

“Lighting Up the World—As Jews”

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Just yesterday, a reporter from Fox News showed up at my office wanting to get a traditional rabbi’s take on the remarkable concurrence of Hanukkah and Christmas on the same day. Indeed the last time such a calendrical coincidence happened was in 1959 and the next time won’t be until 2024. To tell you the truth, I wasn’t quite sure what question she was asking me...she seemed to be searching for a mystical, cosmic connection. I feel I may have disappointed her in that regard. I did mumble off something about how wonderful it is to see large parts of society engaged in meaningful holiday celebrations at the same time, albeit observing very different reasons for the season. However, as we all know there is no parity between Christmas and Hanukkah. Christmas is akin to the high holidays, while Hanukkah, as well all know, has a much more limited status on our holiday barometer. While I was decrying the commercialization and materialism that has infected this celebration, it occurred to me that Hanukkah’s message is exceedingly powerful and as modern today as it was 20 centuries ago.

The sweet lessons that we learned in Hebrew school, though palpable to children hardly scratch the surface of this holiday’s complexity. While our sages wanted us to focus on the miraculous discovery of extra-long lasting oil, and the cleansing of God’s Temple, we know a great deal more about this holiday’s texture from a library of ancient texts called the apocrypha. Though these books are not canonized in our Bible, they remain extant because of their sacred status to the church. All four books of Maccabees, as well as the book of Judith are located in the apocrypha. It is from these texts that we get a fuller picture of this ancient conflict.

One could argue that although the overarching issue was the global spread of Hellenism—the Greek gestalt that celebrated the physical world, the glory of the body, a pantheon of gods that included the emperor, and the elimination of diversity within its borders—that the actual Hanukkah conflict was between three categories of Jews, and how they responded to the imposition of Hellenistic values in Judea.

The truth is that Hellenism wasn’t all bad. In fact we know from the Talmud’s record that initially at least, the Jewish community was fascinated by Greek culture. Such beauty did our Sages accord to the Greek language that they decreed that a Torah scroll could be written in Greek—That’s a stunning endorsement! The Jewish community was fascinated by the Greek promotion of philosophy, art, architecture, literature, and the sciences...all burgeoning interests among Jewish intelligencia as well. And the Greeks were captivated by the Jews as well. Never in their trail of conquest and dominion had they come across a monotheistic people, who argued that the Creator of the Universe actually cares about people, and how they conduct their lives. Never before had the Greeks encountered a community with such a strong social service network, a society based on complex legal traditions, and high rates of literacy. In fact the first major translation of the Hebrew Bible came about under the sponsorship of King Ptolemy II in

the third century BCE, who gathered 70 rabbis to translate the Hebrew Bible into Greek, known today as the Septuagint. Our rabbis were versed in the language and thought of the Greeks, and the Greeks were concomitantly interested in Jewish civilization. The exotic appeal of both societies for one another soon became a source of enmity. Jewish rejectionism of all-out assimilation was understood as rebellion against the state, and so the Maccabean revolt we all know and love.

What is so interesting is the multifarious responses among Jews to Hellenism. On one end of the spectrum dwelled the pietists...known as Chasidim. They are made famous in a story related in Second Maccabees where they refused to fight for their lives on Shabbat. Their passivity and wholesale reliance on miraculous intervention inspired the Maccabees, who were Jewish nationalists and religionists to be sure, but who also understood that if they acquiesced in their resistance, there would be no one left to keep Shabbat in a few short months. Today we are aware of the Shulchan Aruch's principled stand: *Pikuach nefesh dohe et ha'Shabbat*—The saving of life overrides Shabbat. The Maccabees made this principle famous. They of course refused to relinquish their tradition and faith, preserved and cultivated over many generations. They could not imagine a Jewish world without the intimacy and vitality of the Temple at its core. And while they may have been interested in certain Hellenistic ideas, they certainly were not about to forsake Judaism in favor of them. The third camp, was of course the Hellenistic Jews. This sector of society, primarily the upper crust, reminds me of the German Jewish immigrants of the late 19th and early 20th century in America. They looked with disdain at their brethren coming across the sea from Russia—bringing with them all their old world practices and perceptions. The German Jews felt obligated to release the Russians from the albatross of the past, and bring them fully into modern society, a transition sanitizing them of Jewish nuances, languages, or appearances. So too the Hellenistic Jews, who thought that Judaism was a quaint, primitive expression of old time beliefs, but one that had to yield to the progressive, advanced ideas of Athens. My friends, does this spectrum sound altogether different from each and every age when Jews have encountered new cultures, new ideas, and new lands?

The question I posed to our teenagers last week was, who would you have been? In this mix of emotions and allegiances, what camp would have attracted you? While most did not associate themselves with the pietists, an honest, enlightening discussion ensued about negotiating our lives between the pervasiveness of a larger culture while keeping alive and well our Jewish identities. This class was as illuminating as a chanukkah menorah.

It is fascinating to me that the Hanukkah story became popularized by the grass roots Jewish community. It was not legislated from heaven, indeed it is the only Jewish festival that is not in the Bible. The rabbis were existentially uncomfortable with a story couched in military might, and while other holidays enjoy a full treatment in their own Talmudic tractate, the rabbis buried Hanukkah deep within tractate Shabbat—in a discussion about candle lighting, wicks, and oils [you get the connection]. Nevertheless, this story was deeply inspiring to Jews throughout the ages—us included—who had to walk the tenuous line between acculturation and assimilation. Jews who wanted to

participate in the vibrancy and cosmopolitanism of the modern world while at the same time preserving their distinctiveness and inheritance. Hanukkah continues to challenge all those who believe that universalism and homogenization are the ideal forms of human existence...rather, proclaims this festival, that the strength, vibrancy, and creativity of a society is vouchsafed by how well it cultivates and protects pluralism.

You know that the mitzvah of Hanukkah is to place the menorah in a public place. Not only that, but the ideal time to light it is during rush hour! Indeed the rabbis instruct us to place it in a window facing the public thoroughfare—the *reshut ha'rambim*, and that the lamps should stay lit '*ad she'tichleh regel min ha'shuk:*' during the time when the majority of people are coming home from the market...today's equivalent of rush hour. And we do all of this *mishum pirsumei nisa*...for the purpose of publicizing the miracle. But what miracle are we publicizing...especially when most passersby are non-Jews? Sure it might be nice for them to know that we celebrate the ongoing light that allowed for Jews to rededicate our holy Temple. But I would like to suggest that the meaning of placing the menorah in public view, shining out of our homes, illuminating the dark night is that we Jews have a stake in this world. We care deeply about the societies and communities in which we live. We are dedicated to public welfare, and to the needs of our neighbors. We are not the dug in, isolationist Chasidim of ages past, who retired to the desert environs rather than participate in a society they deemed to decadent and self absorbed. We have a stake in our world that we will not give up. But—here's the kicker—we stake that claim proudly, unabashedly, and uniquely as Jews. There is a wonderful legend about Mordecai Kaplan, the great theologian and teacher who came to this country from Lithuania to America on July 4, 1889. As his ship sailed into New York Harbor, Kaplan was mesmerized by the show of fireworks in the sky above. As he stood on deck admiring this celebration, his mother summoned him to the deck below...It was time for mincha, the afternoon prayers. At that moment, Kaplan recalled, he had to find a way to say his prayers and see the fireworks. This is our opportunity today. We live in a time and place where Judaism is flourishing, perhaps more than ever before. The opportunities are limitless for ourselves and our children to cultivate our Jewish lives. And at the same time, there is a world of fireworks around us. An exciting, fascinating global culture that beckons our minds and interests as well. Like Kaplan, we must both say the prayers and see the fireworks. This world is made an infinitely better, richer place as we Jews continue to insist that our unique coalition of tradition and modernity are not only possible but imperative. And not only for us, but for the spectrum of faith communities and ethnic groups living peacefully together. Rabbi Yitz Greenberg writes: "Pessimists and assimilationists have more than once informed the Jews that there is no more oil left to burn. As long as Hanukkah is studied and remembered, Jews will not surrender to the night. The proper response, as Hanukkah teaches, is not to curse the darkness, but to light a candle." My friends, as you gather your loved ones around hanukkiyot tomorrow evening and next week, may you light beautiful candles publicizing the miracle of Jewish life in our world. May you declare uncompromisingly your existence as a Jew in the modern world. And may the holy lights of Hanukkah inspire us in the knowledge that only as proud, knowledgeable Jews can we continue to light up the world with the wisdom and values of Jewish tradition. Shabbat Shalom, *Chag Urim Sameach!*