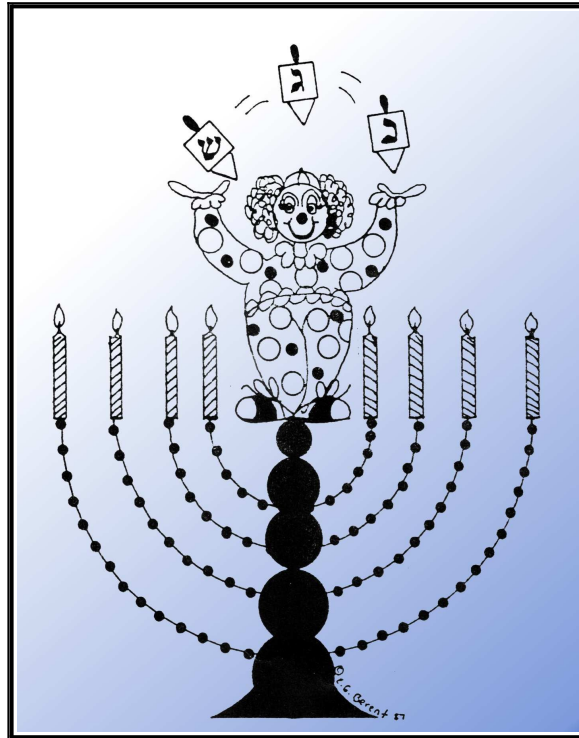


The Chanukah Clown



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Once upon a time, in a pretty blue box on the top shelf of a toy store, lay a Chanukah Clown.

For many weeks he had liked there quietly watching the parents and children look through the store and purchase toys and gifts to give to loved ones for Chanukah. Many had stopped and looked at the little clown, touched the yarmulke perched atop his fuzzy mop of hair or pointed to the tiny dreidel he held clutched in his hand. Many had stopped and looked and oohhed and ahhed at his perfect hands and feet and happy, smiling face, but no one had chosen him.

Now, here it was, early in the evening of the seventh day of Chanukah. Soon, the toy store would close as the toy maker hurried home to be with his family and light the candles to begin the eighth and final day of the festival of lights. Only a few more minutes and the little clown would not be part of someone's Chanukah. He

would lie in his box, in a back room, all year long until next year. For who would buy a Chanukah Clown, except at Chanukah?

“Oh dear,” thought the little clown. “I did so want to see some little child’s eyes light up and hear them laugh when they opened up my box and saw me smile at them! But now the crowds are thinning. Everyone is heading home and here I sit.” And the poor little clown felt very, very sad.

Suddenly, the bell on the toy shop door tinkled and in burst the strangest looking man. He was short and round. An old, black hat was pushed so far back on his head that it seemed a miracle that it didn’t tumble off as he waved his arms this way and that. Great tufts of tangled white hair stuck out from under the hat shooting off in all directions. And he was wrinkled – everywhere. His long, black coat was wrinkled. His face was wrinkled and crinkled and folded...everywhere except for his eyes, which twinkled and danced with joy as he looked all about the toy shop with a smile as dear and utterly happy as a child.

With a start, the old man realized that the toy maker was speaking to him. “And what can we help you with today, Sir?”

A cloud passed over the strange man’s eyes and he looked into memories filled with heartbreak and tears. He answered with a voice filled with excitements and sorrows in many strange lands and beautiful places, of nights alone with the wind and the stars.

“My niece. She is not well. All day she lies in the hospital and they can do nothing for her. She doesn’t move. She doesn’t open her eyes. She barely breathes. She just lies there and wastes away. I came as soon as I heard she was sick. I went to her bed side and looked down at this dear little girl – so fragile, so delicate, so sweetly sleeping, but not waking. I looked down at her and felt so sad...so sad. And then I thought, ‘Tonight is the eighth and final night of Chanukah. And what is Chanukah? Well, it is a celebration of a miracle! And then I KNEW!!! I knew that I had to find a present which would be the just exactly right, perfectly special and wonderful gift and bring it to my niece to celebrate this festival of miracles and then she will get well.’”

The old man had been waving both hands wildly about to emphasize each point in this oration. He finished with a flourish of arms and hands.

“And so, I have come here to find that just exactly right, perfectly special and wonderful gift.”

With that, he pulled out a battered black spectacle case, opened it and withdrew a pair of thick glasses. He perched these on the end of his nose and proceeded to comb through the store, pouncing on toys with great, “Ah Ha’s!” and “What have we here’s?” When he saw a possible gift, he would grab the toy and turn it this way and that, peering at it through and over the top of the goggle-eyed glasses, all the while muttering to himself.

However, each toy he chose would fail his inspection and, with a sigh, he would return it to its place. Then, he would begin searching the shelves again.

This went on for quite some time. All the other customers had gone and the toy maker was making anxious cleaning up motions, obviously wanting to close up and go home to his family. And still the old man searched.

Then his eyes fell on the little clown. He did not pounce. He did not shout. He just looked at the happy figure poised in its blue box and he smiled.

He said, “This is the one. This little Chanukah Clown.”

A moment later, the clown was boxed and wrapped and bagged and tucked under the man’s arm as he hurried to the hospital.

Bursting into the hospital room, the old man waved the package at the two grownups standing sadly beside the bed, arms entwined as if trying to hold each other up, looking down at the dear child who lay so still.

The child did not notice them or the menorah full of candles, ready for the lighting at sundown or the pile of gifts on the table nearby. She lay so still...within the touch of their hands, yet so far away and her mother and father could do nothing for her but watch and hope and pray.

"I have it! I have it!!" shouted the old man, braking through the quiet sadness which filled the room.

"Albert. There you are," said the moth. "We thought you would miss the lighting of the candles. What do you have?"

He pushed the box at them. "It is a preset, but not just any present. It is THE present. It is the just exactly right, perfectly special and wonderful present, the one which will bring our sweet one back to us!"

The father's eyes were angry as he grumbled, "What is this nonsense?"

"It is no nonsense. It will work. I am sure it will. Come, it is sundown. Let us light the candles and then you shall see."

"Mother, I've had about enough of this brother of yours. What do you mean coming in from whatever end of the earth you have been wondering around to disturb us at this, our hour of sadness with some false hope? Why, I've got a mind to ..."

"Papa. Papa. It is sundown. Put aside your differences. It is time to light the candles."

And so they did. They lit the candles and thanked G-d for the miracle wrought so many years ago and for the continuous miracle of their being. They lit the candles and they remembered and they were thankful – as Jews all over the world were doing and had done and will do. And they were quiet and still as they looked at the menorah with its eight candles burning brightly and they believed in miracles.

"It is time for the gift," said the old man at last and brought forth the box. With great ceremony, he pulled off the wrapping paper – all the while looking at the girl and then, with a slight hesitation, opened the box, pulled the clown out and held it out to the little girl.

"See, my dear one? See the pretty clown Uncle has brought you for Chanukah? See how happy he is? Doesn't it make you want to smile, too?"

And all three stared at the still, little child and the bright, happy clown and the hoped and looked for some sign, some slight stirring from the girl.

But nothing happened. Nothing changed.

After a time, the old man's face fell and with great sadness, he leaned the little clown against the menorah, among the collection of candies, dradles and small toys, so it, too, could watch the still child. He sighed and looked very old and tired.

"Forgive me Arthur... Bessie. Forgive the ravings of a silly old man. I am sorry. I felt sure it would work."

The old man looked down once more at the motionless little girl, touched her cheek, turned and was gone.

The mother and father stood there for some time more, looking at the girl and the candles so cheerfully burning down and they held each other very close. And after a while, because they could not bear to be there when the final candle hissed into darkness, they turned off the lights and left, too.

And the remaining ends of the candles burned brightly. The flickering, dancing flames cast patterns of light and shadow over the face of the girl and the toys and the little Chanukah Clown.

And as they burned, the little clown stirred – just a bit at first, but more and more until, finally, the little clown stood right up!

He stretched his arms and legs, made a few funny faces and smiled – ever so happily. He looked over at the little girl, expecting a smile in return, but she only lay there, so still, so pale.

“Why this won’t do!” thought the clown. “How can I be a special gift if she doesn’t play with me? I must take care of this right away!”

The little clown stepped up to the pile of toys under the menorah. He picked up two dradles that matched the one in his hand and faced the child. The clown then began to juggle. He juggled with his eyes closed. He juggled and danced. He even stood on his hands, juggled with his feet and smiled THIIIISSSS big.

He juggled the dradles in the light of the candles and sang a special, happy song of birds and trees and wind and hills and springtime.

And as he sang and danced and juggled in the light of the Chanukah candles, the little girl’s eyes fluttered and then they opened. She saw the little clown dancing and she smiled and stretched out her hand.

And when her mother and father came in the next morning, they found her asleep with the little clown clutched in her hand on the pillow beside her and a smile on her face.

Unbelieving, they leaned closer to look and she awoke. With cries of joy, the three embraced each other – laughing and crying and thanking G-d for this miracle.

And as the little girl grew into a woman, she always kept with her the little Chanukah clown and, although he never again juggled for her, she would always smile when she looked at him and remembered that most special of Chanukahs and the wonderful little Chanukah Clown.