

Hanukkah: Festival of Light and Hope
READING – December 18, 2011

Spark on a Park Bench by Chaim Drizin

The car was magnificent. As we stood back to admire our handiwork amidst the gently swirling snowflakes, I had to admit that it was the finest Menorah Car that I had ever seen.

The '78 Bonneville, with the huge wooden menorah on its roof, would definitely make people sit up and take notice—and that was our goal.

We planned to visit shopping malls and old age homes—anywhere that we could spread the joy and message of the festival of Hanukkah.

Seven or eight of us were crammed into the smallish vehicle; the trunk was filled with tin menorahs and colored candles which we hoped to distribute. As the more technologically advanced kids discussed the intricacies of the electronic apparatus that powered the flickering lights of our menorah (was it an alternator?), I tuned out and stared out at the blackness of the winter night outside.

We presently arrived at our targeted destination for the evening, a huge residential complex in Brooklyn, situated in close proximity to our yeshivah.

In the 1970s the Russian floodgates had opened, and Trump Village was the destination of choice for thousands of newly-arrived immigrants. Often elderly, these feisty Jews had survived decades of communist rule with their Jewish identity intact; yet they knew very little about the particulars of the Torah and mitzvot, and we were hoping to kindle a spark or two.

I saw him sitting there. An elderly man of about seventy or seventy-five years of age, seated on one of those park-like benches that New Yorkers know so well. The base was concrete and the seat was wood, painted green, facing a concrete chess table. He just sat there and watched the cars go by on that frigid night.

“Ah freilichen Hanukkah! Would you like to light the menorah?” I asked him, hoping that he would help me accomplish my personal goal of ten people that I had hoped to inspire that night.

“Please go away,” he replied in Yiddish. “I am not interested,” he said, perhaps a bit more softly.

I tried to change his mind. I cajoled, I explained the powerful story of Hanukkah, perhaps I even pleaded a bit, yet he was pretty firm in his decision. “No, thank you. Now please have a good night.”

Sensing an opportunity slipping away, yet not quite ready to throw in the towel completely, I took the little tin menorah, placed it on the concrete chess table, inserted four colorful candles into the little slots that always seem as they were designed for candles much slimmer than mine, lit them, and turned to the old man and said: “Here is the menorah. If you want, it is yours—if you don’t want it, then it is not.”

The man said nothing, and I walked away.

We continued our rounds of the massive complex, and we were extremely successful that night.

It was getting late and it was time to go home.

My mind kept on going back to the old Russian Jew sitting outside on that lonely park bench.

“Let’s drive past the place where we saw the old man.” I was curious. What had he done with the menorah? Did he throw it away, or perhaps had he just left it, a lonely menorah in a forlorn spot?

There are images that stick with you. Events that transpire that leave an indelible imprint on the psyche, that even thirty years later one can see them clearly.

This is one of them.

I see an old man sitting on a bench. His eyes filling up with tears, as one large tear courses down his left cheek.

The candles are burning low and he is staring at them. Staring and crying. Flame meets flame and a soul ignites.

SERMON: Hanukkah: Festival of Light and Hope
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Many Jews will tell you that Hanukkah is not one of the more significant holidays in the Jewish Calendar. It commemorates a historical event, the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem after it had been defiled by the Syrians, but in America the thing that has most boosted the popularity of Hanukkah is the fact that it falls close to Christmas, and many families have ramped up the festivities for their children, who might otherwise be envious of the kids who celebrate Christmas with an orgy of presents. In conjunction with lighting the candles in the menorah each of the eight nights of Hanukkah, modern Jewish children have eight nights of receiving presents, playing games, singing songs, and eating special treats.

However, even though Hanukkah is not as significant a religious holiday as Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Passover, or Shavu'ot, we should not forget what it represented to the Israelites of the past, and what it can represent to us today.

As described by several Jewish organizations, the story of Hanukkah begins in the reign of Alexander the Great. Alexander conquered Syria, Egypt and Palestine, but allowed the lands under his control to continue observing their own religions and retain a certain degree of autonomy.

More than a century later, a successor of Alexander, Antiochus IV, was in control of the region. He began to oppress the Jews severely, placing a Hellenistic priest in the Temple, prohibiting Jews from practicing their religion, and desecrating the Temple by offering sacrifices to idols, including the sacrifice of pigs (a non-kosher animal) on the Temple's altar. Worse yet, the Jews were required to offer sacrifice to the pagan gods along with the pagan citizens.

This sacrilege sparked a revolt. A band of guerilla fighters led by Mattathias the Hasmonean and his son Judah Maccabee staged a revolt, and despite being greatly outnumbered by Antiochus's troops, the revolution succeeded. Jerusalem was recaptured, Jewish rule was reestablished, and the Temple was cleansed and rededicated.

According to tradition, at the time of the rededication there was very little oil left that had not been defiled by the Greeks. Oil was needed for the menorah, or candelabrum, in the Temple, which was supposed to burn through the night every night. There was only enough oil to burn for one day, yet miraculously, it burned for eight days -- the time needed to prepare a fresh supply. An eight day festival was declared to commemorate this miracle. Hanukkah is celebrated by lighting eight candles, an additional candle for each night of the festival until all eight are lit.

As Dr. Adam Goldstein, from the Department of Family Medicine in the UNC School of Medicine says, the themes of Hanukkah are ones that resonate to both Jews and non-Jews worldwide: fighting for liberty, fighting for religious freedom, fighting for tolerance, and fighting for the preservation of culture. The belief in the miraculous and hope for a better world underly Hanukkah.

Unlike most Jewish holidays that occur predominantly inside the home or synagogue, Jews are commanded on Hanukkah to “light the menorah” publicly, in open spaces and windows, to show everyone that we must constantly move the world to a better place, join together to fight oppression of all people outwardly, or to resist the inward struggles that can enslave us daily, such as greed, jealousy, pride, or power.

Although these ideals are not limited to people with Jewish heritage, we can get a better idea of what the Temple rededication must have meant to those at the time by looking at the particularity of Temple worship. Bruce Chilton, an Episcopal Priest, has written a creative biography called *Rabbi Jesus* which, although it takes place a century and a half later than the retaking of the Temple, does provide a glimpse into the power of the Temple as a symbol to the Israelites. Chilton writes:

“The pilgrimage from Galilee to Jerusalem would have taken more than five days, even at a quick pace. [Jesus and his family passed through wilderness, ancient settlements, and river valleys.] By late afternoon [of that last day], they were worn out but had almost reached the end of their hundred-mile journey. After staying the night in Bethlehem, they started out for the Temple.

They were transfixed by the sight of the Temple looming above them. The stones of its enormous pedestal were gleaming white and beautifully fitted: the hill of Zion, as a result of Herod's building, had indeed become a mount, a brilliant rock which supplied the Temple above with more than thirty-five acres on which to unfold its splendor. From far below, they could see a thick pillar of smoke that rose heavenward from the first sacrifices of the morning. The sun reflected off the gilt that covered the enormous rectangle of the Sanctuary, the courtyards around it, and the mammoth porticos that surround the entire edifice. Sunlight gleaming off the gold facades made the Temple blaze like a second sun.

Everyone entering the Temple had to bathe by immersion. The interior courts at the center of the Great Court were reserved for Israelites who had purified themselves. Jesus and his family sought out a simple bathing pool. As they made their way into the enormous gate on the Temple's south side, they could see nothing at first. The windowless staircase, climbing up inside the pedestal four stories to the Great Court, was as dark as a cave; despite the huge torches flaming along the outside of the staircase, Jesus and his siblings must have been as afraid of the height as they were of the smoky dark pressing in on them, the driving crowd, the press of strangers that became terrifying in its intensity.

It must have been a profound moment for him: here was the praise of God as the supreme sovereign of all, publicly proclaimed in the most magnificent building he had ever seen. When they exited the stair, the sunlight on the golden edifice dazzled them. Every portico around the Great Court was overlaid with a shimmering intensity of gold and silver. Jesus saw within the court nearest the Sanctuary what he had been waiting for – the end of the pilgrimage, the holiest spot on earth, the timeless place.

Set near the courtyard's west wall was the white marble Sanctuary – whose inner recess was called the *qodesh qodashim*, the holy of holies. This was God's Throne on earth, the focal point of divine energy, the link between heaven and earth, between the transient and the immortal, between the creator and creation. And it was empty – an enclosed room that no one but the high priest ever entered (and then once a year on the Day of Atonement).

Before this Throne, in the open air of the first court, the altar fire raged, fed by huge logs. The altar itself was a rough structure of natural, uncut stones, some twenty-three feet high, surrounded by ramps covered with embers and ash and blood on which priests officiated. The animals bellowed and lowed on the way to slaughter. Dozens of priests slaughtered them, spattering their ornate garments with blood as they sliced throats, disemboweled carcasses, and divided meat into portions to be eaten by worshippers and priests or consigned to the flames. Flesh popped on the altar. Wine was poured into the fire, where it steamed. The explosive combustion of grain could be heard intermittently above the din of animals and the crowd's fervent prayers and ecstatic songs.

Jesus stared towards the Sanctuary and the smoke mounting above it. He had come to the place where God's presence was more palpable than anywhere else on earth. And he was part of it, in the very house of God."

This image of what it was like for a Jew to enter the Temple, take part in the sacrifices, and stand in the presence of God, gives a sense of the importance of the Temple and the national disaster it must have been to have it defiled in pagan worship. To have rededicated the Temple to the living God must have been, for those people, to have restored the vital and central symbol of their religion, but more than that, to have reclaimed and reestablished their connection with their God and themselves.

With this backdrop, we can more readily understand the importance of Hanukkah, during which Jews remember their historic military victory and the reclamation of their sacred site, God's very house, from the pollution of pagan occupation; and the miracle of the oil during the dedication. They are reconnected to their history, they are reminded of their relationship to the divine. Perhaps this is where we find our old, Russian Jew on his park bench – moved by the lighted menorah to a reconnection with his past and his people's history. Flame meets flame - - and a soul ignites.

As Unitarian Universalists, who draw from the wisdom of the world's religions, including Judaism, we can claim as well some broader lessons embedded in Hanukkah. What has separated us from ourselves, or from our Ground of Being?

Have we done anything (or has anyone done something to us) that makes us feel defiled or polluted? Are we struggling with the way we are treating others, a spouse or a parent perhaps? Are we struggling with addiction, or lack of willpower, or despair? Are we still carrying around past hurts and bitterness? Do we feel that we are somehow less than we can be, or less than we should be? Do we feel that we need to purify our hearts, or purify our minds?

For us, the historical rededication of the Temple can serve as both a model and a hope. No matter our past... no matter our present... no matter what we have done that we regret, or not done that we thought we should have, no matter what has been done to us -- we need not consider ourselves forever polluted. We can be purified. We can rededicate ourselves to ourselves... to the life that we want to live, to the person we want to be. There remains always hope for renewal, for reconnection. For the erasing of defilement, and the miracle of an entry into a better world, a better self.

I'm not saying it's easy. When we have long-standing habits of the heart or mind, we can feel entrenched with no way out. We may take two steps forward to a better day, and one step back. But what I am saying is that we have hope. We are not defined by the things we've done or the attitudes we've held. Life moves ever onward. With the promise of rededication and renewal, we always have open to us the pathway to a better heart, a better self, a better world. May it be so.