

The Menorah Shines Light on the Light within Us

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Light and re-dedication are the two Hanukkah themes I want to explore with you today. And I'll be mixing in a bit about miracles as well. But first, let's refresh our memories about Hanukkah's historic origins and why it's celebrated. You got a bit of a taste from the story I read to the children

We get the Hanukkah story from the two Books of the Maccabees, neither of which made it into the Jewish canon, or collection of writings that includes the Torah, the Jewish Bible, the Prophets and the Writings such as Kings and Chronicles. So unlike most other Jewish holidays, Hanukkah is not a commanded holiday in the Torah. Yet the Rabbis determined that it should be celebrated every year.

Historically, the time period we're talking about is the 170s Before the Common Era. The area we call Israel had fallen under Greco-Syrian rule when the Egyptians lost a war to the Greeks. This is within the period of the expansion of the Greek Empire begun around 250 BCE. With that territorial expansion came a cultural expansion called pan Hellenism.

By 174 BCE, Antiochus IV ruled the Syrian or northern Middle Eastern part of the Greek Empire. In order to spread pan Hellenism, non Greeks were required to learn the Greek language. While the Jews weren't required to give up their religion, they were forbidden three elements of their religion that would, if they did indeed give them up, cause the disappearance of Judaism. First, they were prohibited to celebrate the new moon, and since their religious calendar depended on this observance, they would

literally lose track of Jewish time. Second, they were forbidden to circumcise their male children. As circumcision is the way Jewish males are brought into the covenant with God, this would break that covenant. Third, they were prohibited from observing the Shabbat, the weekly rest from work, from doing and making, in order to celebrate God. Additionally, Jews were forbidden to observe their dietary laws and their sacred writings were burned. They were heavily taxed and their chosen high priest was removed from the Temple and replaced with one who would do Antiochus's bidding. And Antiochus desecrated the Temple, roasting pigs on its altar, as well as massacring Jews in Jerusalem.

There was disagreement within Israel about how to respond. Some suggested going along with Antiochus's demands to maintain their safety. Others formed legions to fight back. One such legion was led by the Maccabees, a clan of the Priestly class. They were the ones who successfully re-captured and re-dedicated the Temple on the 25th of the Hebrew month of Kislev, which this year corresponded to last Wednesday, November 27. The word Hanukkah actually means "re-dedication."

Now here comes the part you may remember: After cleaning up the Temple, they found one cruse or vial of holy oil with which to light the eternal light that burnt in the Temple and burns in synagogues to this day (usually with electricity). The holy oil was also used to light the menorah, which is a 7-pronged candelabra, different from this hanukkiah with its 9 branches, which is used only for Hanukkah. This one cruse of oil was only meant to keep the eternal light lit for one day, but it would take seven more days until more oil could be obtained. Many teach that the miracle of Hanukkah is that the oil lasted the full eight days when it should only have lasted for one day. Some teach that the miracle is that the Jews re-dedicating the Temple that Kislev 25 in 174 BCE used that oil even though they knew it should only last one day yet they had the faith that it would somehow be enough until they could get more oil. Others teach that

the miracle was the victory of the small, Jewish, Maccabean army over the powerful army of Antiochus.

I've been studying some texts written by Hassidic rabbis in the 18th and 19th centuries on Hanukkah, and I have discovered in these texts other miracles. The *S'fat Emet*, which is actually the title of the most famous book by Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter who lived in Poland in the late 19th and early 20th century, teaches us that soul of a person is a candle of God. With that soul-candle, God searches for God's home in the holy Temple, which of course, no longer exists. So God searches for that holiness in each person. But that holiness in each of us gets hidden or dimmed by our misdeeds, the things we do that aren't very nice or very kind, our failure to live up to our potential, our flaws and our blindness to our flaws. The *S'fat Emet* teaches us to search our hearts and our souls for that pure light.

Now Hanukkah falls at the darkest time of year. There is a story that when the first person, Adam, saw that the days were getting darker and darker, he worried that the world would just become totally dark, and that it was because of his sins. But then the days began to lengthen again. From this, the rabbis suggest that even though the Hanukkah story and holiday were not in the Torah, it was, nevertheless prophesied in the Torah.

Now the *S'fat Emet* noticed that within the word Hanukkah are the letters chaf and hey, and these letters form the word Coh, which is a Hebrew word for revelation. He reminds us that our soul-lights can become hidden, as I mentioned earlier, through our misdeeds, our lack of living up to our potential, and the wrongs we do to others as human beings are wont to do. The Hebrew word for miracle is "nays" and this word contains two of the letters for the Hebrew word nister or hiddenness. The *S'fat Emet* teaches us that when we light the Hanukkah candles, we are re-revealing our soul-lights—the goodness, righteousness and holiness with which God endowed our souls

when we were conceived -- to God and to ourselves. We rekindle our inner light in order to shed light on this darkened world. Lest you be concerned that I am suggesting that anyone here needs a complete soul makeover, set your mind to rest. For perhaps you have found as I have that a sincere smile goes a long way to lighting up the world. Perhaps, too, though, there are broader more expansive ways you can re-dedicate yourself and re-illuminate your soul light. Perhaps it's by repairing a breach in a relationship. Perhaps it's by doing the volunteer work you've been wanting to do. Perhaps it's by doing something you haven't yet considered.