

*Moment Magazine* partners with NPR's *Hanukkah Lights* program, which presents original fiction to be read aloud by hosts Susan Stamberg and Murray Horwitz when the show airs on NPR stations in December. In addition to the two stories below, three other stories are featured on [momentmag.com](http://momentmag.com). A free e-book of Theodore Bikel's story will be available in December at [momentmag.com](http://momentmag.com).

## The City of Light

By Theodore Bikel

The boy was 13. The City he lived in was all light—a city of waltzes, of sweet confections. Through the windows of the coffehouses on every corner of every lane he watched the intellectuals debate and play chess, and although he was too young to take his place among them, it was a foregone conclusion that his time would come. The boy was a Jew, and he liked his people, their stories, legends and mysteries. The Jews lived well in the City; they were the merchants and the lawyers, the doctors and the writers, the playwrights and the artists.

As far as the boy could tell, there were several kinds of Jews in the City. There were those who looked different from everyone else, who wore different clothes and whose language had the unmistakable lilt of Eastern Europe; they all lived close to each other and to the houses of prayer they would walk to on Sabbath and holidays. But there were others who spoke high German and looked like their neighbors in every way. These Jews lived all over the city.

There was anti-Semitism. In the classroom the gentile boys yelled out insults and taunts about killing Christ. "Why are they doing that?" the boy thought. "They know I didn't kill anybody." He tried to understand it, but it just didn't make any sense.

The City could not live without its Jews, and the City



knew it. People looked up to the Jews as much as they looked down on them. The boy knew that the people of the City admired the Jews, and this made him feel proud but also nervous because he could see that with the admiration there was also envy and that the envy sometimes turned to hate, so that you could never be sure of where you stood.



The boy had been bar mitzvahed; it was a modest affair held in a *shtibl*, a small prayer house his father liked to go to from time to time. The congregation was made up of mostly old Polish Jews who listened in wonderment as the boy delivered his speech in crisp modern Hebrew. This was the gift of his father, who wanted his son to speak this old-new language of their people and not only the language of the Jews in the City. After the prayers and the speech came the mazel tovs, a sweet wine kiddush and honey cake baked by his grandmother. Later, at home, there were some presents, books mostly, and a visit to the theater. That was it. The boy kept wondering what exactly had happened that supposedly turned him into a man. A Man, a Jewish strong man, a hero, that's what he thought he might be, a Bar Kochba, a Judah Maccabee.

There were ominous signs of trouble to come; from across the border the dictator was spewing a daily litany of Jew hatred and an invasion was imminent. But the City waltzed, the City sang; sweet cakes were consumed by the ton, and in the coffeehouses intellectuals played chess and debated. The High Holidays came and went, then Sukkot and Hanukkah and another chance to dream of Judah Maccabee, of Jews as victors instead of victims.

And then, it happened: The tanks and armored cars rumbled across the border,

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unstopped and unstoppable. Within days the boy saw elderly Jews spat upon and beaten, elderly women forced to clean the sidewalks with their coats. School reopened, and the principal made a speech in which he declared, "If in the first exuberance of joy excesses should happen, we will not be inclined to prevent them." Sure enough, the boy and his Jewish classmates were dragged from the classroom and beaten. When he came home from school, bruised and bloody, his papa wept.

Every day brought new regulations, new burdens. They tried to adjust, shrink

town, from country to country; there was nothing to stop it.

One day the boy walked home and took a shortcut through the park, an area now forbidden to Jews. Some hooligans spotted him and started to chase him: There goes one of them, let's get him! They almost caught up with him, but he ran for his life and made it home in one piece, pale, panting and afraid. That night the boy dreamed of a glorious rescue: A band of brave Maccabees with Judah at the head, tall and golden with great locks of long black hair, had arrived in the City

built and restored what they could; not everything that is broken can be mended.

Many years passed and the boy, now an old man, came to the place of his youth. Once more there was a community of Jews, once more there was life. He stood at the doors of the temple, now restored to its former grandeur; he entered and greeted the familiar places. All seemed the same but for the eternal light. In its place now was a replica, lit, yet there seemed no light emanating from it. Where was the *Ner Tamid* he remembered, how



into the shadows, but there was no safety to be found. The boy, who only yesterday had felt himself to be an integral part of the City, knew he would never feel completely at home ever again.

Then came the night of horrors. Houses of worship, *shtetls*, synagogues were smashed, sacred objects defiled, Torah scrolls torn and trampled on. And the temple in the Seitenstetengasse, the beautiful temple was made into a shell covered with shards. Where oh where is Judah Maccabee now? Where is the liberator of my people? Even if he were to come, the eternal light was so thoroughly demolished that not even one drop of pure oil remained.

The devastation continued, proceeding from mayhem to murder, from town to

and brought redemption to the people. He watched with amazement and relief as the men, his men, his heroes, reconsecrated the temple and rekindled the *Ner Tamid*, the Eternal Flame. All at once, the temple was filled from edge to edge with a great and brilliant light. The wonder of it made the boy smile in his sleep. But when he awoke, he was in the dark, back in the place of terror. He knew that there had been no Hasmonean rescue, no Maccabean liberation, and he wept.

It took years and the combined might of several nations to subdue the tyrant. The joy over the victory was tempered by deep sadness; the losses had been too great. Slowly, very slowly and in pain, the remnants made their way back. Some to new places, some to the old ones. They

could it remain extinguished after the barbarians had defiled it?

Suddenly it was clear... the light was there, had been there all the time. It was in his own heart.

*Az egmor beshir Mizmor...*

At last, with my song, I can rededicate the Temple.

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# The First Hanukkah

By Andy Borowitz

**W**hen Billy Zylberberg thought about his childhood, he realized that Hanukkah would have meant more to him if he had been Jewish. Growing up in Winnetka in the 70s, Billy had only scant evidence of his Hebraic roots. Sure, he had a Jewish last name and Jewish parents, and on Sundays they ate Chinese. But that was about it. His alienation from his tribe only deepened when he turned 13 and every other Jewish boy in his grade became a man. When his best friend Josh Greenbaum had his bar mitzvah party, the all-purpose room of the Sussman Jewish Center throbbing with the opening guitar hook of “Aqualung,” Billy felt like a freak.

He blamed his parents. Assimilation was fine up to a point, but sometimes it seemed like Arnold and Marge Zylberberg were trying to be the WASPiest Jews in the Midwest. Every night before dinner, they had a languorous cocktail hour in their living room, sipping tumblers of Dewar’s on their Scandinavian sectional and speaking in the hushed tones favored by golf commentators. Billy’s dad would puff thoughtfully on his pipe, an affectation acquired in a recent and alarming burst of Anglophilia. At dinner, whenever Billy’s mom reacted in amazement to something he or his older brother and sister said, her preferred exclamation was “Lord.” Billy had never heard of a Jew saying “Lord,” with the possible exception of Moses.

As Billy saw it, Arnold and Marge were just no good at things Jews were supposed to be good at. And at the top of the list of things Jews were supposed



to be good at was celebrating Jewish holidays—possibly because they had an opportunity to do so about 200 times a year. If you can’t get good at being Jewish with a calendar like that, you’re just not trying. And that was the problem: Arnold and Marge didn’t try. By Billy’s calculation, the Zylberbergs practiced Judaism less than he practiced the cello, and he practiced the cello five minutes a week. When a major Jewish holiday rolled around, the Zylberbergs’ inadequacy in the Judaism department became truly glaring. Plenty of Jewish families didn’t keep the fast on Yom Kippur, but how many packed into the Buick Skylark and had lunch at a Swedish smorgasbord?

At Hanukkah time, the Zylberbergs’ lack of Jewishness translated into something more sinister, in Billy’s view: a lack of presents. In his friends’ homes, the parents lit the menorah over the course of eight nights and gave their children a present for each glowing night. The Zylberbergs did not own a menorah and therefore, by some kind of perverse candle-driven logic, Billy and his siblings got exactly one present. To Arnold and Marge Zylberberg, Hanukkah was not a time for excess. That’s what Yom Kippur was for.

Billy’s brother and sister didn’t have a problem with this arrangement. They seemed to feel that forfeiting seven presents was a small price to pay for never having to go to temple. But Billy could not be so cavalier. Unfortunately for him, his birthday fell on January 2nd, and Arnold and Marge had decided, with secular briskness, to combine his



Hanukkah present and birthday present into one somewhat larger gift. That meant that, by Billy's calculation, the average Jewish boy was raking in nine presents a year (counting his birthday), while he was getting only one. There was no other way to address this deficit, Billy decided: This year, the Zylberbergs would have to celebrate Hanukkah the way the real Jews did.

"Dad, can I talk to you a sec?"

Arnold Zylberberg sat in the tweed wing chair in his oak-paneled study, intently stuffing Amphora tobacco into his pipe. "Sure."

Billy knew that what he was about to do was fraught with risk. Trying to strike some vestigial Jewish chord buried deep inside his father might be a fool's errand. But legend had it that when Arnold was Billy's age he had gone to Hebrew school and was even bar mitzvahed. So it was worth a shot.

"I'm concerned," Billy said, "about my Jewish identity."

Astonishingly, Billy's tactic—the Jewish equivalent of a Hail Mary—worked.

The next day Arnold bought a menorah and candles, along with a Cliffs Notes-like guide to the holiday. And so it came to

pass that for the first time ever, the Zylberbergs sat down to celebrate Hanukkah, a holiday whose rituals and traditions were as foreign to them as Kwanzaa.

The evening began inauspiciously. As Arnold struggled to recite the candle blessing, it became painfully obvious that his Hebrew was rusty, having been in disuse since his bar mitzvah in 1943. Moments into the prayer, Billy's brother started laughing, and Arnold, in one of the fits of thin-skinned rage that were his specialty, ejected him from the table.

Arnold began again, this time sending Billy's sister into a fit of giggles. She, too, was summarily ejected.

Only Billy and his mom remained to witness what happened next. Arnold started in on the prayer yet again, this time making the fatal error of trying to pronounce Hebrew and light the candles at the same time. The first candle he attempted to light tipped from the menorah and fell to the table with a clunk. More laughter, this time from Billy's mom.

Arnold had had enough. "Get out, Marge! Get out!"

"Lord," Marge said, still laughing as she left.

For the next hour, Billy and Arnold soldiered on, huddled around the menorah, trying to gin up a credible facsimile of Judaism. But as Billy watched his father wrestle with the prayers, the candles, and a plastic dreidel that seemed engineered not to spin, he felt terrible. He had put his father through all of this, and for what? To satisfy his own rapacious lust for presents. The joy he thought he would experience on this first Hanukkah was nowhere to be found, crowded out by an inescapable feeling of guilt. And as he wrestled with that guilt, Billy Zylberberg finally knew what it meant to be Jewish.

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*Illustrations by Noah Phillips.* ☺