

The Sefer Torah of Baron Rothschild

By Chaya Sarah Cantor

On an early winter day in Germany, Baron Rothschild stood watching through a window overlooking his estate. While surveying the icily silent grounds, with its gardens and fountains, he felt a certain pride and gratitude.

"G-d has bestowed so much kindness upon me," he thought, "that I feel it is my tum to display my

gratitude to Him. It is a commandment that every man write a Torah scroll for himself. If he lacks the ability, then he should have one written for him. Since I am untrained in calligraphy, I simply have no choice but to hire a scribe."

After several inquiries, a man was recommended to the baron — one Yitzchak Fogelman, who lived in Warsaw. This man had serviced many

of the distinguished families of Poland, and was famous for his flawless Hebrew calligraphy, as well as his great piety.

At the thought of this last quality, the baron smiled approvingly, "Piety. That is very important to me — that whoever I hire be a truly G-d-fearing man."

A week later, a squat, bearded man

At Chanukah, when we celebrate the victory of Judaism over the idolatry of Greece, it is wise to reflect on our extensive use of the secular calendar.

As Jews, we live by the seasons in the Land of Israel, and not in the Diaspora. This means that in January there may be a blizzard here, but on Tu B'Shvat the trees are beginning to bloom in the Galilee, and we celebrate the event.

Pesach, Succos, and Shavuos are agriculturally as well as spiritually based, and must take place at particular times of the year. Certain events such as the New Moon (*Rosh Chodesh*) or memorials (*yahrzeits*) are observed according to the Hebrew calendar. Our Hebrew birthday, rather than the "English," is more important. Thus, we are obligated to give priority to the Jewish months, and the Jewish days.

Unfortunately, due to our coexistence with the world at large, we often tend to keep track of "their" calendar, at the expense of our own. In fact, we often seem to keep track of our own holidays this way. For example:

"When is Chanukah this year?"

"Let me check . . . uh, Saturday night, December 3rd . . ."

"Hey, it's early this year."

Early? In relation to what? A certain "other" holiday? Why should we care when in the secular calendar Chanukah falls? Now, Chanukah does occur early in one sense this year: it falls out early in the

season. The reason is that the Jewish calendar is based on a lunar cycle, which is shorter by eleven days than a solar one. In order to "catch up," the Jewish calendar must be adjusted; otherwise, we would eventually end up observing Pesach in October — er, the fall. This is done by adding a leap month — a second Adar — seven times in 19 years. Did you know that this year, 5749, has a leap month?

But you don't know that 5749 is a "short year." Cheshvan and Kislev have only 29 days, thus making the year short (though it's longer because of the additional Adar). Some years both Cheshvan and Kislev might have 30 days — making it a full year. During "regular" years, Cheshvan might have 30 and Kislev 29, or vice versa.

Do you ever catch yourself using these expressions?

"The first of the month [April, May, etc.] I went there . . ."

"Last April I stayed with a friend . . ."

"Over Memorial Day weekend I saw . . ."

Instead, how about:

"*Rosh Chodesh Iyar* I went there . . ."

"During *Parshas* (or *Shabbos*) *VaYechi* I stayed with . . ."

"Around *Lag B'Omer* I saw . . ."

Of course, most of us like to say *Shabbas* (or *Shabbat*) instead of Saturday. It's lucky we do, else we would be honoring Saturn, the Roman god of agriculture. But how about saying *Yom Revi'i* or *Yom*

appeared at the massive gates of the estate. From his window the baron saw the *sofer*, and immediately was impressed. The man, waiting to be admitted, was reciting Psalms from a little prayer book, his eyes semi-closed in rapture.

Once admitted to the baron's drawing room, the man continued to chant and sway. Not until he caught sight of the baron, standing and watching admiringly, did he stop and bow respectfully.

"*Shalom aleichem, Reb Baron,*" he said. "Yitzchak Fogelman at your service."

The baron immediately bade the man be seated, and ordered food brought out. Rabbi Fogelman, though tempted by the delicacies placed before him, refrained from partaking until he was assured by the baron that the food was absolutely kosher. Afterward, he helped himself to the gourmet treats — carefully making the appropriate blessings.

The baron conversed briefly with the *sofer*. They discussed life in the Polish capital, each man's encounters with great sages, and Torah topics. Baron Rothschild was amazed at the man's depth of Torah knowledge, and

his sparkling insights.

Satisfied at last that he had found a G-d fearing man, the baron set down to business. Yitzchak Fogelman was to have exactly one year to produce a *sefer Torah* of the highest quality. During this year he and his family were to remain at the Rothschild estate, with all expenses paid. He would be given an initial advance of one thousand marks, and be paid the rest at year's end.

"Agreed?" asked the baron.

Shaking the baron's hand, the *sofer* replied, "You can count on me, Reb Baron. With G-d's help I shall produce

Dales (Fourth Day) instead of Wednesday — or *Wodnes daeg*, as it was originally called? *Woden* was the chief Norwegian god. Incidentally, his wife, *Frig*, is honored on — you guessed it — Friday. In fact, we owe several days of the week to the Vikings. Two other gods get special mention — *Tiu* and *Thor* (*Yom Shilishi* and *Yom-Chamishi*, Tuesday and Thursday).

You see, English, unlike Hebrew, is a "hybrid" language; originally Germanic, it borrowed from many different sources, especially Greek and Latin. In fact, the Greeks would marvel at how much their idols are given mention by us modern people. After being conquered by Rome, the culture of Greece, including her religion, was adopted by the victors, and her idols were renamed in Latin, the language of Rome.

Thus, *January* was a month honoring Janus, a two-faced gentleman who guarded the portals. He was the god of "beginnings and ends." *February* was a festival in which the Romans purified themselves (probably after spilling all that Jewish blood!). *March* is the month of Mars, the Roman god of war.

Not all the months, however, were borrowed by Rome from Greek mythology. Two of the Roman emperors, Julius Caesar and Augustus, modestly named the summer after themselves.

Now, a quick quiz — we all know when the Romans conquered Jerusalem — 70 C.E. What was the Hebrew date? Don't know? Have to sit and add?

Amazing then, how much even we Jews live by the

pagan calendar.

Unfortunately, we're all guilty of this to a certain degree. Somehow, it seems easier to remember the "English" months (courtesy of Rome and Scandinavia) than to abide by the Jewish cycle. Knowing the secular date may be fine, even necessary, on your birth certificate; however, it was never intended by our Sages for anything other than reference. The world was created for the sake of the Torah; by the Torah, and its unique time cycle, are we Jews governed.

Hence, we are also commanded to familiarize ourselves with the weekly Torah-reading, which remains pertinent for the entire week. Every home should have a Jewish calendar (called a *huach*) indicating the week's Torah portion, as well as the Friday night candle-lighting time and upcoming holidays.

Knowing and adhering to the Hebrew calendar helps to unite all Jews; not all of us are watching a fireworks show on the "Fourth of July," but (we hope) on Tisha B'Av, we're all seated on the floor, mourning for the Temple. Having a weekly awareness of the Torah deepens our commitment, and the knowledge that, as Jews, we live in a different world than do other people.

So let's set our watches straight! By following the Jewish calendar, we bring it into our hearts, as well as our homes. And have a good year — 5749, that is!

a Torah scroll to your extreme satisfaction.”

Rabbi Fogelman's family arrived shortly later, and settled into a private wing of the estate. A separate room was arranged for Yitzchak Fogelman to perform his sacred work. Each day he rose at dawn and prayed in the baron's private *minyán*. After an hour studying Talmud with the baron, he immersed himself in the baron's private *mikvah* before beginning to write the holy letters. Patiently, and

money.

“But that can't be right.”

“It is, sir. I recorded all the advances that you paid me. Trust me, sir. I have never cheated anyone.”

“Well . . .” The baron scratched his beard meditatively and said, “I do remember the initial advance of a thousand marks.”

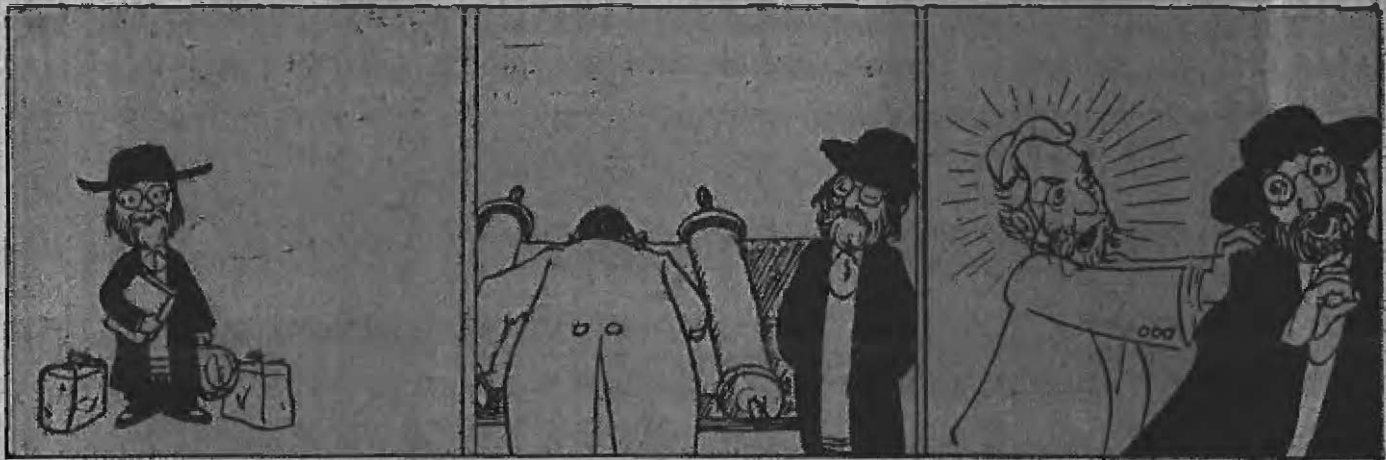
“Yes,” said Rabbi Fogelman. “That was exactly a year ago, in December. Then in March — right after Purim — you agreed to give me another

you the Torah scroll isn't defective. If you wish, I can have it reexamined.”

“That will not be necessary. It is not the scroll that is defective. It is the scribe.”

Rabbi Fogelman's meekness gave way to religious and professional anger. “Sir, I must challenge that remark. I feel it is unwarranted.”

“Wrong, Reb Yitzchak,” retorted the baron. “It is quite warranted. I asked for someone who was absolutely G-d fearing — someone



with excruciating detail, he composed the *sefer* Torah, constantly examining and reexamining his work.

When he was finally finished, he reverentially presented it to the baron. Looking the scroll over, Baron Rothschild was impressed with the craftsmanship.

“Beautiful,” he said, “simply exquisite. Truly a worthy gift to G-d.”

“It was with G-d's help that I wrote it,” the *sofer* replied.

Putting the Torah scroll away, the baron leaned back and asked, “Well, then, how much do I owe you?”

The *sofer* cleared his throat. “Twenty thousand marks, sir.”

The baron was amazed. “Twenty thousand? Are you certain?”

“Positive, sir,” answered the *sofer*, feeling embarrassed at the mention of

advance of two thousand marks. For Pesach, you know. Then in the summer — August, it was — I had another advance. And in October, after Simchas Torah, I believe I received the last one—”

“Pardon me,” the baron interrupted coldly. “Did I hear you say ‘December?’”

The *sofer* stopped, confused. “Why, yes.”

“And March . . . and August?”

“Yes.”

The baron withdrew a bank draft and scribbled the amount of twenty thousand marks. Handing it to the scribe, he said, “Here is your money. Take it . . . and your Torah scroll.”

The eyes of Rabbi Fogelman widened incredulously. “Sir, I assure

who truly thought in accordance with Jewish practice. By your deference to the secular calendar, I see that you have been tainted with pagan culture. Do you know what holiday is coming up?”

“Of course,” answered the scribe. “Chanukah.”

“And can you forget how our ancestors battled the Greeks to defend our religious beliefs, identity, practices, and *calendar*? The Greeks wanted us to adopt theirs — along with its own holidays and seasons. As Jews, we adhered to our own, with its sacred Torah cycle. It is ingrained in our very souls, our very mentality. I see you haven't learned from the past. I shall have to find someone who has — and have *him* write a Torah scroll instead.”

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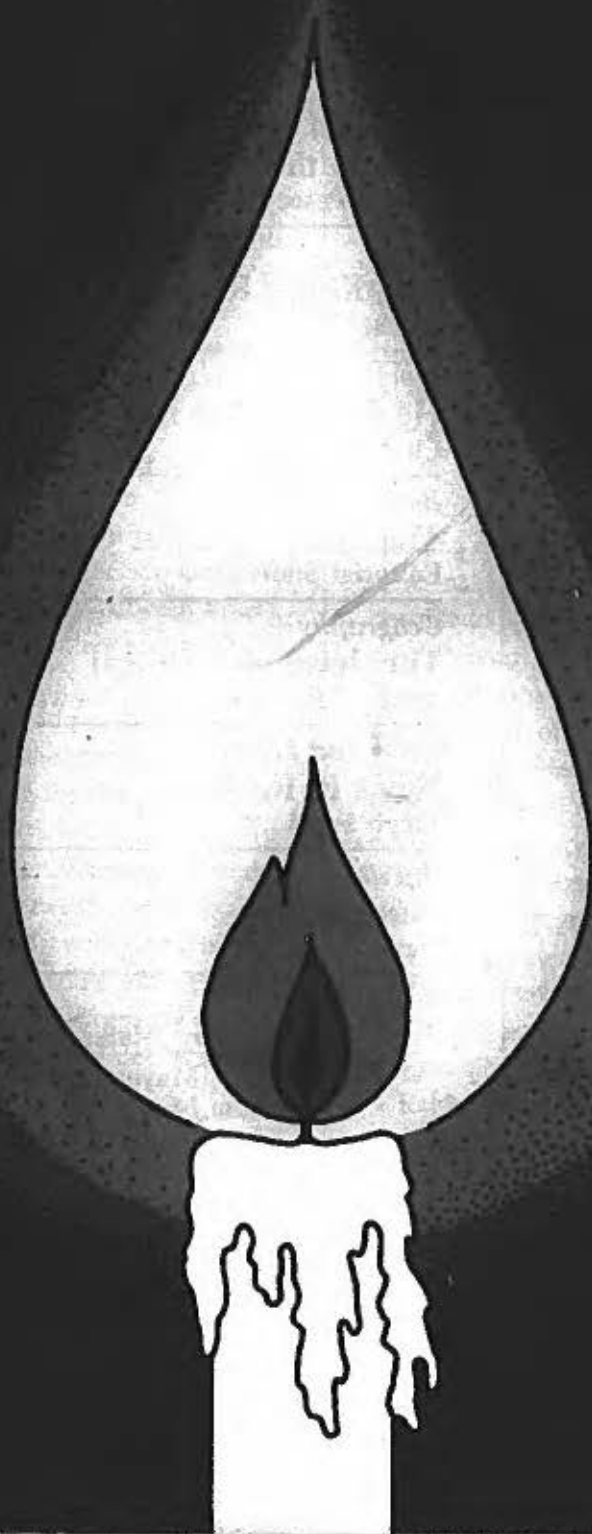
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The Jewish Reader

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A little light
dispels darkness

TO OUR READERS

We at **The Jewish Reader** have been quite gratified by the reaction to our first issue. It was our feeling that the Jewish public has been looking for quality reading material which reflects our values, and we think our magazine is helping fill the void that has existed.

The focus of the second issue is Chanukah. The miracles of Chanukah — the defeat of the Syrian-Greeks and the Temple menorah which stayed lit for eight days — symbolize the superiority of the Torah outlook. For over 2,000 years, Chanukah has represented the victory of Torah-true Judaism over other philosophies of life. It is for this reason that Chanukah is primarily a spiritual holiday, not a material one as is Purim.

"Torah Highlights" delves into the connection between Chanukah and the sale of Yosef by his brothers. "Jewish Faith and Chanukah" discusses the importance of the holiday as a reflection of absolute Jewish faith.

Other features include a look at our use of the secular calendar, the continuation of "Across the Atlantic" — a tale about Jews in colonial America — and "He Won't Miss Me," which analyzes two attitudes toward **gemilus chasadim**, acts of kindness. There is also a biography of Rabbi Yosef Caro, the author of the **Shulchan Aruch**.

We wish you a Happy Chanukah, and look forward to your comments about this issue.

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The Jewish Reader

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