OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Candle Power

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MY family came to America from Egypt in 1963. We arrived during Hanukkah, and I remember being unable to take my eyes off the electric menorahs glowing in the windows of houses in Brooklyn, where we set out to hunt for our first apartment.

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Helen Yentus and Jason Booher

Even as a child I was struck by how open religious practice was in this country. Christmas decorations were everywhere — this was, after all, Bensonhurst. But what astonished me most was that Jews could be as affirmative and demonstrative as their Christian neighbors about their faith.

After we had settled upstairs in a “two-family,” I tried to persuade my parents to buy an electric menorah. I loved how the soft orange light could illuminate even the darkest winter nights. And having a public menorah was, well, American. After all, our Italian neighbors competed to set up ever more elaborate holiday displays — trees, Santas, elves, reindeer, sleighs, lights and crèches with figurines of Jesus and Mary. Our Jewish neighbors responded by prominently displaying their electric menorahs.

Despite what to me were obvious virtues, my parents steadfastly vetoed my holiday display plans. At our house, Hanukkah remained a low-key, intimate affair, observed behind closed doors — as it had been back in Egypt.

For a menorah, my mother would do what she had done in Cairo; she would take several ordinary juice glasses, fill them with water and oil and then insert a floating wick. Each night, we would light the wicks in the glasses, which we arranged in a semi-circle and placed on a tray. The flames were reflected in the oil and in the water.

My mother was always so delighted when one or two lasted through the night. “Nes,” she’d exclaim, Hebrew for “a miracle,” and cover her eyes with her hands to whisper a short prayer in the direction of the flames.

Not surprisingly, my parents, both of whom were raised in old Cairo, were overjoyed and bewildered by our new home. Jews were welcome here, and it was clearly so easy to be Jewish. Yet to them there seemed so little rigor, so little interest in the small details that defined their faith: when to pray, what foods to eat and not to eat.

My parents came to feel considerable despair at the secular society that surrounded them. The social worker assigned to help with our transition seemed particularly troubled by my dad, by his insistence on tradition and his refusal to assimilate. She disliked his habit of crying out “God is great,” a fact that she noted in her meticulous case file.

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I imagine it was this ambivalence that led them to resist my menorah entreaties for so many years. In the end, however, they did relent. Perhaps it was because we were better off; perhaps it was because they wanted to feel more American. At any rate, I was overjoyed. My mother, though, continued to persist in lighting her glasses of oil.

It was only recently that I understood my parents' insistence on observing the holiday as simply as possible. I was in the Museum of Jewish Heritage in Lower Manhattan, wandering around its gift shop, which was filled with dozens of the most dazzling menorahs imaginable, some costing hundreds of dollars. A few were sleek and modern; others were more modest and traditional, constructed by artisans. There were some electric models. Customers were milling about, trying to make their selections.

I left the shop and wandered upstairs. In a nearly deserted part of the museum, I came upon an exhibit on resistance during the Holocaust; one of the forms of resistance, it turned out, was prayer. There, behind glass, were frayed prayer shawls and yellowed synagogue tickets and Sabbath candle-lighting schedules and — this is what caught my eye — a couple of menorahs.

One, from the Lodz ghetto, was portable and minuscule, the kind you fold in your pocket so no one can find it. The other wasn't even a menorah at all — just a photograph of one being lit in 1943 in a transit camp in the Netherlands. Like those glowing menorahs I remember from my first visit to Brooklyn, this one held my eyes. And not because it was ornate or dazzling, but because its very existence was simple and miraculous, like those glasses of oil and water my mother would light during the longest nights of the year.

Lucette Lagnado, a reporter at The Wall Street Journal, is the author of "The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit: My Family's Exodus from Old Cairo to the New World."

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