

# Hanukka in Niger

*A father-daughter trip—and two journals recording the experience—reveals how necessary, and how portable, Judaism can be, particularly for visitors to a foreign land.*

By William F.S. Miles and Arielle P. Miles

Never in my 25 years of periodic sojourns to Muslim black Africa have I concealed my Jewish heritage. Even despite the advice of my mother, late in the summer of 1977. ♡ I had just completed college at Vassar. Mother finally accepted that, despite her concerted campaign against it, I was about to enter not law school but the Peace Corps. In fact, I was about to leave the United States for a two-year stint in Niger, an impoverished Islamic country just south of the Sahara. It was not what a nice Jewish boy raised on Long Island, New York, was supposed to do—given the global climate of anti-Israel diplomacy at the United Nations and the Palestinian airplane hijackings, assassinations and kidnappings directed at American and Zionist targets alike.

So my mother finally relented—under one condition: “Promise me,” she implored, “that you will not tell the people over there three things:

“First, don’t tell anyone that you are an American.” (So what if representing America is the very essence of being a Peace Corps volunteer?)

“Yes, Mother.”

“Second, don’t tell anyone that you are Jewish.” (This, too, was a strange request, given that my parents had always raised me to be proud about my heritage.)

“And finally,” she said, still in a tone of utmost gravity, “don’t tell anyone that you’re white!”

Needless to say, I didn’t follow my mother’s instructions.

No, I never concealed my Jewishness in Muslim black Africa. But in the ensuing years during which I have re-



turned to do ethnographic research (I am a political science professor at a Boston university), neither have I made a show of my religion.

When, while chatting in the local language of Hausa, the subject of religion had come up, I invariably pointed out that I was not, as my neighbors had assumed, a devotee of “the one from Nazareth,” but rather a follower of the *Nabi Musa* (Prophet Moses), who gave us the *atora*. Still, for most villagers, it was all rather abstract theology.

Until Hanukka last year when I visited Hausaland accompanied by my 16-year-old daughter, Arielle.

**Father:** More than at any time during my visits to a distant Muslim village in the poorest country on earth, the issue of religion—my religion—has become prominent in conversation.

Is it because of the war in Iraq and the alleged conspiracy between Israel and America? Because of the global terrorism perpetrated by Al Qaeda and cohorts? No, it is simply because this time I was accompanied by my young lady of a daughter for whom observing our holidays, as we do at home, is essential.

**Daughter:** It was the fourth night of Hanukka when we arrived in the village. I brought the menorah, one of those flimsy Chabad ones. Hanukka is kind of a messy holiday because it leaves all that colored wax on whatever surface you place the menorah.

In America, you just scoop it all up and throw it in the garbage, but what are you supposed to do with it in Africa? Nothing here gets thrown away. I picked up some pieces of the wax and made a pile of it for the children. I hope they found some entertainment in it.

Some nights we had visitors while we lit the candles. Sometimes they talked while I was saying the prayers, which I found quite disrespectful—I don't make noise when *they* are praying. Once, we lit candles at the home of one of Dad's friends. As gifts to the women and children we gave some of the dozens of wooden dreidels we had brought along.

**Father:** Only in a third-world setting would the sacrificial nature of ritual candlelighting hit me so. In a community without electricity, where few people own flashlights and even fewer can afford batteries, burning candles

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merely as a memory device (remember, we are not supposed to *use* the light, only to look at it) verges on the extravagant.

In such a poverty stricken society, the notion of kids playing dreidel for *gelt*—even just pennies—is too much. Instead, making a loose cultural translation, I explain that, back home, children spin the tops for roasted peanuts.

**Daughter:** We also did Shabbat, of course. While we were packing for the trip, I asked Dad how many candles we'd need and he said enough for one Shabbat. I made a really bad joke and said—knowing there would be no electricity—“O.K., I'll bring two candles, and one extra in case there's a power outage.”

It turns out we actually spent two *Shabbatot* and so we only had three candles. I improvised with a makeshift Shabbat candle made of two yellow Hanukka ones melted together. It was better than nothing.

**Father:** The Islamic world as a whole is especially upset with Israel and America nowadays, and on this trip I am wondering as never before how these unprecedented displays of Jewish ritual will strike my Muslim friends and neighbors. For sure, most people in Hausaland are too preoccupied with day-to-day survival to care much about Middle Eastern politics. Their knowledge of and interest in Judaism remains Koran-based.

Word of our candlelighting spread through the village like fire; the deputy *imam* I interviewed the very next day (“People follow bin Laden on account of what Israel does,” he told me) had already heard about it.

*Sharia* (Islamic law) had also been adopted as the law of the land. Alcohol (including wine) is now not only irreligious, it is illegal. Celebrating Hanukka and Shabbat are not the simple matters they were back home. But with my daughter by my side, the pressure to observe is irresistible.

**Daughter:** Shabbat was a treat because that's when we had our little boxes of grape juice. It was our wine. Instead of halla, we used the matza we had brought. (Dad always packs matza as “emergency food” because, he says, it never goes bad and so what if it breaks.) We had salt. Everything was there.

We recited Kiddush from memory. The last night of Hanukka fell on our first Shabbat and I was really upset because the wind kept blowing out the candles. Kiddush and Hanukka were the only similar things my mother and brother would be doing at home and it made me homesick. I couldn't help crying.

**Father:** “You are greater than we,” Mallam Souleymane, an Islamic preacher friend crippled from childhood, said to me.

I asked for clarification, though I believed I knew what he meant. “What do you mean by ‘you’?” I asked.

“You *Jahuds*. For your origins go back further than others,” he replied. “Also, you are a people of trust.”

**Daughter:** One by one, I put the headphones of my Discman on the ears of the young boys who had come to visit and let them listen to my favorite CD's. They had never heard this kind of music before. Some of it was klezmer. Their faces lit up in wonder and they immediately began to dance.

In America, I always lie down and wait until I get sleepy before chanting the Shema. In Africa, though, sometimes I fall asleep before remembering to sing it. I feel slightly guilty.

**Father:** We brought dreidels to my Peace Corps town,

and I gave one to a school official. He painstakingly copied the Hebrew letters from dreidel to paper, making note of our explanation, in French, of what each letter stood for.

This young principal was an erudite man impressively familiar with the contours and key dates of Jewish history. Yet he had also heard some rather fabulous things about us.

**Daughter:** We were talking to the principal of the middle school, and it came up that we were Jewish. The principal shared with us some of the rumors that people had about Jews. They were new to me. Not mean, just very far-fetched.

Supposedly, we all have a special mirror (*miroir mystique*). Anyone who looks in it immediately possesses all knowledge and doesn't need to study anymore.

**Father:** Jews have "secret powers" that enable them to "succeed in everything they do," the principal said he has been told. In particular, we are thought to possess a magical mirror. Anything we decide to see will appear in the mirror and become real.

**Daughter:** The principal also said Jews are a very smart people. (For sure, there is truth in that.) Jews are "eternal scholars." (That's true too. I mean, we have suffered persecution for the last 2,000-plus years, so our brains have been our secret weapons for survival.)

**Father:** "There is something I want to ask of you," the prince of the region told me, "but I am afraid to."

"Don't be afraid," I replied. "You can ask me anything."

"I want you to make *salla*."

I was momentarily confused. *Salla* means prayer. What was so difficult about asking me to pray?

Then I realized the subtext—the prince meant that I should pray like he does. As a Muslim.

I had already been asked by Malam Haruna, a village friend with the honorific title of Alhaji (which means one who has performed the pilgrimage to Mecca), what my rabbi would think were I to convert to Islam. But this was different.

"My father raised me to pray in a certain way," I explained by way of polite decline. The prince knew that my father—who had visited me in this very kingdom when I first lived here during my Peace Corps days—had died long before. "When I use the same words that my father used in prayer," I went on, "I feel close to him."

The prince nodded.

"And were I to change the religion he gave me, I feel that I would be betraying him."

His Highness clucked in sympathy. Invoking one's ancestors is usually very effective.

**Daughter:** Our rabbi sent money to build latrines so that the village schoolchildren wouldn't have to go in the bush. But the kids are embarrassed to share stalls and prefer to do it out in nature.

So the money from Rabbi F. is instead being used to dig a well. For their drinking water, the kids go home during recreation and often don't return to school. This way, with a well, the kids can have a drink at school and remain for afternoon class.

**Father:** "Without bread, there is no Torah," it says in the Talmud. Here in Hausaland, I adapt the maxim: "Without water, there is no learning." How can children concentrate in class if they are thirsty and have nothing to drink?

“Why don’t they bring a water container from home?” you might ask. The answer is disarmingly simple: Plastic bottles are nonexistent. And even if they weren’t, who could afford to buy them?

**Daughter:** The principal had wanted the well completed for our arrival so that we could have an inauguration ceremony. But the well diggers haven’t finished. They are participating in the annual boxing and wrestling matches going on in the village.

**Father:** Post-9/11 sensitivities had inhibited my recording in correspondence to the village the source of the *tzedaka* [in Hausa: *sadaka*]. This is the second most Muslim country in all West Africa, after all, and was it not possible that an overly zealous government official might catch wind of the Jewish connection and misinterpret or distort the motives of the donation?

Face-to-face I would tell the principal, the chief, the *imam* and anyone else who cared to know that the money for the well was actually provided by my rabbi in America. Indeed, I would show them pictures of Rabbi F., of our synagogue, of its Torah and especially the scroll from Egypt (*Masar*, in Hausa).

Rabbi F. was quite satisfied with my plan. In fact, he said, it didn’t matter if his hand in the donation were known at all.

**Daughter:** At the well itself, Dad gave pictures of him and the rabbi standing in front of the *Aron Kodesh* [Holy Ark]. Dad pointed out the Ten Commandments, written in Hebrew, above the Ark. The school librarian asked about the the striped “scarves” Dad and the rabbi were wearing in the picture. “Scarves of holiness,” is how the librarian put it in French, after he heard Dad explain what a *talit* is.

**Father:** “I tell you all this just so that you know,” I said to the principal. “My rabbi does not seek any credit. In our religion, there are levels of *tzedaka*. The highest one is the charity given anonymously.”

“It is the same in Islam,” the principal replied. “The *imam* will announce to the congregation that the mosque needs a new prayer mat. By the next morning, a mat will be inside. But no one will know who put it there. ‘Anonymous gift.’” **H**

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