

Bearing Chanukah Light in a Dark Time

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Imagine the lives of the rabbinic sages who created Judaism. I particularly think of those living in the Land of Israel following the Bar-Kochba Rebellion in the year 135. The Judean rebels, inspired by Rabbi Akiba, fought with valor. All the same, they were massacred. Their fervor was no match for Roman resolve and military might. In the wake of the slaughter, our people were faced with cruel persecution under the Emperor Hadrian. Studying and teaching Torah were forbidden, on penalty of death. And yet, they persisted.

In this atmosphere, our rabbis asked, “What is Chanukah?” This minor holiday is the only one not ordained in Hebrew Scripture, and the only rabbinically-ordained celebration lacking a major tractate of the Talmud. Perhaps the holiday had fallen in popularity, nearly ignored. After briefly recounting the Maccabean victory, the rabbis emphasize the miracle of the oil: “When the Greeks entered the Sanctuary[,] they defiled all the oils that were in the Sanctuary (by touching them.) And when the Hasmonean monarch overcame (them) and emerged victorious over them, they searched and found only one cruise of oil that was placed with the seal of the High Priest, (undisturbed by the Greeks.) And there was (sufficient oil) there to light the [Menorah] (for) only one day. A miracle occurred and they lit (the) [Menorah] from it eight days. The next year[,] (the Sages) instituted those days and made them holidays with (recitation of) [psalms of praise] and (special) thanksgiving (in prayers and blessings).¹

Many of you have heard me cast doubt on the historical accuracy of this particular account of the Chanukah story. Indeed, the miracle of the oil is not to be found in the Books of First and Second Maccabees, which were written shortly after the Maccabean revolt. The Talmud is centuries later.

Doubtless, the rabbis received the story of the miracle of the oil from those who came before them. They didn’t make it up, though perhaps they decided to attach it to Chanukah. What they did, more importantly, was to clarify their priorities, bringing light in a very dark time.

In the depths of winter, at the northern hemisphere’s winter solstice, the rabbis ordained light to dispel the darkness.

At a time when a Jewish military revolt led to unmitigated disaster, the rabbis found a miracle, not in the Maccabean victory, but in a wonder that could be attributed only to God, with no human agency.

On the same page of Talmud, the rabbis debate how to light the *Chanukiah*. The School of Shammai says that one should start with eight lights, reducing by one each night. His argument hints at the “real” reason Chanukah lasts eight days: The Books of Maccabees tell of a delayed observance of Sukkot, the eight-day holiday that the Maccabees had been unable to celebrate when they were at war. The School of Shammai points to a biblical passageⁱⁱ which specifies the number of bulls to be sacrificed each day of Sukkot: thirteen the first day, twelve the second, eleven the third, and so forth.

The School of Hillel takes a different position, beginning with one light on the first night, increasing each day of Chanukah, arguing: “One elevates in sanctity and does not downgrade.”ⁱⁱⁱ I don’t need to tell you who wins the debate. As Chanukah unfolds, we increase the light each day.

The rabbis do diminish something, however. They nearly ignore the Maccabean Revolt. They reject the notion that Chanukah is a delayed celebration of Sukkot. They dismiss any thought that redemption is to be found through human action. Lest anybody miss the point, they select a Haftarah for the Shabbat during Chanukah, including these immortal words: “Not by might nor by power, but by my spirits, says the Eternal God.”^{iv}

Neither Jewish history nor our religious teaching is at all consistent with this particular rabbinic thrust to de-emphasize our role as God’s partners. After all, God calls on Moses, Miriam, and Aaron to assist in freeing our ancestors from Egyptian bondage. Israelis often look to the Maccabees as inspiration and example of ancient Jewish military victory paralleling the War of Israeli Independence and the Six Day War.

Every morning, our prayer book reminds us to perform *gemilut chasadim*, acts of loving kindness. Yes, we are inspired in Covenant with God, but God chooses us to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to dispel the loneliness of the sick and homebound, to dance at weddings, to bury the dead, and to comfort the bereaved. God performs those deeds by making them *mitzvot*, religious obligations incumbent upon us.

Challenges aplenty have faced us this year. We could be forgiven if we often feel plunged into darkness. We now know that not all lights are holy: The

tiki torches of Charlottesville brought terror to the night, not illumination. Only Americans, which is to say human beings, can confront the hatred and bring light where others have brought darkness. Tens of thousands of Americans lost their lives to senseless, often preventable gun violence, often in horrific mass shootings, in 2017. Only Americans, which is to say human beings, can bring sanity to our gun laws and assure that they are enforced, reducing the epidemic of gun deaths. Extremist Islamists and the deranged thug who leads North Korea continued to terrorize the civilized world this year. Only the vigilant resolve of mighty nations can bring those threats to an end. In 2017, we learned, as if we did not know, that virtually all American women – and too many men, as well – have been victims of sexual harassment and violence. Only by refusing to let one more abuser prosper by his perfidy can all be safe. Even the Israeli government dimmed the light of Torah this year, giving in to blackmail by ultra-Orthodox politicians to deny the right of Jews to marry, to divorce, and to worship as they see fit in the Jewish State. Reform and Conservative Jews worldwide must continue to raise our voices in protest, supporting our movements in Israel and fighting alongside them for equal rights, for all to be free.

Yes, 2017 gave us a full plate. As we light the Chanukah candles, let us commit ourselves to doing our part to increase the light in America and around the world.

As we do, let us not forget the lesson the rabbis sought to impart: We are not alone. At our hours of greatest darkness – as Americans, as Jews, and as individual human beings – God is there. When our voices are drowned out, when our strength flags, when we doubt that we can make a difference, let us turn to the lights of Chanukah once again, not only during these eight days but throughout the year. Let us recall the message of these flames: God's power knows no limit. With God's help, let us increase the light, day by day, year by year. The light of justice. The light of human dignity. The light of faith.

Amen.

ⁱ Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 21b, *Sefaria* translation. Words and phrases in parentheses are from the *Sefaria* translation, where they appear in non-bold text, as opposed to the literal Talmud words, which are in bold. Words in brackets are my own emendations of the *Sefaria* translation.

ⁱⁱ Numbers 29:12-31.

ⁱⁱⁱ Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 21b, *Sefaria* translation.

^{iv} Zechariah 4:6