

SuckLeukah

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

More than the calf wants to suck, the mother wants to suckle.
Talmud Pesachim 112a

It's [Chanukah](#) time! Consumerism has gone mad. We ape the rest of the world and we overindulge in an orgy of unnecessary spending, spoiling, and waste. Before my children complain that I am the worst overindulgent grandparent on the planet, hear me out, because this is all about therapy.

Once upon a time Chanukah was a sweet, eight-day-long, home-based, winter's fireside celebration. Returning from work, parents would light up the candles. In my youth in postwar England, olive oil was far too scarce and expensive a commodity to be squandered on lighting. Everyone lit white candles until 1948, when white and blue became fashionable, and then in the mid-fifties we had those multicolored twisted candles. Nowadays, of course, we have only the best and the purest olive oil, and even individual glass phials of oil premeasured to the right amount of time required to fulfill one's obligation. All imported, sanctioned, and sanctified from the Holy Land (and don't ask where the olive trees actually are), guaranteed to make someone a small fortune in the process.

Then we would sing [HaNerot Halalu](#) ("These Are the Lights") which we sang to Handel's [See, the Conqu'ring Hero Comes](#), from his oratorio Judas Maccabaeus. And on to [Maoz Tzur Yeshuati](#) ("The immovable Rock of our Salvation"), the [cat's in the cupboard](#) and you can't see me.

Mummy would fry up [homemade donuts](#) and other oil-cooked food (we wanted chips), and we'd sit around on the carpet [playing dreidel](#) for nuts. Four sides of the little top with Hebrew letters—Nun, Gimel, Hei, and Shin. In Hebrew these letters stood for "a Great Miracle Happened There"; in the dreidel game, they stood for the Yiddish words meaning "put one in, take one out, stay as you are, or take the lot"! Of course our parents made sure we were all winners and then off to bath and bed while the grownups took out the cards and gambled away the evening. Actually, my father never, ever allowed us to play cards. He had a visceral hatred of gambling. It was not until I married into a continental family that I discovered so much addiction to gambling in many Jewish communities.

It all sounds positively Dickensian doesn't it? Innocent and romantic. And I guess it was rather innocent in its way, at a time when most Jews, in fact most of postwar people in general, were poor.

But then things changed. It started with American cousins coming over with boxes of Bazooka bubble gum, and then slowly Madison Avenue initiated the relentless move towards consumerism, advertising, and spending. Insidiously, subliminally, the "[The Hidden Persuaders](#)" convinced us that buying things was good for the country. We learnt about built-in obsolescence so that we

would have to buy replacements every year or so, and a car was no longer to last a lifetime but had to be traded in every two years to preserve its secondhand value, and of course to maintain a profile as a successful whatever-we-were. We deserved it. We needed it. And we were doing a service to the economy and the country. At the same time, in the immortal words of Harold MacMillan, we “never had it so good”. And that was when I became aware for the first time that it was a mitzvah to compete with Christmas.

Christmas was no longer the festival of good cheer and charity and Christian values. It had become the pagan celebration of spending money, of going into debt to give lots of people lots of useless gifts. I, too, hung up a stocking on my bedpost and kept a lookout for Santa coming down my chimney with presents. But for some reason my father wasn't on the same page.

As soon as I had children of my own, and it was the era of a television in every room let alone every house, I didn't want my children to feel deprived. So I started buying presents, one for each child for each day of Chanukah as if to reassure them that they need not suffer by being Jewish when everyone else was getting presents and the media were seducing them day by day from November—because [Chanukah gave them a whole lot more!](#) I got a tremendous amount of pleasure seeing my children happy every evening for eight days, and getting hugs and kisses and adoring looks, and what a good Daddy I was. And now I do exactly the same for my grandchildren whenever I see them, and try to make up for the months in between.

I am addicted to giving because I enjoy it. When my sons and daughters, and daughters- and sons-in-law try to tell me to stop being so overindulgent, and that I am ruining my grandchildren and undermining them, because I am raising expectations and training them to want, and measuring love in terms of material things, I realize they are right. I am a hopeless addict. More than my kids want presents, I want to give them!

So it is that children are conditioned to expect and want the latest gadget and doll and toy car and fashion accessory. Spoiling children really does a lot of damage. I see young men and women incapable of taking “no” as an answer, and incapable of self-discipline, and unwilling to buckle down to work hard at anything. I see marriages destroyed because unreasonable expectations are not met. Yet here I am, the suckling cow, refusing to pull the treat away. How can I say, “Grow up,” when I haven't grown up either? Is this really what the [Hasmoneans](#) fought for?