

Dec 5, By a Different Light, Rev. Linda Simmons

On the Sunday that falls on Chanukah each year, we ask the Margolis' to light the menorah. Greg often reminds us that the oil lasting 8 days is not the point and that most Rabbis agree probably did not happen. The point seems more subtle. But before I get there, let me add a bit to Greg's wonderful telling.

It was the Maccabees who were able to defeat the oppressing army in 167-166 BCE. The story starts with a familiar scenario from ancient times: the people of Israel are under foreign rule. They had been for hundreds of years, since the Babylonians forced them into exile and destroyed their first temple—the one that had been built by Solomon, the son of King David himself in 597 BCE. Later the Persians defeated the Babylonians, and being more open to religious diversity, they allowed the Jews to rebuild their temple. Then, along came Alexander the Great, a Greek, and then the Greek dynasty known as the Seleucids ruled over the Israelites. Under the Seleucid empire, for a time the people were still allowed to follow their own religions, as was common Greek practice. But then a Seleucid emperor came into power, Antiochus the 4th, who had different views. And he began to crack down on the Israelites, forcing them to follow Greek religious practices.

The story of the Maccabees takes place in the second century BCE, under Antiochus's oppression. Antiochus didn't burn down the temple but did something just as defiling, he built an altar to Zeus inside it, and ordered the people to make sacrifices to Zeus instead of the God of Israel. It was the custom of that part of the world that when one group defeated another, the god of the victors had also defeated the losing side's god. And it was normal for the defeated group to therefore convert to the religion of the winners.

With the people of Israel, it was different. When their temple was destroyed and they were exiled from Babylon, they made the incredible change from being a location-based faith, to being a faith that is practiced in people's homes and hearts. A faith that goes with the people. It would have been impossible for Antiochus to truly stamp out the religion of the Israelites. It was not as easy as banning public practices or ruining a temple space.

Judas Maccabee and his brothers, with a small band of fighters, defeated the mighty armies of Antiochus IV Epiphanies, the Syrian Greek king of the Seleucid empire who had conquered Jerusalem during the second century BCE.

They entered that holy place that had been ransacked by their oppressors and prepared to rededicate it to the worship of their God. The word Chanukah is derived from the Jewish word for dedication. They righted the menorah and found a vial of oil with which to light the sacred lamp – a vial that would last only one night and then the miracle: the oil went on to burn for eight days instead of one.¹

¹ <https://www.usnh.org/the-eight-day-mystery/>

Rabbi Rachael Barenblatt, who calls herself the Velveteen Rabbi, and who wrote the poem that John read, also writes that Judaism is multivocal, there are many voices encouraged to contribute, many debates and the same is true for the interpretation of what Chanukah mean. Multivocal is a good description of our board meetings I would say!

Rabbi Steve Greenburg says that for American Jews Chanukah represents religious freedom, for traditional Jews its often about a fight against assimilation, for Hassidic Jews who focus more on mysticism, it's more about seeking one's inner light & that small burning candle within.²

When I consider Chunukah it brings up for me the question of what is a miracle and what is mundane. The miracle of the oil is a pretty modest oil compared to the 10 plagues, the parting of the Red Sea...now those are some miracles. The miracle of the oil feels like kind of like card trick. It doesn't really go against nature.

Rabbi Barenblatt says that perhaps the lasting of the oil was like those trick birthday candles that refuse to go out, something lasting longer than it should. Chanukah is a human sized miracle, one that we can almost reenact, lighting candles day by day as we move through the darkest part of the year. She also points out the Chanukah miracle required humans unlike the parting of the Red Sea; that was all god.

But the leap of faith it took to light that menorah and to keep it burning required courage, belief that we can keep a light alive if we give watch, if we keep at it, if we stay awake.

Martin Buber puts it this way: What are miracles, but awe inspiring natural events recorded by extremely enthusiastic participants?³

Rabbi Mark Gellman writes about a great legend that can be found in the Talmud. It's a legend that says that some of the people that walked through the red sea in the exodus from Egypt never saw the miracle of the parting of the Red Sea because they never looked up. They just kept looking down, where all they saw was mud.

As Gellman writes, is it not possible that we humans were put here on planet earth that we might look up, that we humans were put here to look up and around for the miraculous so that all of our vistas might not be mud.⁴

Chanukah asks us to be open to awe. I want to be one of Buber's extremely enthusiastic participants. I want to look at the lasting of the Chanukah oil and see not a good card trick or magic birthday candles. I want to see awe inspiring faith and hope of a people who

² https://ajws.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/cc_chanukah_5774.pdf

³ <https://www.latimes.com/socal/daily-pilot/news/opinion/tn-dpt-0205-godsquad-20110204-story.html>

⁴ https://www.kenoshanews.com/life/the-god-squad-by-looking-up-youll-see-angels/article_e684d975-fb1c-5e02-aed5-bd47cb755750.html

resisted having their spirits crushed. I want to be one of those people that looks at the sunset and imagines the miraculous.

What kind of awe have you lost in this year and a half or more of political travesties and covid upticks? I have lost some of the awe I feel when I wake up. I used to wake up and meditate and watch the trees moving in the wind and thank the mystery, whatever mystery has improbably brought me to this time and this place and to all of you, for this day and ask that I be a better servant of justice, kindness and care. These days, I look out the window and want to turn back over and sleep for more hours, to keep dreaming rather than face all the complexities of being human in this time.

I considered the other day that there are 7.9 billion people on this earth and that for the time humans have been here, 107 billion people have lived on this planet before this moment. And then when we consider what it took for all of those people who met and made babies to meet in exactly the way they did, without one single, slight change, to make each of us here right now, then I wonder, is it too much to say that we are not only part of this time but that we are this time, that we and this time happened exactly as they were meant to, that we are all here right now because there was no other iteration possible and that we belong here. Even miraculously so?

I think this is a kind of parting of the red sea in that every time, every day is born from the time and days before, exactly, and that for another day to occur, we need one another's courage and strength and fear and worries and dreams and willingness to keep showing up, not as downtrodden people, but as people who can risk looking up. Make no mistake, looking up requires all of us. Looking up in these times means being willing to see the miracle and the monsters, the hope and the fear (what if that sea crashes back down while we are crossing), the beauty and the reflection of our faces in the sea around us that show us battered and beautiful.

If we know that we are here right this minute because nothing could have stopped it from being so once it was a possibility, then we have to know that it is only in looking up that we can create a next possibility that holds beauty and hope and love. Because if we miss the miracle of our beating heart, of our breath, of our footsteps touching the earth, our earth, then we will miss what we are capable of when we know that when we open our minds and hearts wider than these times tell us is safe to open them, when we imagine what else might be, we take a step in that direction, we move toward the wall of water that keeps us from what we need to birth next, and if we keep moving, maybe that wall of sea will part, no way made into a way.

We keep being so that the next beings might know that their time here is only possible because each and every one of us dared to stay awake, to stay present, to walk toward the impossible and imagine a way forward.

Stay the course my friends. Look up. So much yet awaits us!

Amen.