's not feeling bad about killing his own brother, or thinking that there might be global economic consequences if he loots the Temple, which is the engine of the world economy. No, he's thinking about what happened to that general in the Tabernacle, and saying to himself: so, it's going to be a god-on-god throwdown. An Ultimate Cage Fight between me and the so-called King of the Universe. That god is going DOWN.

Yes, my Story has a Villain, and this is him. I've been holding my breath for six nights, just waiting for him to show up.

• • •

That person in Jerusalem who was thinking about the troublesome recent events in Antioch, the one coming up with a really brilliant plan was named Jason.¹¹ He was the brother of the current High Priest, Onias.

Now the books of Macabbees present Jason as (take your choice) a villain or a douchebag. And for the thirty years so I studied this story, I thought of him this way too, bouncing between those two options.

About a year ago, I realized there was a third option, which I'd like to share.

So here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to tell you what Jason did, which is why the chronicles present him as a douchebag villain. Then I'll tell give you my brilliant take, and you can decide if that makes any damn difference to you at all.

I'll tell you this much, no matter what you think of what Jason did, the way things finally went down afterwards was a bigger fucked-up mess than anyone could imagine.

• • •

So here are the facts. Nobody has any alternate facts to present.

Jason went to Antiochus Epiphanes, the God-King of the Seleucids, with this deal:

1. Antiochus should fire Jason's brother and make Jason the High Priest instead.
2. Antiochus should make the client-state of Judea (including Jerusalem) into an independent *Polis*, a city-state.
3. The new polis would be named Antioch, in honor of Guess Who.
4. Since it would not be a province, the polis would not be ruled by a provincial governor. Instead it would be ruled by the High Priest (in other words, by Jason. See Item 1).
5. The High Priest would build a Gymnasium in the Temple courtyard.
6. The High Priest would have authority to establish taxes and to impose capital punishment.
7. The polis would pay each year as tribute to Antiochus three hundred and sixty talents of pure silver.¹²

A few points about this deal were a little disturbing to the Jews, according to the Macabbees authors:

First, High Priests had never been forcibly replaced, and never been appointed by a foreign king, so Jason's plan to snake his brother this way was really galling.

Second, the High Priest was establishing himself as the ultimate civil authority. Taxation was never a High Priest's role before...or given capital punishment authority. That was really scary.

Third, calling Jerusalem Antioch? Are you fucking kidding me?

Fourth, the Council of Elders was supposed to determine who the High Priest was, not the other way round.

Fifth, so obviously the five solid silver automobiles a year are coming out of the Temple treasury. What, the treasury is now Jason's private piggy bank?

¹¹ From here on, practically every Jew found in the Bible, as recorded in those books and the later New Testament books, will use Greek names. Jason had changed his name, other sources tell us, from his original Hebrew name, Jesse.

¹² A talent was a unit of weight, about sixty pounds. Three hundred and sixty talents was almost twenty-two thousand pounds. That's the equivalent of more than five full-size solid silver automobiles, or a stack of American silver dollars over eight miles tall – so tall that jetliners would need to swerve to avoid it.

Sixth: A Gymnasium? In the Temple courtyard? Are you fucking kidding me?

And so on.

• • •

Yes, at first glance, Jason does seem to be in the lead for the Douchebag of the Year award. Actually on second glance, third glance, and five thousandth glance too.

But I have recently come to see a different, much more positive interpretation. I think Jason was trying really hard to find a way to return Israel to Jewish control, and was trying to take advantage of Antiochus' education, egotism, and greed to make this happen.

Let's start with his greed: Jason played him like a cheap fiddle. Sure, Antiochus could try to loot the Temple, but if he tried on his own to take out that much silver – even once – he'd face anger and violence from the Judeans every step of the way. There'd be blood and death, rebellion, and that could lead to insurrection throughout his kingdom. He could pay a heavy price, or get as much for free – and establish a precedent for other temples in the kingdom.

Antiochus' egotism: well obviously, Antioch. Flatter, flatter, flatter.

And the whole polis thing played into Antiochus' education. You see, Antiochus had gotten lots Modern Greek Ideas while he studied in Athens, just like Alexander had, and Alexander had made a name for himself by putting his education into action. Jason was helping Antiochus see ways to develop this self-styled connection with Alexander. Jason sort of guessed that Antiochus wanted to end up being called Antiochus Epiphanes *the Great*, and probably had gotten wind that the king was hoping to use polis development as a way to do it.

Same with the gymnasium suggestion. The whole idea of gymnasiums – the whole healthy mind in a healthy body thing – was like the uber-Greek ideal. Gymnasiums weren't just 24-Hour Fitness Centers. They were places of learning as well, where smart Greek philosophers held forth on whatever the hell smart Greek philosophers were holding forth on in those days. Putting one in the Temple would offer a Modern, With-It counterpoint to the Old-Fashioned Superstitious Nonsense being practiced by the Jews a few hundred yards away.

Those were the sweeteners to Jason's deal. The less obvious elements were these: that Jason really believed that the time had come for Israel to step up and have its own ruler, with the same authority as its ancient kings. And he guessed that Antiochus would, in his heart of hearts, want to deal with an Authority, not an underling.

And Jason, I think, also shared the belief that it was time that the Jews should begin to Branch Out, and that they would never branch out into the wider world until they began to experience the richness and variety of Greek thought. Maybe some of the City Jews had already begun to do this, but the Jews in the country were still quite backward, held down by the strict fundamentalism of their rabbis. Yet three times a year, at the Temple, those Jews too would now have a chance to come into contact with Greek culture at the gymnasium.

Last of all, Jason believed, I think, that a High Priest governing Jerusalem would be able to assert command over a largely Jewish Seleucid garrison, should the need arise to countermand one of Antiochus' orders. This was, I think, Jason's biggest concern. He really wanted to insert a buffer between Antiochus and the soldiers in Jerusalem.

Even if it cost a stack of silver dollars eight miles high, that would be worth it.

• • •

And so Jason and Antiochus shook hands or fist-bumped or whatever the hell guys like that did, and the deal was struck.

I'm sorry to say, tomorrow night's story is going to be kind of a bummer.

Night Seven

And that's the seventh candle. We've nearly come to the end of this celebration, of this time to remember our forefathers, and their roller-coaster relationship with their god. This time that our forebears, who had lived through horror and wonder twenty-two hundred years ago, set for aside for themselves and the generations to come together, and light lights with their family and friends, and remember the Great Miracle every year forever.

I'm glad that you've invited me in, my unseen friends. I thank you for the honor of sharing this time with you.

Tomorrow: the Miracle. Tonight: the Bummer. Tonight, when we get done, believe me, we'll all want a drink. Some of was will be lucky enough to get one.

• • •

Oh, Jason, what a glorious fool you were. You thought you were dealing with a megalomaniac. How could you know that you were dealing with Evil incarnate?

You knew, I'm sure, that it would be a tough transition. I can just imagine the look on your brother's face when you told him to strip off all his clothes, and then you picked them up and put them on.¹

And the look on the faces of the seventy members of the Council of Elders in the Room of Hewn Stone, when you told them to pack up and go home, and marched in a whole new, hand-picked Council, and not a priest or Pharisee in the lot.

And the faces of the Chief Priests when you told them you were knocking down the back wall of the Temple and building a gymnasium there.

And the faces of the Keepers of the Temple Treasury when you told them to rustle up three hundred talents of pure silver for delivery to the King's Palace, Antioch.

And the faces of the People of Jerusalem, when they heard your decree that henceforth and forever the city would be called Antioch.

Well, you knew there'd be some tough days. You knew there'd be some grumbling. Fistfights even. Handy to have command of that nasty, scary garrison to maintain order when the looting started. You made it clear pretty quick who was boss.

Days passed, weeks, months. Slowly people got used to you. You did your job. You wore the robes, sprinkled the blood, waved your arms at the appropriate times. Nodded solemnly at the concerns of the Sadducees and Pharisees and scribes, but you didn't make any sudden disturbing moves.

People expected you to jail or exile your brother, Onias, the former High Priest, but you mercifully allowed him to retire quietly to the country. That won you some good will.

Eventually the dust settled. Eventually people realized the upside of the downside. You were in charge. You, a Jew, a High Priest, ruled Judea.

It was almost the same as when Israel had a King. Instead of Israel, Antioch; instead of a King, a High Priest. But almost the same. Pretty darn close actually.

Jerusalem began to admire you.

Go ahead and get puffed up, Jason. You like Greek, right? Look up *hubris*.

¹ The new High Priest got installed by wearing the ceremonial clothing of the former High Priest in the Tabernacle for a full day and night. In case you've forgotten about the ceremonial garb of the High Priest, I did a really nice job of describing it in the middle of Night Two.

• • •

Actually after the dust settled, things went along fairly well, maybe better than anyone expected for the next three or four years.

It got a lot tougher for Country Jews, however. Jason's new Council of Elders was made up Jerusalem Jews, merchants mostly, and all of them, oddly enough, agreed that taxes had to be reduced for the suffering merchants of Jerusalem, but should be raised for the privileged farmers and herders of the countryside, who were basically freeloading off the wealth of the city. Without the benefit of all the merchants' hard work, after all, where would those country folk be? Where would they sell their goods? Time for those freeloaders to pay their fair share – which share turned out to be two or three times the share paid by the merchants.

When the Gymnasium was complete, Antiochus visited Jerusalem – er, that is, Antioch. Jason rounded up everybody, and I mean everybody, and showed him a good time. The royal full treatment: parades, golden crowns, honors, the works. Antiochus clapped Jason on the back and said they were BFFs, so pleased with his bright idea of creating a polis that he went home with a big grin on his face and started thinking about making a whole bunch more throughout his kingdom.

Yes everything was going well for Jason. Until a bright young boy named Menelaus took a look at Jason's playbook and asked to have a chat with Antiochus himself.

• • •

Menelaus went to Antiochus Epiphanes, the God-King of the Seleucids with deal quite similar to Jason's, only shorter:

1. Antiochus should fire Jason and make Menelaus the High Priest instead.
2. Menelaus would pay *triple* the current tribute to Antiochus: one thousand and eighty talents of silver every year.²

I'm guessing Antiochus about leaped over the table to shake Menelaus' hand on that deal.

• • •

Jason was too smart to wait around. As soon he'd dropped his High Priest robes at Menelaus' feet he ran for the hills.

One thousand and eighty talents is a boatload of silver. Frankly just about all the Temple's cash – it pretty much cleaned out the Treasury. When the Jews saw cartload after cartload of silver, *their* silver, driving down Temple Street, driving off to Antiochus, there were riots. Standard, modern-day style riots, complete with looting. It took a lot of broken bones and few spears through the heart before things calmed down.

Menelaus was not well liked.

• • •

Up until that time, things had been going pretty well: the Gymnasium at the rear of the Temple was a great big hit. People were flocking to the Gymnasium every day, making it a regular part of their daily routine. Warm Greek baths beat cold ritual mikvahs any day. Foreskin stretching became more and more popular.

Nobody was bothering to stand around to watch the boring sacrifices any more. The Gymnasium was so much more fun than watching dead burning animals. The calisthenics and competitions were so enjoyable that even the Temple priests joined in. In fact, sometimes the Temple proceedings had to halt until they could round up enough priests to come back from their games at the Gymnasium.

² Almost sixty-five thousand pounds. More than sixteen automobiles, or a stack of American silver dollars twenty-eight miles tall. The Space Shuttle would need to swerve around that stack. Even geostationary communication satellites don't fly that high.

• • •

A year passed, and the second tribute of nine hundred talents came due. The Temple Treasury just didn't have it, not in cash at least.

When I've been speaking of the Temple Treasury I've meant the repository of its cash, that is, the coins involved in its banking. But it held more wealth than that: Over many years, the Temple had gotten Love Gifts of great value that weren't in coin: things like that basket of golden tumors from the Philistines, for example, and more typical items of value, like golden chains, or necklaces or crowns, that sort of thing. I call them Love Gifts because those are the sorts of things that people gave out of a sense of gratitude or affection, things that mattered to them, gifts from the heart.

The Temple had a lot of these sorts of things, and they really didn't know what the hell to do with them. You couldn't just hang a necklace from a pushpin on a wall or something. So they just squirreled them away. If push came to shove, the Keepers of the Treasury reasoned, they could always sell them. But until that time came, they had rooms full of beautiful, valuable, but not very liquid objects.

Well, on the day the second nine hundred talent installment came, push had definitely come to shove. Menelaus ransacked the Love Gifts.

Naturally this did not go over well with some of the Temple priests. It was one thing to take the banking profits: after all, maybe the Temple shouldn't even be involved in banking at all. But those gifts of love, given by the faithful to their Lord? Shouldn't those, at the very least, be sacrosanct?

Those troubled priests got word to Onias, the first deposed High Priest, who was living in a nearby town. Onias didn't like it. He raced to Jerusalem and with a bunch of angry Jews behind him, and confronted Menelaus.

One of Menelaus' men figured the simplest response was to kill Onias.

• • •

Well, that was kind of rude. And it was the kind of act that makes the ugliness of the situation all too obvious. It's like when the redneck sheriffs turn their ferocious dogs on the little black kids trying to go to school, or when the whole world sees the pictures of prisoners wearing panties on their heads at Abu Grahb. Suddenly the ugliness is just too obvious, and nobody feels good anymore.

You can't just kill a High Priest in cold blood. A pall fell on Jerusalem. Menelaus felt it, and left town. Antiochus started issuing decrees. He sent someone to execute the murder. You might have thought that would have calmed things down. It only made matters worse. Everybody realized that Menelaus was just Antiochus' puppet. Not even much of a puppet when you came down to it. He was just the guy who was ransacking the Love Gifts.

Antiochus also decreed that a statue of himself as Zeus was to be placed at the front of the Gymnasium, complete with altar, and that sacrifices were to be made there daily. Sacrifices to Zeus meant pigs.

Antiochus had this notion that the problem with the Jews was that they didn't realize who the hell they really should be worshipping. Meaning him. He thought a big-ass statue and some pig sacrifices would make that easier for the Jews to understand.

• • •

So far as money went, Antiochus was raking it in. Now megalomaniac kings follow one of two courses when they get flush: either they build big monuments to themselves, or amass big honking armies to attack their enemies. Antiochus was taking the second option.

About this time, things were getting squirrely with the Ptolemies. The king had died, the heir was underage, and there was a big argument about the succession. The Ptolemies managed to reach a very dicey compromise, and Antiochus got invited to the coronation. He'd bought himself the biggest, most

well-equipped army on the face of the earth, and he marched it down to Egypt. Ostensibly to celebrate the young king's coronation; in fact to depose him.

Since he'd enjoyed such a warm reception before, and since he wanted to show the Jews who was boss, Antiochus decided to pass through Jerusalem on his way to Egypt.

Menelaus returned from his self imposed exile. Somehow he managed to gather up enough Jews to cheer as the king passed through the city.

Menelaus took Antiochus through the Temple, to the Gymnasium and showed off the brand-new Big Ass statue of Zeus that looked just like, of all people, Antiochus. The two of them stood together and watched Antiochus' Greek priests sacrifice a few pigs to the God King.

The locals cheered for all they were worth. Antiochus probably didn't see the soldiers standing behind them, threatening them with swords, just to be sure they showed sufficient enthusiasm.

Then the sacred pulled pork barbeque was passed around. Anybody brave enough to eat some got gold stars from Menelaus.

• • •

While the Ptolemies were squabbling over the succession, another power was just beginning to flex its muscles in the world: Rome. The Ptolemies understood that their country was in danger from the Seleucids, and that the succession dispute had weakened them, and they had looked to the growing might of Rome for an alliance. Which, as it turned out, could not have come at a better time.

In Gaza, north of Egypt, a single Roman general³ rode out alone into the desert and met Antiochus and his vast army. He told him that he had been sent by the Roman Senate with a message for Antiochus:

If Antiochus attacked the Ptolemies, the message said, Rome would destroy the Seleucids.

The general asked what answer he should give to the senate. Antiochus said he would think about it.

With that, the general drew a line in the sand⁴ in a circle where around the spot where Antiochus stood. "Pray do not step outside that line before I have heard your reply," the general said.

(By the way, if you ever find yourself in a similar situation, pay attention to the smooth moves of that solitary Roman general. He went *alone*. And that meant he totally dominated the situation. Antiochus had his whole honking army, fifty or a hundred thousand men, cavalry, chariots, even war elephants for Pete's sake, and the general faced them all down *by himself*. If he'd taken along a dozen Roman soldiers, or hundred, or even a few thousand, Antiochus would have done the math and figured, hell, I can take him. Antiochus would have felt *obliged* to take him. But *alone*? How you deal with that? It's too intimidating for words. It's just honking brilliant.

Nice going, solitary Roman general.)

Anyway, there was the general, and there was Antiochus, and there was the line in the sand. Antiochus gave some thought to his reply before he stepped outside the circle. Then the little coward turned tail and ran.

• • •

Meanwhile in Jerusalem...

Macabbees I and Macabbees 2 tell parallel versions of what happened next. Macabbees 1 is very matter of fact. Macabbees 2 sets the stage.

³ My darling wife wants me to be sure to tell you that the general's name was Gaius Popillius Laenas. Probably because she was Gaius Popillius Laenas in a former life.

⁴ Yes, this is "the line in the sand." It's part of the Hanukkah story.

For forty days before the Egyptian invasion, the second book tells us, the sky was filled with apparitions of golden horsemen charging through the air with lances and drawn swords – oh hell, this is worth quoting – “and troops of horsemen drawn up, and attacks and counterattacks made on this side and on that, brandishing of shields, massing of spears, hurling of missiles, the flash of golden trappings, and armor of all sorts.”

That’s all in the sky, mind you.

And I like this part too, which is quite wistful and charming “Therefore all men prayed that the apparitions might prove to be a good omen.”

As if.

• • •

The story of Antiochus and the general that reached Jerusalem, like the mixed up finish at the end of a game of telephone, was slightly different than the story I just told you. Slightly.

The story that reached Jerusalem was that Antiochus was dead.

Cue the confetti, the ticker tape parade, the dancing in the streets. Also while you’re at it, cue Jason (remember Jason, the former, but not dead, High Priest?), who had been gathering a thousand followers just outside of town.

Jason and his men staged a triumphant return into Jerusalem. The Jews were jubilant. They forgot all the crap they’d endured while Jason was High Priest; all they remembered now was that he wasn’t Menelaus. While they were carrying Jason around town on their shoulders, Menelaus scurried out of town while the getting was good.

Remember that messages in those days only travelled as fast as the people who carried them. So within a few hours of Jason’s return and Menelaus’ flight, who showed up at Jerusalem’s gate but Antiochus himself.

• • •

When he saw the Jews rejoicing over his supposed death, Antiochus flew into a rage. He ordered his army to kill everyone.

Everyone and anyone they could find. And then to hunt down and kill everyone and anyone that was hiding. And they did.

Men. Women. Children. Infants.

Forty thousand Jews.

Forty thousand defenseless Jews, killed in a few hours.

• • •

They didn’t die gloriously. They didn’t die for their country.

They didn’t die in an earthquake, or a fire, or a tsunami.

They didn’t even die because they killed Christ, or because they were racially inferior.

Those forty thousand defenseless Jews died because a fucking psychopath was having a bad day.

Even Hitler’s worst death camp never killed forty thousand Jews in a single day.

• • •

At this point I want to tell you how Antiochus died. It’s not part of my Story: I wish with all my heart that the Jews had killed him, but his death happened while he was on his way to put down a rebellion of Persians. Nevertheless, I want you to know how he died, right this minute.

Antiochus got a horrifically terrible disease: he was infested with parasites that ate through his organs and chewed through his gut until his belly burst open and thousands of white, carnivorous worms spilled out.⁵ It was a painful living hell of a death. And it was a death that was way too good for Antiochus Epiphanes.

• • •

Well I guess the slaughter stopped before everyone was killed. I guess the soldiers got worn out, or just sick to their stomachs. Something. Anyway, it turns out there were still some Jews left the next day.

These were Jerusalem Jews, Jews that had adopted Greek culture: the language, the hair, the shaving, the clothing, the restored foreskins. Perhaps because they had tried to embrace civilized behavior, Antiochus took what I suppose in his mind passed for pity.

In the midst of city streets still littered with corpses of their brothers and sisters, Antiochus gave those Jews a choice: Death.

Or drop their stupid ways, and follow his new decrees:

No more Sabbaths. No more sacrifices. No more mikvahs. No more circumcisions. No more Torahs – in fact all copies of the Torah were to be burned. The Temple to be rededicated entirely to the worship of Zeus – in other words, to Antiochus. The festivals of the Law were out: no Passover, no Sukkot, no Yom Kippur. In their place, Olympic Games. And that whole no pork thing? That had to go.

Sounds good to us, said the Jerusalem Jews, standing in the blood of their relatives. Where do we sign?

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Antiochus went back home, but he left a big chunk of his army behind with instructions on how to proceed.

The soldiers went through Jerusalem street by street, house by house, person by person.

They looked for circumcised children. These they killed, along with their mothers. If the children were small enough, they were tied, still living, around their mother's necks, and both were thrown from the temple walls.

The houses were tossed to find copies of the Torah. If these were found the scrolls and the occupants were burned. (Naturally, a lot of copies of the Torah just got found lying in the street.)

Finally the pork test. Every person, every single one, had to eat pork. It was the proof of compliance. Eat pork or die.

• • •

So Menelaus eventually crept back into town, and Antiochus put him back in charge. Who knows why? Supposedly more money changed hands, but heaven only knows where it came from.

Back in charge meant that the High Priest of Jews was now the High Priest of Antiochus as Olympian Zeus. Menelaus soon had the priests of the Temple making sacrifices to Zeus instead of Hashem. The Gymnasium changed from an adjunct to the center of the Temple's activity. The Jews walked past the Tabernacle without looking up.

At the Temple now, pigs were burned in addition to sheep; and Zeus preferred pigs. Menelaus imported as many as he could to keep the god happy, and encouraged the Jewish farmers around the city to start raising pigs. Pork quickly became the preferred meat of Jerusalem.

⁵ Modern diagnosticians believe this disease may have been a form of *visceral leishmaniasis*, which is about the most horrible disease I've ever heard of. Look it up if you don't believe me. King Herod had the same disease.

After a few months, when he saw the High Priest bowing to the statue of Olympian Zeus, and the Chief Priests offering sacrifices of swine at the altar of the god, when he saw the former Jews of Jerusalem singing hymns to Zeus, and kneeling at the statue's feet, and eating pork still hot from the altar, when he felt confident that worship of the Jewish god had been replaced with worship of himself as Zeus, Antiochus gathered up his men and marched them back from Jerusalem to his palace in Antioch.

• • •

He left behind a garrison of soldiers in the Temple citadel, and orders that Menelaus send them through rest of Israel, or Judea, or Antioch, or whatever they were calling it these days, and rid the world of Jews forever.

There was no need for those Jews to die. They just needed to cease to exist. They could stop being Jews, just as their kinsmen in Jerusalem had done. The choice was up to them. The garrison was there to draw a line in the sand around them, and wait for their reply.

• • •

Judea covered a lot of territory, and the garrison was small, so it took some time. They rode from village to village, rounded everybody up, burned all the Torahs they could find, lined up the Jews at sword point, brought out the pork. A few old souls would refuse to eat, and die, but not many.

• • •

A few miles to the northwest of Jerusalem was village called Mod'in. By this point the soldiers making the rounds had gotten used to the drill. They burned the Torahs, just like always, lined up the villagers for the pork like always.

Now this town had as its rabbi an old man – we don't know his name – and also had its country priest, a man named Mattathias. The rabbi wouldn't eat the pork. He began to weep. Some villagers loved him, and took him aside. Someone slipped him a piece of chicken and told him to eat that instead, just pretend to eat the pork. The rabbi agreed, but when the time came, he was overcome again, and could not.

One of the villagers had enough. It's no big thing, he shouted, and he stepped in front of the rabbi, and took a piece of pork to eat to demonstrate.

And Mattathias, who had been watching this scene, lost it. He leaped up, struck that villager across the head with his staff and killed him.

"Let everyone who has zeal for the Torah and who stands by the covenant follow me!" shouted Mattathias. One of those great lines that probably never got shouted.

Anyway, they followed. I guess they killed or somehow overcame the soldiers, and the whole village took to the hills.

This was the start of the Great Rebellion.

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So while Jerusalem continued to worship Zeus, in the countryside of Judea, more and more villages packed up and took to the hills. Mattathias' rebellion, for many months consisted of little more than finding ways to hide from the small garrison in Jerusalem.

Remember, the villagers were mostly herders and farmers, familiar with their area, the rugged hill country of Judea. The soldiers were foreign mercenaries with no clue at all. They'd had a hard enough job finding a village that was where it was supposed to be; trekking around the wilderness looking for a bunch of people hiding behind rocks was not in their job description.

I'm personally a big believer in stable situations; I think that people work to find ways to make situations stable even if the solution is unpleasant. This situation, however, running around in the

wilderness with no end in sight, is unstable both for the Jews and for the soldiers. And it's about to get first a little more unstable, and then very unstable.

Let's take a look at the current instability: first you've got these villagers uprooted. They're used to houses, beds, wells, you get my drift. Now they're living in the open. They're like their ancestors in the Sinai. Some probably have brought along their sheep, some have probably brought a few provisions; there's food maybe but not much. Shelter, maybe some. When it's cold and rainy, your children get sick. Those hills have lots of caves, though, so that's where people end up spending time. Lots of worry, constant worry. Nobody knows what's safe. Is moving any better than staying put? Yet scared people feel compelled to move. You get the idea. You wouldn't want to be one of those villagers on the run.

Jerusalem, however, just lost its supply chain. Everything Jerusalem eats comes from the villagers who are now running in the wilderness. The city probably has some storehouses, but just like the villagers are taking inventory and worrying how many more meals they can count on, so are the Jews of Jerusalem. The garrison that is supposed to be dealing with the Great Rebellion is going to be needed here too, because food riots aren't far away.

As for the garrison, things have gotten unstable for them as well. They signed up to be real soldiers, assigned to the Citadel to defend the Temple, so they thought, from attack by the Ptolemies. Now they're throwing mothers and babies from the Temple walls, feeding pork to weeping rabbis, chasing farmers through the hills. What are they supposed to do with a farm girl when they find her, anyway? Rape her? Run her through the heart? Find a scrap of ham and force her to eat it?

• • •

Here's the first little wild card: the Hasids. Nobody really knows who they are, but both books of Macabbees mention that the a group called the Hasids joined up with the Rebellion. After that, the Rebellion began to change.

A lot of scholars think that Hasids were an early version of a later group of Jews called the Essenes, and we know a lot about them. They were an extremely devoted and faithful group of Jews, mostly males, who joined together, sold their possessions and pooled the proceeds, ate meals in common, bunked together, and followed rigorous hygiene practices.⁶ They were huge believers in a Messianic Apocalypse, with beliefs not a lot different than our modern End-time Christians.

Anyway after meeting the Hasids, the Rebellion changed. The Rebels didn't just flee.

They attacked.

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I don't know why it was such a novel idea to pick off some of the soldiers when they came hunting for the Rebels, but the notion only seemed to catch on when the Hasids show up.

As the rebels started to kill soldiers, things got unstable enough that Antiochus got wind of it. So he started by sending a couple thousand troops to Judea.

Now I've told you before how troops fought battles: things hadn't changed that much from the time of David and Saul. Big armies lining up for big battles. The big Seleucid army got down there, but there wasn't any big Rebel army lined up against them.

But it turned out, this first attack turned out rather well for the Rebels. They were led by the third of Mattathias' five sons, a young man named Judas, who has since become known as *Macabbee*: the Hammer.

⁶ These, in the end, probably wiped them out. They used to carry a little trowel with them and bury their excrement in designated areas. Sadly, the trowels and their footwear would get contaminated by this supposedly helpful practice, and they end up getting sick pretty often and dying early.

Judas Maccabee's idea was for the Rebels to hide in the hills surrounding the Seleucid camp and attack by night. This, apparently was Very Poor Form, and the Seleucids did not know what hit them. Judas and the Rebels set fire to the Seleucid tents, stole a ton of armor, weapons, horses, and best of all food, killed a bunch of soldiers, and ran away before the sun came up.

Judas was a great big hero. The Rebels started calling themselves The Hammers. Or as they've come to be known: the Macabbees.

• • •

The Macabbees had just beaten a well-equipped army with sticks and rocks and slings and crappy farmer's weapons. Now they had swords and spears and shields.

The Seleucids that survived came after them. Judas' basic plan stayed the same: fight like hell as you run away. It was a pretty good plan. It confused hell out of the Seleucids. They were used to battles with lines, flanks, glorious charges and the like. They weren't used to chasing Jews and dying.

But Judas' tactic had a great big flaw, which the Seleucids discovered one Sabbath day.

On the Sabbath, these faithful, noble Jews would huddle together in caves and observe the Mosaic Law of Sabbath Rest. That meant doing nothing. Nothing. Not even defending themselves or running away.

And if the Seleucids stumbled onto one of those caves, here's what happened: The Seleucids gathered piles of wood, and set it in the mouth of the cave. The Jews just sat and watched. Then the Seleucids set the wood on fire and burned the Jews alive.

• • •

The next day, when Mattathias heard this news, he gave the order that Jews were to violate the Sabbath and fight back. "For what value has the Sabbath," he said, "if there is no one left to observe it?"

And it was those words, my friends, that made me decide to write this Story. Crappy non-Jew that I am, unworthy vessel that I am. For what value has the Miracle, and the thousand pairs of hands that passed the light to me, if the Story is forgotten?

I got tired of waiting for somebody good to write it. You're just going to have the put up with me.

• • •

So the Macabbees kept fighting as they ran away, even on the Sabbath, and the Seleucids, to their surprise, kept dying. It's like they just the hell couldn't figure out what was happening. They were supposed to win, for Pete's sake. The Jews were supposed to die.

Antiochus sent another army. A bigger one: six thousand men this time. Damn if Judas didn't pull basically the same exact stunt, a surprise night raid, with exactly the same result. Except this time, practically all the Seleucid soldiers were killed, and the Seleucids that didn't die were even more surprised.

• • •

Around this time, Mattathias died, and he surprised his eldest son Yohan by making Judas the leader of the Rebels. Word of the Macabbees' success had spread throughout the country, and practically every Jew that wasn't in Jerusalem had left his village to join the Rebels.

Which made the Rebels into Sitting Ducks.

Antiochus stopped farting around. He sent a really large army south this time, twenty-five thousand men or more. He sent word to Jerusalem that he was going to capture all the Rebels and sell them as slaves, and he was going to do what the Babylonians had done, raze the city.

Antiochus' heralds cried that Jerusalem would be a graveyard. If faithful, Zeus-worshipping Jews would flee the city, head north, and join the king, only then would they be spared the Rebel's fate of slavery or death. They ran like rats.

The massive Seleucid force marched toward the Rebel encampment.

Judas gave his men, according to the Books of Macabbees, the traditional Rebel Leader's Inspiring Speech Before the Enormous Conflict. You can probably write it yourself if you've seen Braveheart or Henry the Fifth, so I won't bore you, but I do love one line Judas spoke: "What can't Hashem accomplish?"

What can't Hashem accomplish? I do so love that line.

And it wasn't just that massive army heading south: following right behind, hundreds of slave traders with empty slave wagons and empty shackles and empty chains at the ready. With lots of coin, too. Antiochus had told them there'd plenty of slaves to buy, wholesale.

• • •

This time the Seleucids were ready for the Macabbees' surprise attack by dark.

Judas surprised them anyway, by attacking with a full frontal assault, in broad daylight, miles from where the Seleucids expected. Judas wiped them out, every last one of them. Then he took all their armor, and their weapons, and their horses. He also took all the money the slave traders had brought.

By the way, the Macabbees don't know it, but why Antiochus wasn't leading that army that day that trouble I mentioned earlier, that trouble he was having with those Persian rebels.

The Jews didn't know it, but right now Antiochus was dead too. His wormy guts were spilled all over the ground someplace outside Qum.

I told you tonight was going to be a bummer. But right now it's not.

Right now the Good Guys have triumphed. Antiochus is Dead. Let's let the Macabbees enjoy that victory. You enjoy it too.

• • •

After the feasting and the dancing and the slapping each other on the back and agreeing that they were all great heroes, somebody must have suggested that they should all go to Jerusalem.

I can imagine the moment. After things had grown quiet, and everyone was staring at the fire, a quiet voice reciting an old poem:

"As the navel is the center of the human body, so was Judea the navel of the world, situated in the center of the world, and Jerusalem in the center of Judea, and Mount Zion in the center of Jerusalem, and in the center of the peak of the Mount, the Temple.

"And the Tabernacle in the center of the Temple, and the Ark in the center of the Tabernacle, placed on the stone from which the world was founded.

"In the holiest of cities, in the holiest of places, on Yom Kippur, the holiest of days, the High Priest would venture into the Holy of Holies, and see the Ark resting on the Mercy Seat. On that day each year, the High Priest would sprinkle the Ark with the blood of the scapegoat to atone for all the sins of all the Jews, and say the Holiest of Names, the hidden name of the Lord, and then he would see, in the mist that rose above the Ark, the Lord's very face."

And Jerusalem would suddenly seem so precious again. After years of fleeing through the hills, to see Jerusalem once more. To see the Tabernacle. To hear the choir sing the Psalms. So far and now so near. I'm sure that grown men wept.

• • •

By the end of the evening, the Macabbees had probably started calling their homeland Israel again, after their glorious victory and everything, so we'll do the same. It will be nice to use that simple name again.

Anyway, most of the country folk of Israel now lived in that encampment, and a lot of them probably just wanted to get back to their lives. A lot of them hadn't seen their homes in a long, long time. Three years had passed between the day Mattathias killed that show-off in Mod'in, and Judas' astonishing victory over the Seleucid army.

Those country Jews were anxious to return, but they also sort of dreaded what they would find. When the garrison soldiers found a village empty because the villagers had joined the Rebels, a lot of times, they just torched the empty houses. Even if they hadn't, the fields would be fallow and overrun with weeds. Herders had long ago eaten all their flocks. It would be a long time before the Rebels would recover.

Judas shared the slaver's coin with the Rebels who went home. That would help a little. Even so, glad as they were to go home, the more they thought about it, the more they could foresee the mess that they would find there. It would be a long a dreary road.

Within a day or two, the Rebel camp had dwindled to a tenth of its size; those who remained were people who maybe had no home to go to, or had a reason why Jerusalem was more important to see first.

The Macabbees began the trek to Jerusalem. Along the road, they saw the hurt the Seleucids had done: villages burned, bodies left to rot in the sun.

The old King's road, now left untended, washed out in places, pitted and scarred in others. Inns empty. Wells run dry. Houses by the roadside falling down. No sound of children playing. No sound of birds but carrion crows.

The olive and fig trees stripped of fruit. The hillsides grasses burned.

Finally the city walls. The sight that once had lifted their hearts now filled them with foreboding.

One of the city gates lay broken on the ground. The other flapped slowly, as if pushed by an unseen hand.

The ruins of David's palace, left as a kind of sacred memory after the Babylonians had their way, could scarcely be seen, it was so overrun with weeds.

Ahead of them, Temple Street, once so glorious and fine, looked like a cyclone had torn through. Broken furniture and crockery strewn across the cobblestones. Hungry dogs picking through the garbage. And pigs, which many of the Jews had never seen before, fighting them for scraps.

No sound. That was the strangest thing. No sound. Just the shuffling of their own footsteps, the rattle of their cartwheels threading through the rubble.

At the top of Mount Zion they could scarcely bear to enter the Temple Gates. They looked down the hill at the empty houses, the empty streets. Everyone had fled, terrified by Antiochus' warning.

• • •

Maybe someone had tried to lock the Temple; the great wood gates were just ajar, just open enough for a man to pass, and a lock hung from a broken chain. They pushed the gates a little wider.

The sun was lowering, just touching the edge of the tall Temple walls.

The arcade entrance to the Courtyard was a chaos like Temple Street; tables and chairs tossed every which way. Judas had been hanging back, but now he had to take the lead, no one else had the courage.

At the grand entrance to the Courtyard, even he could not go on.

• • •

I don't know where to start.

With the bushes that were growing through the false floor before tabernacle?

With the altar, cast down like a child's tower of pebbles? The great bowl of bronze up-ended?

It took all their strength to go on, and with every step they saw more horror.

Around the brass bowl of the Altar, burnt fragments of the Torah.

Turds on the steps of the Tabernacle.

Writing on the walls, vile words, written in something brown. It didn't matter if it was blood or shit.

They knew the law forbid them from entering the Tabernacle, but they no longer cared. Their broken hearts wouldn't let them stand outside.

Blankets and pillows strewn around the floor. It didn't take much imagination.

The Menorah, smashed. The Table, folded, like someone had jumped on it.

Then they saw it. On the Empty Space where the Ark had been, something so vile that Judas gagged. Others vomited. Finally someone managed to the strength to cover it with a blanket.

• • •

They stumbled from the Tabernacle, fell to their knees and wept.

They stopped weeping finally, because they had no more tears to shed.

Night Eight

Welcome to the Last Night.

Oh, surprise. We haven't done this together before. I celebrate the last night of Hanukkah a little differently. I hope that's OK.

First, everybody gets a candle on the last night. Here's yours.

Wait, hang on. On the last night don't light the lights right away.

I keep the room dark for awhile -- Just the light from under the kitchen door, and the moon through the window.

Tonight the story comes first, then the light.

• • •

Well, I told you last night's installment was going to be a bummer.

Tonight we wash away the bitter with the sweet.

Tonight: The Thrilling Conclusion. The Miracle. Why we've come together, us and people just like us, for the past eight nights. For the past twenty-two hundred years, if it comes down to that.

Our Jewish ancestors started this tradition, The Miracle took place with Jews in their Temple in Jerusalem, but the Jews have never pretended that they own the Miracle, or that no one else could join its celebration. Quite the opposite: They've always shared it gladly, even eagerly. Even the Talmud discusses at some length how to make non-Jews feel welcome at Hanukkah.

As a non-Jew, I can't adequately express my gratitude for their generosity.

• • •

Why it's dark. I don't want to have to see your faces right now. I don't want you seeing my face. I'm going to do the thing I hate doing more than anything. I'm going to open my heart to you. It's always pretty painful. I've got a lot to be ashamed of.

I keep saying that the story of Hanukkah is my story. This is the part that kills me. When the Macabbees walk through the Temple and they see what the Zeus-Jews have done to it.

The next morning, they explored the Temple more fully, and the more they looked, the more the sheer dark horror of the desecration grew. There were just so many examples of tawdry, offhand vandalism. Everywhere, pig shit splashed on walls. Everywhere, turds. So many tawdry, thoughtless, offhand acts of piggish vandalism. As they saw more and more examples, it began to cloud their minds and freeze their hearts.

How do I know this? How do I say this with such certainty? Because I imagined this scene a dozen times when I was writing my novel. And I regret to say, I am ashamed to say, I knew this appalling scene all too well. I saw in my own dark life too many direct parallels. Absolute parallels, which I'll get to in a moment, when I can catch my breath. Just give me that moment, please.

Anyway, as the Macabbees looked at these scattered acts of vandalism, other clues started to fall into place.

That Altar didn't just fall over by itself. The stones of that Altar were big, and it took effort, real effort to knock them down. The Zeus-Jews had put some time and planning and teamwork to make that happen.

If you had wanted to make excuses for your brother Zeus-Jews, to give them an out, to say that they feared for their lives and were splashing pig shit and taking dumps on the Tabernacle steps only because they didn't want to die, the broken altar stopped that cold. Those Zeus-Jews could have applied that same time and effort and planning and teamwork toward making an escape. They hadn't done that.

The Zeus-Jews had knocked down the Altar because they wanted to.

In fact, it was clear, they'd done everything because they wanted to. Those Jews were just sick and tired of being Jews. They were over it. Antiochus had offered them an out, and all they had to do was sacrifice a pig or burn a torah or take a dump on the Tabernacle stairs, and they leaped at the chance.

As if with a smear of pig shit, they could make themselves the equal of the Lord who had parted the seas and led their fathers out of Egypt.

As if by these tawdry little tantrums they could say: we're done. We're out. Jews no more.

No Law for us. No Covenant. Fuck Hashem and the horse he rode in on.

I know that's what those Jews were saying because that's what I was saying in my own life twenty-two hundred years later when I turned my back on the Lord. I'm ashamed to tell you, that's my story too.

• • •

There's a second part to this story that's worse than the first, though. You see, just when the Macabbees realized how awful the Zeus-Jews had really been, when they realized that they placed the Abomination of Desolation in the Heart of the Tabernacle where Ark had been, while they were shaking their heads at the piggy tawdry stupidity of their brothers, it dawned them: they weren't all that great either.

What had those Macabbees done, the Good Guys in this story, the Wonderful, Faithful Jews, when they found at that the pressure was on?

They had, quite literally, run for the hills.

Sure, they told themselves that they had no choice. How could a bunch of weak, defenseless farmers and herders fight a Seleucid army?

Well, three years later, they *had* fought back, and they had won. The only difference was three years later, they had trusted in the power of their Lord.

What the Macabbees realized was that they might have actually put a stop to all this mess. They might have succeeded. They might.

They looked around the Desolation of the Temple and realized that they shared the blame.

Fucking things up is something we all do. What we do afterwards is our real measure. If you're a real fuckup you make all kinds of excuses. When I turned my back on the Lord, I too fooled myself into thinking it was something I was forced to do, and of course it was something I wanted to do. Something I worked at doing. Fucking up was something I loved doing. I too said I couldn't stop myself, when really, I could have stopped anytime. And even if I couldn't stop, who did I think I was I kidding? I could have at least tried.

• • •

When I imagine the Macabbees looking at the Desolation Temple, it's no different than me surveying the Desolation of my own life, the ruin I made of it. I know that their hearts at last were broken, because my heart at last was broken.

I even know what they said, finally, when they faced the truth and their hearts were broken. They said what I said:

We have fucked things up. We have truly fucked things up. And there is no way we will ever unfuck them.

• • •

They looked around this once holy place, now broken, now defiled. They could remember when it was alive with song, when the flame of Shekinah informed each corner, when fire blazed from the Altar, when to step into the Courtyard meant to step into the living Presence of the Lord.

Now the place was a wasteland.

They themselves had made it so. They had done what they set out to do and they had no one to blame but themselves.

Hashem had left the building. He had gone home, fried himself a peanut butter and banana sandwich, knocked back a couple of Seconals and gone to bed.

He was never coming back.

• • •

When they came into the full awareness of their shame, the Macabbees could not long stand to stay there. They left the Temple, they left Jerusalem, and walked to Mizpah, a sacred hill about four miles away, which had a watchtower that overlooked Mount Zion.

They took off their clothes, and covered themselves with ashes and put on sackcloth, and said prayers of mourning.

Who were they mourning? Or what?

Everything, really.

They'd come back to find pretty much everything they thought they loved was dead. Their holy city. Their Temple. Their way of life. The Law. The Covenant too, I suppose.

I can tell you from my own experience what that day is like.

There's an old stupid country song:

Why does my heart go on beating? Why do these eyes of mine cry? Don't they know it's the end of the world? It ended when you said goodbye.

And you try, really really hard to remember that those lyrics are stupid clichés, because at that moment, they seem rather profound. In fact on that day, the tall bridge, and the train track, and the gas oven, and the noose look a whole lot more inviting than the slow ticking second hand of the kitchen clock.

• • •

As much as the Macabbees had hated the confines of the Law, the constant fear of the Lord, the endless looking over the shoulder, worrying about Hashem's fearsome wrath, at least Life had had a purpose. That great terrifying world they lived in had been filled with a Being who promised Good to those who kept His Law. At least they'd had that hope.

• • •

On the other hand...

On the other hand, why had Hashem delivered them from the Seleucids? Merely to show them the defiled Temple? To rub their noses in their collective sin? To show them the depth of their squalid guilt, and then to leave them high and dry?

So their thoughts turned to the mess at the Temple, and whether to restore it as a place of worship, or maybe to restore it simply as a penance with a contrite heart, to try to make amends. Maybe none of the above: maybe they should just walk away and call it quits.

And after, I am certain, a lot of sad and bitter talk, and many tears, at last the Macabbees decided to return and set things as right. At least as right as they could.

It must have been hard. I can tell you from my own experience. I know their story, these broken-hearted Jews, because as I keep saying, their story is my own. Going back is hard.

Walking up your own steps, knocking on your own front door, waiting for an answer. Asking through the closed door to be let in. Waiting, and waiting some more, nearly giving up. Hearing finally the click of the doorlock opening, then waiting for the door to open. Giving up and opening it yourself, gently. Peeking in. Tiptoeing across the doorstep of what used to be your home.

That's hard. Seeing the pieces of furniture still lying on the floor, just the way you left them. That's hard.

You don't even want to lift your eyes for fear you'll see the faces of your loved ones. Just like why I have the lights turned down while I'm saying this to you now.

The Jews were going back to the Temple they themselves defiled. That was going to be hard.

• • •

It must have been a pretty brutal task, psychologically speaking. Like picking up the body parts of friends after an explosion. Something you want to do, maybe, but something you dread. Getting out of bed would get harder every day.

Like those guys who picked through the rubble of the Twin Towers, who would find an arm or nose or something, and would lift it from the rubble while holding their hands over their hearts, and gently place it on a plywood board, and cover it with an American flag. On the news you'd see them turn away, breaking down uncontrollably and one of their buddies would reach out to hold on to them. Then a klaxon would go off, and all the workers would line up, and stand at attention and salute as it was carried up from The Pit.

It would just break your heart.

I think it must have been like that.

• • •

On a practical level, who was involved? The Macabbees men and women and children who had been living in the country, who had joined with the Rebellion but not returned to their homes. Most of them farmers and herders; some of them rabbis; some of them, like Judas, Levites, so there were priests. Probably a few hundred people altogether.

Next: the tasks: Clear away the crap and clutter of the Zeus-Jews. Tear down the statue of Zeus and its pagan altar. Get rid of the gymnasium, or at least block it off from the Courtyard. Move that loathsome Thing¹ out of the Tabernacle. Clean the walls. Repair the Holy Vessels. Rebuild the Altar. A lot of work for a few hundred people. Months of work probably.

¹ Remember that Thing they found in the Tabernacle – that Thing that made everybody gag? I didn't make that up. The Books of Macabbees call it the Abomination of Desolation, but don't describe it: like it was so horrible nobody can bear to say what it was. But it must have been a hell of a thing, just to come up with a name like the Abomination of Desolation. Holy cow what a name.

Biblical scholars speculate that the Abomination was some sort Greek fertility symbol like a giant phallus or something, or maybe, of all things, a meteorite. You can speculate anything you want, I guess. Why not speculate that it was giant banana?

The Abomination, however, totally entered the consciousness of Jews: Just like we'll refer casually to Nine-Eleven, the Jews continued to refer to it for hundreds of years. In the Gospels and other New Testament books it's a sort of iconic reference point of Uber-disgust as in: How disgusting would that be? Worse than The Abomination of Desolation, that's how disgusting!

Then there was the unspoken question sort of hanging over everything: when all that was done, what then? Seal it up as a kind of memorial? Try to start things up again? Nobody wanted to think about that one, not yet.

• • •

The written accounts are pretty of the cleanup are pretty skimpy. They talk about removing the Abomination. The words are so brief they scare me.

I do love another passage, however: The Macabbees built a new Altar base from unhewn stones. The old stones they moved to a corner of the Courtyard “until a prophet should come to tell them what should be done with them.” Isn’t that wonderful? It means they’d kicked a lot of ideas around first before they realized it was decision too big for them to make alone. It’s interesting to see that they believed that another prophet might show up. It suggests that their feelings of Hope were growing.

Watch how that one goes.

• • •

At one time I believed that Asheville’s local Hasidic rabbi, who is just a terrific guy, might bring his wife by our house for a visit. My wife and I thought we’d want to serve some refreshments, so I read up on how to kosher the cooking implements, dishes, silverware, etc.²

I mention this because a lot of emphasis is placed on boiling water as a means of purification. So I imagine at the temple, after basic cleaning and repairs were done, a lot of boiling water was used to return items to a state of ritual purity.

But in fact, I don’t know. There’s no record of what was done, and no instruction anywhere on how to purify a defiled Temple.

My wife, who has endured years and years of my droning on and on about this period, however, has some thoughts that I have come to share. She thinks that women played a central role.

I’ve certainly seen something equivalent in Hindu temples, where the priesthood, of course is also all male. So the formal maintenance of a Hindu temple is done by male priests, and by a male staff directed by those priests. And everything is a Hindu temple very clean, and very neat, because the priests want to do their very best to honor their deity, and they do a good job.

But a lot of Hindu temples, particularly temples dedicated to Krishna, or to the Goddess, those most frequented by women, are quite beautiful, not just clean and neat. In fact when you go into one, your heart sort of opens up, like on that first bright day of spring when the trees first open in flower and the sun is bright and gentle. Because in those temples, the women have made everything beautiful. Blossoms placed, here, there. Chalk designs traced on the walkways. Garlands hung on photographs. Perfume in the air. Women have been there. Beauty everywhere. The gods are happy.

Maybe you are fortunate enough to have had a wife or mother who has made your home beautiful, and seen this for yourself. How women have this almost magical way of bringing beauty to the places that they love. I don’t want to be all sexist here, but I’ve never seen a man do this – have you? Probably some man someplace can do this; but women make this happen all the time; those little girls with perfect

² Turns out I need not have bothered. I’ve since been given to understand that Hasidic rabbis are reluctant to visit non-kosher homes, because they want to spare their hosts the discomfort of the dealing with whole can/can’t eat the cookies problem. This is very different than the rest of Asheville, where being gluten-free has become practically a matter of ritual purity these days, with the gluten-intolerant now intolerant in all respects, poring over the labels of everything you serve them, demanding a précis on all aspects of procurement and preparation, refusing to eat off plates that have touched wheat, and so on. They end up making kosher Jews look like the most easy-going diners on earth.

braids, the flowers placed so thoughtfully on the bedside table, the seashells in the glass bowl. You know the sort of stuff I mean. The fact that I say “stuff” indicating that I have testicles.

As the men were doing the heavy lifting and rough scrubbing, and the Temple slowly began to regain its order, I’m sure that the women were not idle. I’m sure that women were bringing beauty.

I’ve learned the hard way that women’s love is precious, and that women often express that love in bringing beauty into the world. They do a lot of things, great things, wonderful things, but bringing beauty is something they seem particularly good at, something men seem quite inept at. For my part, I’ve come to value it, and I think more and more that men now do as well.

I like to think those Maccabee men had begun to see that the Temple was starting to be beautiful. That it wasn’t just being restored, it was being transformed.

• • •

So the months passed, and eventually there could be no denying that the Temple was in a state of readiness. It was suitable to be returned to its use as a place of worship.

Originally, I expect, there had been some question, but during all the effort of restoring the temple, and with news of restoration spreading through the country, by now the question was all but settled. If you restore it, you really have no choice but to return it to its intended use.

• • •

Of course some of Jews would wonder whether the Temple hadn’t passed the point of no return.

How many times could the Temple be destroyed and restored and still be the Temple? How many times would Hashem bring his Presence back? Could He even stand to be present in a Temple defiled by his own people?

To those who doubted, the believers had an answer. Let’s try it, and find out.

• • •

It seems like ages since we talked about the Law surrounding the Eternal Flame of the Menorah, and the Eternal Fire of the Altar, and the preparation of the Holy Oil. Time for a quick refresher course.

The Altar fire had to burn constantly, remember? Fire from the Altar was used to keep the flames of the oil lamps of the Menorah lit constantly. The Oil for those lamps was olive oil sanctified by staying in the presence of that sacred flame for seven days and nights.

Naturally things could go wrong, so the priests who made and stored the sacred oil kept a backup supply. The High Priest would place a wax seal on bottles of oil that had been sanctified and were ready to go.

Remember when the Second Temple was restored? The Persians returned the Menorah and bottles of sacred oil to the Jews, so when worship started up again, everything was ready.

There’s an interesting story about the sacred eternal fire of the Altar. I told you the story of Jeremiah hiding the Ark of the Covenant. Another story is that Jeremiah took some of the sacred fire from the Altar and stored it in a large clay pot. This pot traveled with the Jews to their captivity to Babylon. When plans were being made for the restoration of the Temple, the Persians asked to see the content of the fire-pot.

When they opened it, the Jews and Persians found that the pot contained a dark, thick liquid. When a scoop of this liquid was placed in the sunlight, it burst spontaneously into flame. The Persians and the Jews called this liquid *naptha* – meaning purification.³

³ A name still used in the oil refining process: it’s describes a very high-octane petroleum derivative used to make gasoline. It’s an essential ingredient in napalm.

Nehemiah, the first Persian governor of Judea, used this naptha as the source of the sacred altar fire – so in that sense, the fire of the Second, Persian temple was the original eternal fire of the First Temple, which was part of the Original fire of Moses’ Tabernacle.

But that naptha had been lost. The Fire was gone.

• • •

So now we come to the day when the Altar fires were to be lit, and the sacrifices to be started, and the worship of Hashem to be started up again.

It wasn’t a day of requirement, but you can be sure a lot of Jews were at the Temple that day. They came into the courtyard, and ooh’ed and aah’ed, and remarked about how nicely everything had been restored, and really how it looked even better than before. The musicians were playing everybody’s favorite psalms, and everyone sang along with choir. They cheered as the carts of firewood were rolled to the base of the Altar, and as the first sheep and goats were led to the slaughter tables.

Everybody shouted and cheered and clapped as Judas stood at door of the Tabernacle and said a few words, and thanked all the little people who had made this day possible. Everyone stood in silence remembering the Jews that had died rather than give up the faith.

And so on.

Everybody was willing to get over the fact that there was no Ark, and no one anymore knew the Sacred Name of the Lord, and that the Eternal Fire had gone out and they were going to have to start it from scratch.

It was going to be OK in spite of that, everybody agreed.

And then the bombshell hit.

Somebody noticed the broken seals.

• • •

Somebody noticed that the seals on the bottles of Holy Oil that they were going to use for the Menorah had been broken.

Now if that idiot had only kept his mouth shut, there would have been no Hanukkah. If he had just kept his mouth shut, and just pretended that everything was fine, nobody would ever have known. Sacred oil had no material difference from other oil. The only thing different was that it was sacred. Those seals, broken or whole, made no difference to the oil inside the bottles. That oil would have burned just fine.⁴

But instead he said something. Like: “Oops.”

And with that one word, the day changed from one of rejoicing to one of despair.

• • •

The priests dug through the bottles. Broken seal. Broken seal. Some goddam vandal had broken every seal. They could just picture the piggy little smile on his piggy little face as he ran his fingernail through the wax and tossed the now useless bottle of oil into the basket. Just knowing that this day would come, and he would have his little joke. Ha-ha.

Only one bottle’s seal had remained preserved. Enough oil for one day.

The Jew’s dreams of starting over were fucked. They had fucked things up for good.

⁴ One rabbi in the Talmud makes an interesting case that there were two or three other options available to the Jews at this point. By the Law, they could have kept the Menorah lit using other sources of fuel. But they were apparently too upset at the moment to think of subtle options. At that moment there wasn’t anything in their heads except: oh shit. Now what do we do?

Hashem had let them do play out this whole charade and then pulled the chair out just as they were about to sit down.

• • •

And bless their broken hearts, instead of cursing the Lord and cursing their fates, those fierce brave Jews cowboyed up. They stood tall.

Those Jews, those admirable broken-hearted, hopeless, helpless Jews, came to a decision.

They decided that even if it was to be for only one day, then they would worship Hashem for that one day.

• • •

The priests stepped onto the porch of the Tabernacle before the courtyard full of their brothers, and said the words that changed those songs of joy to weeping.

• • •

When things settled down, they did it. They didn't have any naptha, so I guess they struck a match, or brought fire in a horn or something. Anyway they closed their eyes, and held their breaths, and for better or worse, they did it. One final day of worship. One final day they joined hands together in the Temple for their Lord.

They lit the sacred fire of the Altar. Then they took some of that fire and lit incense and the oil lamps of the Menorah. They sang the blessings.

• • •

We've been waiting to light our candles. Let's do that now. Remembering those sweet, hopeless, broken-hearted Jews. One last time, let's light the lights together.

• • •

That poignant day wore on. Night fell. Slowly the crowds that had come to rejoice drifted home in sorrow. Everybody went home eventually, and except for a few priests idly tending the Altar fire. The vast Temple was empty and quiet.

When the oil of the Menorah burned out, those priests would go home too and the time of the Temple would finally end.

• • •

That the Menorah lights still burned the next morning didn't set off any alarms. Probably things only began to seem a little bit strange that afternoon.

A little stranger that evening, maybe

By nightfall, rather odd. A few raised eyebrows. Some whispers A couple of priests started sitting in the Tabernacle, watching the Menorah flames.

The next day, a few people from the city began standing outside the Tabernacle. From time to time one of the priests would step outside to give them updates. That night, a few more came people sat outside to keep vigil.

Soon word spread. Over the next few days, the courtyard grew more crowded. In front of the Tabernacle, in the courtyard of musicians, singers sometimes sat and sang. By the next morning, music began playing around the clock. Singers had to sign up for times.

By the end of the sixth day, people from all over Israel were trekking to the Temple. The courtyard was jammed. Feeding people became a concern. In the end, people didn't mind sharing. It was like a party. The courtyard was full of lights even by day. By night it was an astonishing sight; the courtyard blazing with a hundred thousand tiny flames. Everyone was waving lights at the Tabernacle, as if encouraging the Menorah.

All night and all the next day, people sang at the top of their lungs. People shouted prayers to Hashem.

The priests struggled to remember the exact hour and minute that the Menorah had been lit. When they had lit it, they'd just assumed the jig was up. They never realized how important that exact time would be. Now they didn't want to miss the moment the oil that was bathing in the sacred light would be consecrated, and ready to be used.

• • •

Eight days after the sacred fire was lit, Judas, looking weary and bedraggled, stumbled through the Tabernacle doors. He didn't need to say a thing. He didn't need to. He just held up a couple of the clay bottles of the newly sanctified oil, the red wax of their new seals still hot and dripping onto his fingers.

It took a moment for the crowd to realize what they were seeing. Then the Courtyard exploded in cheers. Grown men fell to their knees and wept.

• • •

The Talmud is quite emphatic that the Hanukkah menorah is to be placed outside, so everyone can see the lights. The second option, which is much less desirable, is for the menorah to be placed in a window in full view of the street.

There's no other Jewish celebration so emphatically public as Hanukkah.⁵ The Jews wanted everyone to know that they could share in the Great Miracle. From the start they wanted everyone to realize that it wasn't just about the Jews.

There are some events that are about Humanity. Discovering fire. The first wheel. Walking on the moon. Individuals of genders, ages, tribes, religions, races, nationalities, and so on did these things, but those traits are meaningless, really. Humans did them.

It was Jews who lit the Temple lamps, of course, and Jews who have kept the memory alive ever since, but they've never stressed that part. They've seen it as a blessing on all humanity. They've never said "hands off – Jews only." With Hanukkah, anyone can play. Everyone is welcome. The more the merrier, actually.

• • •

So now we come to it. I've been saying since forever that my Story is the story of the Great Miracle. And how many times have I said: don't think the Sign is the Miracle. And how many times have I said: Holy Cow, when I tell you about the Great Miracle, your head is going to explode. And so on.

For eight nights I've been diligently, enthusiastically painting myself into this corner. And now I have no choice but to hand over the goods.

Boy oh boy I hope I'm up to this.

I imagine this is how Judas felt when he lit the Altar fire. I imagine, in fact, that this is exactly how Judas felt. When I say the Story is my Story, this is what I mean. I say now, as Judas said twenty-two hundred years ago: well, here goes nothin'.

You've heard the story of the Sign. Now I can tell you the story of The Miracle.

• • •

You've been listening to this story, and how many times have I said: Hashem is a Developing Character. He's changing. He's developing.

⁵ In Asheville and apparently a lot of other communities, the local Chabad houses support a Chanukkah Parade (their preferred spelling) with a big electric menorah float on a car or truck. It might sound a little cheesy, but it turns out that there's a much firmer scriptural basis for this practice than there is for having Rudolph and Santa Claus waving from the back of a flatbed for the Macy's Day parade.

I told you that sweet quote from Rebbe Nachman, that the Lord constantly gives us hints. The story of Hashem and his people, this story I've been telling these last eight nights is full, full, full of hints.

You need to remember back to our first night together, to the first time Hashem caught Abram's attention. How He was lonesome. Yes lonesome. Unworshipped and unloved.

When the only way he could think to get Abram's undivided attention was to cut a deal.

When Hashem was a miserable, childish desert god who couldn't touch people's hearts, who could just bring plagues and storms to make things happen.

I said He was throwing tantrums. I told you I said that without meaning disrespect, and you thought I was being a wise-ass.

But I know about tantrums. I'm a dad. I had a son who threw tantrums, and it was rough on everyone; but he grew up to be a wonderful man.

Children who throw tantrums grow up. Hashem grew up.

Hints. I have littered this Story with His hints.

• • •

Hashem cut His deal with a bunch of desert nomads, and I'll bet He regretted it almost immediately. I remarked on how Hashem felt regret, remember? I asked whether you'd ever thought about that? That was a hint.

Those nomads weren't all that great when Hashem cut the deal, and almost immediately they ended up in a big mess, carted away into slavery in Egypt.

That childish, tantrum throwing nature-god had to do everything he could think of to help them out. He pulled every gimmick he could out of his modest bag of tricks. He couldn't even find a willing helper: the best He could find was a guy who tried to argue his way out of it, remember that? A guy who told Hashem, in effect, that He was making Bad Choices.

It took a lot of growing up for Hashem to stick with his Covenant. How many times did He think – wait a minute. I'm the All-Powerful Lord of Hosts! What a disaster to be stuck with this rabble. I'm out! Adios, muchachos!

But He hung in there.

• • •

That scene in the desert when Hashem appeared as Shekinah in the fire and smoke around Mount Sinai? That was a Big Deal. That moment was Hashem trying really really hard to be a grown up, and talk, grown up to grown up with the Jews he'd just saved from Pharaoh's slavery.

Look, He said. I'm the Lord. I brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. But, what can I say: I'm a jealous god. It's my nature. Just how it is. Please. I'm serious. Have no other gods before me.

If He'd said something like this at couples counseling, at that point He'd be reaching for the tissues.

The other Nine Commandments He wrote by fire on tablets of stone were, like I said, Guidelines for a Nice Life. But *that* one, that one and *only* that one, was a personal plea, a serious and heartfelt relationship request.

That was the hard one, a hard truth that would be hard for anyone to say, maybe even harder for a god. Yet Hashem had manned up, and said his piece.

Hashem had hoped, even believed, I think, that his Chosen People were growing up too, just like Him. Like people at the couples counselor, revealing those hard personal truths, hoping their spouses were ready to hear, He had opened His heart.

Unfortunately, Hashem had matured faster than the Jews.

Hashem had mastered honesty and openness. His jealousy not so much. That whole Golden Calf thing really threw him. He started treating the Jews like Bad Children. The whole Forty Years in the Desert thing. The 673 commandments. Visiting the sins of the Fathers unto the third and fourth generations.

Like an angry bitter spouse, if He couldn't get a decent grown up partnership out them, then by heaven Hashem would sure as hell show the Jews who the fuck was boss.

• • •

Do you see the hints in this story? Hashem tried to have a partnership of equals. That blew up in his face. So He became the Bad Dad. And that relationship went on for a long, long time.

The thing is, all those Great Santini rules and regulations sort of worked out well for the Jews. Hashem as Cosmic Drill Sergeant was indeed a Heavenly Pain in the Ass, but the Jews, frankly, kind of needed structure to grow up, and the Law provided it.

The Jews, slowly began to mature. Which is why I next bring up the stories of the Kings, Saul and David and Solomon. My choice of those stories is another hint.

This part of the Story is a lot like the teenager asking for some freedom. Asking, as it were, for the car keys. It's a moment when both the child and the parent come to a point of change.

The child needs to step up. And the parent needs to accept the child's new maturity, and let go.

Which Hashem did.

It's the classic story, too. It's all fun and games until somebody crashes the car. The Jews got their kings. And within a few years, they had started putting idols in the Temple. Right in the Living Room of the Jealous Lord.

Hashem had grown up a lot in the interim. He took his lumps. He was like the sad, mature dad who lets the teenager get picked up by the cops and face the music on his own. He just let the Jews get taken to Babylon.

• • •

When I say this Story is my Story, by the way, as you probably have guessed, I see specific parallels with the relationship of Hashem and His People, and my relationship to my parents, my children, my dear wife, and with my Higher Power.

When I say this story is your Story, it's because it is your story too. I know that to be true: because that same divine spark informs all of us, that same desire for love, for growth, for freedom, and that same jealousy, idolatry, and rebellion and disaster pulses through our lives and our relationships, building them up and tearing them down constantly. The hints in this Story are hints for everyone. That's why the Jews created Hanukkah. It's why they've lit the lights for all to see for twenty-two hundred years.

• • •

Just like a kid in prison grows up fast, the Jews in Babylon did too. There was a really remarkable change. You don't have to be in a physical prison to run into the life-changing, life-saving wisdom of the Twelve Steps – I wasn't – but a lot of people do. That's when a lot of people first face their problems squarely, first take a moral inventory, first ask their Higher Power for help, first try to make amends.

There are hints in that part of the Story, too. For the first time, the Jews stopped simply obeying the specifics of the 673 commandments. They wanted, for the first time, to understand them. They wanted, for the first time, to go beyond them; to act not simply to avoid bad consequences, but to *please* their Lord.

That must have been a nice change of pace for Hashem. I think that's when He decided to send them home.

• • •

And now we come to the bitter part of the Story, the part that of my Story that makes me feel the saddest.

When they came back to Jerusalem, the Jews had made some giant strides. They had really grown up. The Second Temple was the All Grown Up temple. Which makes their Fall so much more horrible.

A kid makes bad choices, and you get over it. He's just a kid. The grown up makes bad choices, and it's a lot, lot harder to take. Those are thoughtful choices, made despite the consequences, made aware of consequences. Those bad choices really hurt.

The Jews who made the Golden Calf, Hashem realized, were children. He got over it. He embraced His Children. He took care of them.

The Jews who defiled the Temple were grown ups. They knew better. They knew better and they went the hell and did it anyway.

They were no different than I was. I did exactly that.

And I woke up one day to discover what the Jews discovered. That Hashem had just the hell had it. That He had given up on me. With good reason. I was standing in a puddle of my own shit. I always assumed that He would be there for me, but one day He was gone.

I had fucked things up. I had totally fucked things up and I was more alone than I had ever known that I could be.

• • •

Now I was fortunate, as the Macabbees were fortunate, to have around me some influences that kept me focused. I faced the same questions they faced when they realized the extent of the fuck up. The full impact of the Desolation.

And that is: What are you going to do about it?

All that I personally could do was to tell my Higher Power, wherever He had gone, that I finally how realized how blindingly stupid I had been.

With no hope of forgiveness, I asked His forgiveness. I promised to try to make things right. I promised to amend my life.

Like them, I knew it was all hopeless. I didn't blame Hashem for leaving. He hadn't asked for much: just that I have no other gods before him, and I wouldn't even give him that. I'd cluttered up my life with every fucking idol I could find. I'd splashed pig shit on the temple walls.

• • •

The final step of manhood, I think, is doing the right thing when you know it to be hopeless. These are the acts that we remember and honor, the acts that break our hearts when we retell them, the acts that inspire us.

Cleaning up the defiled Temple was such an act. I bless the Jews who did this. I took courage from their example.

But the real moment that inspired me, the one that makes me weep each time, was the moment of complete despair they faced, the moment that they realized that the whole effort had been for nothing.

When they found the broken seals on the bottles of oil. That's when they realized that the Temple could never be restored. That they had managed to fuck things up so utterly that they could never be made right.

And yet despite that utter certainty of failure, the Jews decided to light the Temple fire. Hopeless and helpless, with no thought of gain. Just because. Just because.

Because they realized they loved the Lord, and they were sorry. Being sorry – that was new. Remember how I mentioned that – that the Lord never asked for anyone to be sorry for sin? Only for the proper expiation? But those Jews had finally grown up. That decision showed the depth of their contrition.

And so they went ahead, in spite of everything, and lit the fire and the flames. One final time. They couldn't do much, but they could at least do that. They could at least do that.

Out of love. Out of love. Out of love. Out of love.

• • •

That hopeless, courageous, selfless, loving act marked a change of heart.

The Miracle, part one.

(How can a decision be a Miracle? Well, a miracle is when something unexplainable happens. And for 3000 years, the Jews – like everyone on earth, I suppose – had been approaching the Divine like a big celestial Skinner Box: pressing the lever and hoping to get a sugar pill instead of a shock. But that day did what they did, knowing full well that the Box was unplugged, that nothing would come of it at all.

So how unexplainable was that?

Today what makes me happiest about the Macabbees decision is how utterly impossible it is to explain that decision to anyone who doesn't already love the Lord. I adore that look of complete confusion. Is it wrong of me to think the Jews began to celebrate Hanukkah perhaps in part because they had a wicked sense of humor?)

• • •

And now, the second part, the part that fulfills this the Great Miracle, the one we share, remembered all these generations. Why we light these lights and weep.

When with hopeless love his Children lit those lights, the Lord himself, in spite of everything, turned his face on them.

On me.

On us.

• • •

All through the Story, the Lord appears as Fire. Great Balls of Fire.

But this time, He returns, and the flame of his Presence is gentle. The flickering light of an oil lamp that just won't stop burning.

I think not ever.

• • •

After twenty-four hundred years of fire, of anger, of plague and flood and thunder, the Lord returned to his children as a quiet ever-burning light.

As if to say: It's OK. I'm here.

• • •

In parents, in couples, they call this unconditional love.

Twenty-four hundred years of consequences, but that night the Lord returned. With quiet forgiveness. With the sign of a gentle flame that did not fail.

There's a famous phrase from the book of John in the New Testament: "For the Lord so loved the world..."

That night, the Lord returned with Love.

He saw the desperate courage of his children, their hopeless, pathetic courage, and their contrition, and their selfless love, and He wept for them, and He forgave them.

He came back.

Why we remember that night, year after year, generation after generation.

That night everything changed.

• • •

From then on, His love would be there just for the taking. You wouldn't have to eat anything special, or say any special words, or go to a special building, or live in any special way. His love would just be there, and from that night on you could just reach out and take it.

That's the Hanukkah Miracle we celebrate: the New Covenant. On that dark night the New Covenant began.

And if that doesn't break your heart tonight, just wait.

Some dark night, some horrible night, when you've fucked up everything, when you're standing knee-deep in a puddle of your own shit, crying out in despair, when you are Desolate and in darkness, remember.

When you are utterly alone, you can still reach out to Him. No matter how big the fuckup. No matter how deep the shit.

It doesn't matter if you've lost the Secret Name. Just call out anything. It doesn't matter if the Sacred Fire has gone out. Any spark will do. The Lord in his mercy accepts bad coin.

That spark will somehow burst into flame in your heart. By His will, not yours.

Don't worry: Even if you're out of gas, He'll provide that too.

I know it's true because I know it's true.

My sincere wish is that you never need to find out for yourself. But if you do, if you have to live through the hard parts of the Story like I did, hang in there. Remember this: I promise you, it's true.

You can't be sure of much in life, but you can be sure of that.

It didn't used to be like that. That's the Miracle. On that night of Dedication, that night of Hanukkah, everything changed.

You can never fuck up so much that I will leave you, saith the Lord of Hosts.

That's the Miracle.

By the faith and courage and dedication of our ancestors, the Old Covenant came to its end. The New Covenant began.

To mark that moment, we join men and women who have lit these lights and sung these blessings for so many centuries. To remember, and share the Story, and never ever to forget.

The Great Miracle of Hanukkah.

Shalom.

The Hanukkah Blessings

Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech Ha-Olam, asher kiddeshanu b'mitzvotav, vitzivenu, lehadlik ner shel Hanukkah.

Blessed are You, Lord, King of the Universe, who has sanctified us with Your commandments, and has commanded us to kindle the lights of Hanukkah.

Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech Ha-Olam, she-asah nissim la-avotaynu bayamim ha-hem bazman hazeh.

Blessed are You, Lord, King of the universe, who wrought miracles for our fathers in days of old, at this season.

Finally, this third blessing, called the Shehechyanu⁶, which is recited only once, on the first night of Hanukkah. It thanks the Lord that we have lived to celebrate Hanukkah once more.

Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech Ha-Olam, she-hekheyenu v-kiyamanu v-higgianu lazman hazeh.

Blessed are You, Lord, King of the universe, who has kept us alive, and has preserved us, and enabled us to reach this time.

⁶ The Shehechyanu is a general prayer of thanksgiving, and it gets used in a lot of different Jewish liturgies, not just for Hanukkah.

One of the best unexpected benefits of studying Hanukkah was bumping into the Shehechyanu prayer. I have totally ganked it. Other than lighting the menorah, it's the only other Jewish tradition that I follow; although not being Jewish, I follow that tradition in my lame-ass Gentile way.

Traditional Jews say the Shehechyanu on lots of occasions, and some of those occasions apply to me (and to everyone), such as: when doing or experiencing something from which you derive pleasure but which occurs infrequently; or when eating a fresh new fruit for the first time since New Years; or (I particularly like this one) when greeting a friend whom you haven't seen in thirty days or more.

What's wonderful about this prayer is that it forces me keep in mind that these simple joys are really special occasions worth celebrating, that they are happening around me all the time, and that I can thankfully remember them as blessings. Now I say it all the time.

How to Light the Hanukkah Candles

Place the Menorah somewhere it won't have to be moved.

(Ideally you're supposed to set the menorah outside, or near a street-facing window where it can be seen from outside.)

Place candles in the menorah.

(On the first night, set one candle to the far right of the menorah, and each night add a new candle to the left of the previous candle.)

With all in the household standing nearby, light the shamash ("attendant") candle.

While standing, sing the blessings, and light the candles.

(Light the newest candle first, then light from left to right.)

Place the shamash in its place on the menorah.

Hang around and enjoy the candlelight.

Really, it doesn't matter if you do any of these things wrong.

Most Jewish Community Centers, synagogues or temples will be able to help you find an inexpensive and attractive menorah and set candles. Hanukkah candles typically come in sets of the total needed for all nights: 44.¹

I've seen wonderful homemade menorahs. My happiest menorah was one a friend of mine made for his girlfriend out of baby food jars. Little kids make great menorahs out of just about anything. Go bananas.

¹ The numbers work like this:

One candle for the first night, plus the shamash.
Two candles for the second night, plus the shamash.
Three candles for the third night, plus the shamash.
Four candles for the fourth night, plus the shamash.
Five candles for the fifth night, plus the shamash.
Six candles for the sixth night, plus the shamash.
Seven candles for the seventh night, plus the shamash.
Eight candles for the eighth night, plus the shamash.

Total candles: two
Total candles: five
Total candles: nine
Total candles: fourteen
Total candles: twenty
Total candles: twenty-seven
Total candles: thirty-five
Total candles: forty-four

Glossary

Depending on your background you probably know about half of these terms and are mystified by the others

Adonai	Hebrew word meaning "Lord;" an honorific of the Hebrew deity
Apostles	The 12 disciples of Jesus
Crucifixion	The execution of Jesus by the Romans
Disciples	The 12 close followers of Jesus, also called Apostles
End-time Fundamentalist	Christians who believe in apocalyptic prophecy such as the Revelation to John in the New Testament, and that the End of The World and a lot of Nastiness will come to pass soon
Gospels	The first four books of the New Testament that recount the history of Jesus.
Hashem	Hebrew word meaning "the Name"; an honorific of the Hebrew deity
Holocaust	A sacrifice that is totally burned
Kosher	A set of dietary and other rules establishing defining rules for the preparation and consumption of food
Lamb of God	A description of Jesus as the perfect sacrifice for all of mankind's sin
Last Supper	The Passover Meal held by Jesus and the Apostles before the Crucifixion
Menorah	A lampstand, typically one with two arms and multiple lamps
Mikvah	The ritual bath required to become ritually clean before entering the Temple
Parable	Illustrative stories used by Jesus to explain spiritual principles, such as the story of the Good Samaritan
Pentecost	(Christian) The day when the Holy Spirit descended on the Apostles
Pentecost	The Greek name for Shavuot, used during that late Second Temple period
Personal Savior	A term used by evangelical Christians to referring to an intentional commitment to accept Jesus
Sabbath	The day of rest established by Mosaic law, from sundown of the sixth day of the week to sundown of the seventh
Shalom	Hebrew for "Peace," but like <i>Aloha</i> , also used for greetings and farewells.
Shavuot	The Jewish Festival of Harvest, sometimes called the Festival of Weeks, that falls 50 days after Passover, held

	at the Temple. Mandatory attendance required.
Shekinah	The flamelike Presence of the Lord of Hosts
Sukkut	The Festival of Huts or Booths; a seven-day festival held in the Courtyard where the Jews lived in temporary shelters. Mandatory attendance was required.
Sunday School	An educational program of most protestant churches, typically for children but sometimes adults as well
Sunday School	An educational program of most protestant churches, typically for children but sometimes adults as well
Tanakh	The Jewish bible, roughly equivalent to the Christian Old Testament
Torah	The Jewish Book of the Law, the first 5 books of the Old Testament
Yom Kippur	The Day of Atonement ceremony held at the Tabernacle of the Temple. Mandatory attendance required