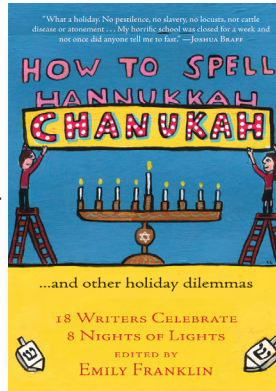


THE BLUE TEAM

by Joshua Braff

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Emily Franklin was curious to know how American Jews celebrate the Festival of Lights, so she asked eighteen writers and collected their pieces in How to Spell Chanukah. Here,*



writer Joshua Braff recounts why, of all the Jewish holidays, he always loved Chanukah best. And it wasn't just because they gave out "Chocolate Jews" in the yeshiva!

As a ferociously reluctant yeshiva-boy in the 1970s, I found Chanukah to be, without a doubt, the most joyous time of the year. Unlike the 412 other Jewish holidays that surround it on the Hebrew calendar, the Festival of Lights used to arrive like a life raft of optimism for any of us who felt Judaism had been crammed down our throats. And yes, of course, it, too, is a holiday that recalls an incident in which a mighty king decided the Jews of the time were having too much luck or fun or prosperity. And yes, of course, this resulted in mass bloodshed throughout the streets of Judea. But unlike Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah, it was always made clear that the story behind Chanukah held relatively little significance. And I always appreciated that. It was about a guy named Judah Maccabee and his four brothers and how they rebelled against King

How to Spell Chanukah,
edited by
Emily Franklin



Antiochus because he ordered the chosen people to reject God and all their Jewish customs. Judah and the boys reclaimed the Temple in Jerusalem and were granted a miracle of eight days of light from only one day's worth of oil. The result of this miracle for me was that my horrific school was closed for a week, a mountain of gift-wrapped boxes formed in my living room, Rudolph and Santa Claus were both on TV in Claymation form, and not once did anyone tell me to fast.

Each December when the Chanukah winter break arrived, my principal, Rabbi Litsky, would hand us a gift as we got on the bus that Friday. I called it "Chocolate Jews," but they were Judah Maccabee-shaped candies wrapped in blue-and-white tinfoil. When you bit Judah's head off, you found that he was hollow inside, and you could wear him on your pinkie and lick him

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like a cocoa lollipop. What a holiday. No pestilence, no slavery, no locusts, no cattle disease or atonement. Chanukah was merely the blue team in the color war against the mighty red team, Christmas. We were smaller and got way less press, but who could deny that eight days of presents was oh so much better than one. All that build up they had with the chimney and the cookies and the sleigh bells ringing and it was over in a New York minute. But with all the obvious differences, I always thought the two holidays had quite a bit in common as well. Both were intended to be religious events but seemed less about God and more about the mall. Both had bearded men on the respective wrapping paper, both had just dynamite, knee-tapping songs written for them, and both were celebrations of truly brave Jews.

Chanukah in our house also meant it was time to bring out the papier-mâché replica of *the* Temple my mother made around the time I was born. She constructed a doll house, really, a miniature synagogue with a sanctuary and an arc with tiny Torahs and plastic Maccabees and little Hassidic men who came complete with taliths and long gray beards. In hindsight, there was no greater way for me to shed my frustrations with the rituals of yeshiva life than to play with this Temple B'nai. I set up all the evil Syrians in battle formation, making them surround the synagogue with spears in hand. Then I would reach inside the sanctuary and set up the Jews. Some of them were slump-shouldered and actually had sorrowful expressions on their faces, and to this day I have no idea where my

mother found a toy store that sold sad, davening action figures. So the scenario was simple: The Jews want to pray, the Syrians want to kill and pillage, and the Maccabees want to protect the melancholy action figures. It was all about timing. My role was simple and I was very good at it: Play God.

Luckily for me, I spent heaps of time in school learning how the almighty, Blessed be He, handled things when he lost his temper.

First, you had to let the drama build. This meant the tiny Jews start their prayer service. Next, you need the Syrians to surround the temple. After that, you need your Maccabees to get into slaughter formation. And lastly, with the bad guys in the windows and the good guys ready to defend Judea, the war begins. Many die in the battle as God—me—looks down on yet another atrocity in the name of,

well . . . me. And that's when I step in. One by one I'd start lifting the Syrians by their itty-bitty heads and hurling them across the living room. *AAAAUUUGGGHHH!* they'd scream as they flew and bounced and rolled under the sofa. My dog Shana would chase them and sniff their dead bodies. And in no time, the frightened worshippers inside the Temple would climb to their feet with the help of my mighty hand and, once again, continue with their prayers. "Thank you, God," they'd say to me as they put their taliths and yarmulkes back on, dusting off their knees. I'd then reach in and tap them on their heads with the tip of my thumb. "You're welcome," I said in my deepest James Earl Jones voice. "Now cheer up and smile, for Christ's sake. It's Chanukah!" ■

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—JOSHUA BRAFF
