

December 2018

Chanukah --The Freedom to Be Different¹

What is the essential truth of Chanukah?

A miracle?

A military victory in a fight for independence?

The power of *Light*?

Or maybe something more subtle and even more powerful. Maybe it is something profoundly relevant to our time and our mindset as Jews.

First, let's recall the mitzvah of Chanukah:

Rambam's Laws of Hanukkah 3:3 and 4:5, 7 – Pirsum hanes 1 *Because of this, the sages of that generation ruled that the eight days beginning with the twenty-fifth of Kislev should be observed as days of rejoicing and praising the Lord. Lamps are lit in **the evening over the doors of the homes**, on each of the eight nights, so as to publicize the miracle.*

What exactly is that miracle?

Is this a story about Gd, or about humanity – about us – the Jewish people, and our commitment to the covenant of Israel?

Take a look at this photograph from 1931 in Berlin:

¹ Texts and



A Menorah in an apartment window overlooking Nazi Party Headquarters bedecked with its Nazi flag (1931). Kiel, Germany, in the house of Rabbi Akiva and Rachel Posner on Hanukkah, 1931. On back of the photograph Rachel wrote:

“Their flag seeks the death of Judah, but Judah will survive, and its light will overcome their flag.”

Here is what it means: Chanukah celebrates our right to different. It is an enduring and everlasting symbol of what it means to be a Jew.

We learn about Chanukah from the Apocryphal books of Maccabees I and II. While the rabbis of the Talmud had an agenda that prevented them from including these historical records from our biblical cannon, it was saved in the Apocrypha—an external work. The Apocrypha also included the book of Judith, a remarkable tale about a woman who helped to save the Jewish people when we were threatened by the Assyrian Greeks. Judith lured Holofernes, the opposing general, into her tent. After she lulled him to sleep with milk and cheese, she chopped off his head and ended the assault from his troops. Judith is customarily read on Chanukah – adding to the Maccabee’s stories

of clever leadership and bravery in defeating the empire that tried to outlaw our religion.

The Greek King, Antiochus IV, known as Epiphanes, ruled over our land from 176-163 BCE. Elias Bickerman, historian of Hellenist Empire and the Jews wrote:

“Under Antiochus Epiphanes the cult of Zeus Olympius took root in his dominions, being especially fostered by the king and replacing the traditional cult of Apollo, the divine guardian of the Seleucid dynasty. ...The novel character of Antiochus [was] ... to intensify the Hellenism of those that already existed.

At that time there appeared in the land of Israel a group of traitorous Jews who had no regard for the Law and who had a bad influence on many of our people. They said: “Let’s form a covenant with the Gentiles, for our refusal to form a covenant with them has brought us nothing but trouble.” This proposal appealed to many people, and some of them became so enthusiastic about it that they went to the king and received from him permission to follow Gentile customs. So they built a gymnasium in Jerusalem, according to Gentile custom, and removed the marks of circumcision, and abandoned the holy covenant.”

Later, Antiochus IV instituted what we might call “Totalitarian Hellenism in the Name of Universal Humanity.”² We learn of the decrees he issues in Maccabees, I:41:

“Antiochus .. issued a decree that all nations in his empire should abandon their own customs and become one people. ...

The king ... sent messengers with a decree to Jerusalem and all the towns of Judea, ordering the people to follow customs that were foreign to the country...

They were even ordered to defile the Temple and the holy things in it. They were commanded to build pagan altars, temples, and shrines, and to sacrifice pigs and other unclean animals there. They were forbidden to circumcise their sons and ...to make themselves ritually unclean in every way they could, so that they would forget the Law which the Lord had given through Moses and would disobey all its commands. The penalty for disobeying the king's decree was death.”

² Noam Zion, Shalom Hartman Institute

This is where the revolt of Mattathias and his sons, led by his son Judah, nicknamed “Maccabee,” began.

Then Mattathias ... said in a loud voice: “Even if all the peoples in the king’s dominions listen to him and forsake each of them the religion of their ancestors, I and my children and my siblings will live in accordance with the covenant of our ancestors. God forbid that we should abandon the Torah and the ordinances. We will not listen to the message of the king, nor depart from our religion to the right hand or to the left.”

When Mattathias finished speaking, a Jew went up before everyone’s eyes to offer the pagan sacrifice on the altar in Modiin as the king commanded. Mattathias saw him and was filled with zeal. Mattathias shook with emotion and could not contain his anger, and ran up and slaughtered him upon the altar...and tore down the altar. Thus he showed his zeal for the Torah, just as Pinchas [the zealous priest] did (Numbers 25). Then Mattathias cried out ..., “Let everybody who is zealous for the Torah and stands by the Covenant follow me.” And he and his sons fled to the mountains ... {They}... went round about, and pulled down the altars...⁴

Some say that Chanukah celebrates a war for independence. But that is not entirely true. While the Jews would have preferred to have their own government, Records show that even while they rebelled against Antiochus; they accepted his taxes. But “they would not accept his interference with their worship, their belief, their religion.... So this war was the first for the right of a people within a country to believe as they wish – so long as they followed the king’s law in worldly matters... This idea of *religious freedom* is followed in all free nations today. It was first given to the world by the Jews.”³

Antiochus tried to create a kingdom where all of his subjects followed his laws and practiced the same religion --- he was threatened by the idea or the practice of *difference*. The Jews could have been equal to all other subjects in his realm if they had acquiesced in the removal of their unique religious practices and beliefs. Jews would

³ ibid

have had rights – if we had been willing to forego our Judaism. From this we learn that **“the Jews fought, not for equality, but for the right to be different.”**⁴

My teacher, Rabbi David Hartman, of blessed memory, observed⁵,

"If your tradition is based on learning, interpretation, and disagreements among scholars... , you cannot escape the haunting uncertainty of knowing that alternative ways are religiously viable and authentic." (Heart, 150) "Although I live in a world where disagreement is widespread and acute, I do not admit to a lack of strong convictions."

"Become a religious person who can live with ambiguity, who can feel religious conviction and passion without the need for simplicity and absolute certainty. In this type of interpretive tradition, awareness of the validity of contrary positions enhances, rather than diminishes, the vitality and enthusiasm of religious commitment."

We fought for the *right to be different*. Even within our own Jewish people, we respect and honor that right. Our commitment to our people and to the Covenant our people entered so long ago is celebrated on this holiday. We rejoice in the *right to be different* with pride, placing our Chanukah lights, the *chanukiah* (Chanukah menorah) in our windows to publicize our celebration.

The chief rabbi of Palestine at the time of the establishment of the State of Israel, Rav Abraham Isaac Kook⁶, spoke to this theme:

"Everyone must know and understand that within burns a candle/lamp. There is no one's candle like his/her fellow's and no one lacks their own candle. Everyone must know and understand that it is their task to work to reveal the

⁴ ibid

⁵ David Hartman, A Heart of Many Rooms. Jewish Lights Publishing. 1999

⁶ Chanukah packet of Noam Zion, Shalom Hartman Institute

light of that candle in the public realm. And to ignite it until it is a great flame, and to illuminate the whole world!”

What is Chanukah celebrating? Light, **and the right to be different.**

Our friend Peter Yarrow said it best in the lyrics of his Chanukah song, “*Light One Candle*”

Light One Candle

by Peter Yarrow

Light one candle for the Maccabee children, Give thanks that their light didn't die.
Light one candle for the pain they endured when their right to exist was denied.
Light one candle for the terrible sacrifice justice and freedom demand.
Light one candle for the wisdom to know when the peacemaker's time is at hand.
Light one candle for strength that we need to never become our own foe.
Light one candle for those who are suffering the pain we learned so long ago.
Light one candle for all we believe in, let anger not tear us apart.
Light one candle to bind us together with peace as the song in our heart.
What is the memory that's valued so highly that we keep alive in that flame.
What's the commitment to those who have died when we cry out
“They've not died in vain.
We have come this far always believing that justice will somehow prevail.
This is the burden and this is the promise and this is why we will not fail.
Don't let the light go out.
It's lasted for so many years.
Don't let the light go out.
Let it shine through our love and our tears.

Do we still feel obligated to that commitment? Does the light still shine?

How shall we continue the work of Mattathias and his band of freedom fighters?