

A HANUKKAH  
MIRACLE

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Nicholas Gordon

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## A HANUKKAH MIRACLE

Rabbi Joel Feigelman's congregation fired him in August, and, having no other source of income, he was forced to put together hurriedly a patchwork of part-time positions.

On the sabbath he conducted services Friday night and Saturday at the Daughters of Jacob Home for the Aged. Mondays and Thursdays he gave spiritual comfort to Jewish patients at Bauman Memorial Hospital, and Tuesdays at the Hospital of St. John of the Cross. Wednesdays he gave classes on Judaism at the Fort Dixon Hills Senior Citizens Center.

Not the life he had envisioned for himself thirty years earlier at Union Theological Seminary. But neither was his messy divorce after twenty-seven years of marriage, nor the embarrassing dismissal by his congregation in response to some admittedly inappropriate behavior with a married congregant in the aftermath of his sexual liberation.

One evening in the waning days of November he was listening to Dave Brubeck in his furnished room when the phone rang.

"Rabbi Joel Feigelman?" came a distant, slithering voice, strained through a cell phone.

"Yes?"

"This is Murray Rosenbaum. Sorry for the bad

connection. I'm in Singapore."

"Yes?" Rabbi Feigelman repeated.

"You *are* the rabbi for the Daughters of Jacob."

"Yes."

"Well, I cleared it with Ms. Kay. I'd like to pay you an extra fifty bucks a shot to light Hanukkah candles for my mother."

"Yes?"

"Fifty bucks. My mother, Rivka Rosenbaum. She's in hospice at the Home. It would mean a lot to me to know that someone was lighting the candles for her."

"Yes," Rabbi Feigelman agreed.

"I gotta get back to a meeting. Yes or no, Rabbi. What do you say?"

"Yes!" said Rabbi Feigelman. Eight days at \$50 equaled \$400 – 20% of his credit card debt. For that he'd light Hanukkah candles for a corpse.

"My secretary will send you a check at the Home as soon as the holiday is over. OK with you?"

"Yes," Rabbi Feigelman said one last time, and Murray Rosenbaum hung up.

After Havdalah services on the next Saturday evening, Rabbi Feigelman went over to the hospice wing of the Home to take a look at the woman for whom he was supposed to light Hanukkah candles.

As he entered the room, Rivka Rosenbaum seemed to be asleep, but soon she opened her eyes as wide as a child's and gave him a look of wonder.

"I'm Rabbi Feigelman," Rabbi Feigelman said. "Your son called me from Singapore."

The words didn't seem to register.

Rabbi Feigelman noticed the tattooed numbers on her cadaverous arm. A Holocaust survivor, once again skin and bones.

The hospice nurse explained that Mrs. Rosenbaum had been given two or three months until a metastasized melanoma killed her, but her doctor and medical proxy had agreed instead to stop dialysis, which would end her life more swiftly and far less painfully in four or five days.

The likelihood of her making it even to the first night of Hanukkah was slim. The likelihood of her making it to the end was zero.

Please, God! Rabbi Feigelman prayed, just half jokingly. Two more weeks! I need the money.

On the first night of Hanukkah, Rivka Rosenbaum was still alive, though barely. Rabbi Feigelman showed up, menorah, matches, and candles in a plastic shopping bag.

The woman was in a coma, he was told, and would have absolutely no consciousness of what he was doing. Still, he was being paid, so Rabbi Feigelman set the menorah up on the little rolling table by her bed, lit the Shamos, and then with the Shamos the candle for the first night, singing the blessings as he did so.

He set the menorah on the window sill and looked over at his audience.

She turned uncomfortably in bed, breathing heavily, then turned again and moaned, as if in pain.

She opened her eyes and stared at Rabbi

Feigelman as though he weren't there.

Rabbi Feigelman shuddered and wondered what she was seeing.

"Mrs. Rosenbaum?" he said.

She moved her head as if in recognition that someone was speaking to her.

"I'm Rabbi Feigelman. Your son Murray asked me (he was about to say 'is paying me' but thought better of it) to light Hanukkah candles for you. Would you like that?"

Amazingly, she nodded her head and smiled.

"Wonderful!" he said. "Can you see the menorah? Over there, by the window."

She turned her eyes towards the window and stared at the glow of the two candles. She seemed thoroughly entranced by the light. Her face had lost its former stupor and seemed intelligent, almost beautiful.

Then she returned her eyes to the ceiling and shut them, as if going to sleep.

"Goodnight, Mrs. Rosenbaum," Rabbi Feigelman said softly. "I'll be back tomorrow evening to light the second candle."

Very quietly, he left the room.

Since the following evening was Friday, the beginning of the sabbath, Rabbi Feigelman did the regular sabbath service in the large lounge and then the candle lighting for the entire population of the Home – residents and staff – at the electric menorah in the main lobby.

Then he went over to the hospice wing to light

the candles for Mrs. Rosenbaum. As he entered the room the hospice nurse drew him back out into the hall and whispered to him.

"Rabbi Feigelman, it's unbelievable! Mrs. Rosenbaum woke up and said it's time for the candle lighting and where were you? So I told her you were doing it for everyone else in the lobby and that then you would be coming over to do it privately for her, and she clasped her hands together with joy. With joy, Rabbi Feigelman! Her potassium readings are high enough to shut down an elephant's heart, and she seems healthier than she's ever been here at the hospice. It's a miracle!"

Oh, God! Rabbi Feigelman thought. He was happy for Mrs. Rosenbaum, but could it be that God was actually answering his ugly, venal, only half-serious prayer? It seemed ludicrous even to think so. Fear gripped his heart.

He came into the room and bowed to Mrs. Rosenbaum, who was waiting like a concert audience for the conductor. Then he lit the Shamos, and with the Shamos two candles while singing the blessings, then transferred the menorah from the rolling table to the window sill.

Mrs. Rosenbaum looked on with enthusiasm. Then she stared at the glowing candles.

"How beautiful!" she exclaimed, the first words he had heard from her, quite apropos and clear.

"You like it?" he asked.

"I love it! And you sing the prayers so well! Excuse me, but your name . . ."

"Rabbi Feigelman. Joel Feigelman. I'm the rabbi at the Home."

"So pleased to meet you! And thank you for the private candle lighting, since I can't go to the public one. I do appreciate it very much."

"You're very welcome. Your son Murray . . . requested it."

"My son?" she asked, confused. "My son?"

She closed her eyes tightly, as if trying to picture him, and fell asleep.

On the third night Rabbi Feigelman had to finish the Havdalah service in the chapel before he could come to Mrs. Rosenbaum's room. When he got there, he found Ms. Kay, the head of social services; Dr. Hilton, the head of medical services; and Ms. Raimondo, the head of nursing services; all waiting for him.

"You don't mind if we watch," Dr. Hilton said. "This is the most extraordinary medical phenomenon I've ever heard of."

Rabbi Feigelman shrugged his acquiescence and greeted Mrs. Rosenbaum, who seemed to be anxiously awaiting the ceremony. He lit the three candles with the Shamos, singing the blessings, and set the menorah on the window sill, where Mrs. Rosenbaum stared at it rapturously.

"This is something to live for!" she exclaimed. "Isn't it? Did you ever see anything so lovely?"

"No," Rabbi Feigelman said quite truthfully. "I haven't."

"The miracle of light! Isn't it like the miracle of



life, Rabbi Feigelman? Inexplicable beauty on the edge of nothingness. How grateful I am for it, even for a few extra days!"

Staring at the candles, she again fell into a sudden, deep sleep, while Dr. Hilton hurriedly pressed his stethoscope against her back and Ms. Raimondo slapped a blood pressure cuff around her left arm.

Rabbi Feigelman left the room shaking. He shook all the way home on the three buses he had to take, and then all the way up the three flights of stairs to his room.

"God, God, God, God!" he kept repeating. "What are You doing to me? Are You punishing me? Are You making fun of me?"

He had resolved not to go back to Mrs. Rosenbaum's room the following night when the phone rang.

It was Murray Rosenbaum, this time from St. Petersburg. He sounded like he was under water.

"I just spoke to Ms. Kay," he said enthusiastically. "The head of social services at the home?"

"Yes," Rabbi Feigelman affirmed.

"She said it was a miracle! My mother's in a coma till about a half hour before you come. Then she wakes up and is all animated and actually happy! God bless you, Rabbi! Tell you what I want to do."

"Yes?" said Rabbi Feigelman.

"I'm gonna double your pay. One hundred bucks a shot. Eight hundred bucks total. That sound good to you?"

"Yes," said Rabbi Feigelman.

"Great! I'll give the instructions to my secretary and she'll send you a check just as soon as the holiday is over. Keep up the good work!"

He hung up.

The next night there was a little crowd in Mrs. Rosenbaum's room. Rabbi Feigelman had to elbow his way in, though as soon as he was recognized, the crowd made a respectful, almost awed path for him.

With a wave of his arm, he cleared Mrs. Rosenbaum's sight line. Her face was beaming with anticipation.

How marvelous that so little gives her so much! he thought.

He lit the candles, singing the blessings with unusual grace. He placed the menorah on the window sill. Below the window, which was on the second floor looking out onto an interior garden, another crowd had gathered, and through the closed window Rabbi Feigelman could hear a muffled cheer.

This scene was repeated over the next four nights, the crowds growing, Mrs. Rosenbaum glowing like a Hanukkah candle for the hour or so that she was awake. Rabbi Feigelman was introduced to the Chairman of the Board, the Director of the Foundation, the Head of the local Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, and so on, all of whom praised him and hinted at more lucrative possibilities for the future.

He felt as though he had been mounted on a rack and pulled apart until his limbs popped out. He

couldn't believe that the Lord would for one second concern Himself with so trivial a request, or would keep life burning in an old lady for eight miraculous days just to ease his financial situation.

It was the Hanukkah miracle replayed as farce. He felt guilty for using a dead woman for his own material advantage, and each time he saw her preternatural joy, he cringed inside.

On the last night of Hanukkah, the crowd was larger than ever. A local cable television station covered the event, as did a photographer and reporter from the Associated Press.

As usual, Mrs. Rosenbaum was animated and vigorous. She was interviewed by both the TV and print media before Rabbi Feigelman arrived, and to both she asserted her belief that she would die soon after the last candle on the menorah was lit, but that she was overjoyed at every opportunity to experience the beauty of light.

"You don't know what a miracle it is," she told them, "because you take it for granted. But for me every second of beauty is a second worth having, and I'm grateful that, for whatever mysterious reason, God has granted me eight more days of it."

When Rabbi Feigelman arrived, the media wanted to interview him as well, but he brushed right by them with a "no comment" and began setting up the menorah for the final candle lighting. As he lit the eight candles with the Shamos while singing the blessings, all eyes were upon him. But after he set the menorah on the window sill, all eyes shifted to Mrs.

Rosenbaum.

How her eyes danced, just like the light of the nine candles! She was an advertisement for the joy of life, and everyone present was sold.

Then her eyes closed, as though her battery had suddenly run out, and she seemed to have fallen into a deep sleep.

Everyone waited while Dr. Hilton checked her vital signs, and fifteen minutes after Rabbi Feigelman had lit the last candle, Mrs. Rosenbaum was pronounced dead. The miracle was over.

Rabbi Feigelman, however, had slipped out while attention was focused on Mrs. Rosenbaum. By the time she died he was on the first of his three buses home.

He felt sorry for her, but he didn't want to be part of the circus going on in her room. Nor did he want to be questioned about why he was lighting Hanukkah candles privately for anyone, nor whether or how much he was getting paid to do it, nor whether he had prayed for her to live just so that he could collect his fee for service.

So he wasn't sure whether she had died until he called Ms. Kay the next morning.

Yes, Ms. Kay told him. She had died no more than fifteen minutes after he had lit the last candle.

"Have you called her son Murray to let him know?" Rabbi Feigelman asked.

"What son Murray?" Ms. Kay said. "She doesn't have a son. At least not one who's alive."

"No son Murray?"

"Her husband and children were killed in the Holocaust. She never remarried. That's why her attorney was her medical proxy."

"But didn't he ask you whether it as all right for me to – "

"Didn't who ask?"

"Her son Murray."

"How could he ask if he doesn't exist?"

A fair question, Rabbi Feigelman thought. He apologized for bothering her and hung up.

Then he realized: No Murray Rosenbaum, no \$800. And he began to understand just how divinely he had been had.