

## RABBI'S MESSAGE

### *The Real Meaning(s) of Hanukkah*

There are many good reasons to celebrate Hanukkah, and history is just one of them. The story is familiar: around 167 BCE, the Middle East was in control of the Greek/Assyrian Empire. Jews were under great pressure to abandon their faith and traditions in favor of joining the Greek culture and religion of Hellenism. The Holy Temple was desecrated by King Antiochus, who wanted all the people in his empire to worship him. A small group, led by the sons of Mattathias, Judah Maccabee and his brothers, led a revolt, and despite being fewer in number and artillery, were able to regain the Temple. The story continues with the battle leaving the Temple in ruins, needing restoration, including the need to replenish the missing oil to light the eternal lamp. The only oil left was enough for one day, but miraculously lasted eight days until more oil could be produced.

This is not a “Bible story,” as it is not found in the Torah or other books of the Hebrew Bible. It comes up in writings about 300 years later; two books called Maccabees are part of the Apocrypha, or those books that were not included in the most sacred texts. Customs related to Hanukkah, like lighting candles for eight nights, are listed much later, in the Talmud. Religiously, Hanukkah is a minor holiday. You can work on Hanukkah. It is clearly less important on the Jewish religious calendar than Rosh Hashana, Passover, Shavuot and even Shabbat.

I still see no reason to downplay much of what Hanukkah has become. Sure, it has become overdone in terms of commercialization. The concept of gift-giving has nothing to do with the Hanukkah story, and has become a way to share a “gift giving season” with our Christian neighbors. In some eras, it was important for Jews to emphasize “we’re not like them.” We lived in different neighborhoods, dressed differently, ate differently and socialized in different circles. In other eras, we wanted to say, “We’re JUST like them,” and there was a movement to change Sabbath worship to Sunday, discourage dietary laws and ritual garments and encourage all prayer to be in the language of the home country rather than in Hebrew. Today, we have more of a blend than the “all or nothing” approach that was important to our ancestors. So when it comes to Hanukkah, why not let ourselves (and our children) get excited about celebrating when the entire world around us is celebrating?

While we are celebrating, eating latkes, exchanging gifts and playing dreidel, the candle-lighting is still the primary focus. When you think about Hanukkah, what is the first image that comes into your mind? Certainly not a red-suited, white-bearded, chuckling sleigh driver; it’s probably a menorah. Light the lights! All the rest just adds to the fun.

Hanukkah is actually a very unique Jewish holiday, religiously. Most of our holidays occur in the middle of the lunar month, when the moon is at its fullest. We celebrate during the brightest times of the month. Hanukkah is at the very end of the very darkest month (Kislev) during the winter. Yet, it is a joyous celebration. It was once nicknamed “Sukkot in Kislev,” rivaling the holiday previously considered the greatest celebration, because Sukkot occurred during the brightest moon.

Hanukkah is about bringing light into the darkness. The candles, which have no purpose other than beauty, are meant to be seen. Tradition teaches that bringing light into the darkest places at the darkest times is the greatest of possible *mitzvot* (sacred obligations). Think about some of the other important lights in our tradition: *yahrtzeit* (memorial) candles, Shabbat and festival candles and the *ner tamid*, the eternal light above ark that holds the Torah. Light is a powerful and peaceful symbol.

As we blend the historic story of the Maccabees with the modern Hanukkah of gift-giving and dreidel playing, perhaps the most important concept is identity. The Hanukkah lights are meant to be displayed, so our neighbors can see that we are happy, proud and excited about our Jewish identity. We can share and celebrate and learn from each other...and shine that light, ever so brightly!

L’shalom,

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