

The Meaning Of The Miracle Of Chanukah

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Chanukah, 1979. It was my sophomore year at Haverford College. My "home" that year was a cramped room in an old, gothic dorm at Bryn Mawr College, where I was living as part of the dorm exchange with Haverford. The hall was mostly Bryn Mawr freshman women. Three of them were Jewish -- and away from home for the first time during this holiday. It was finals week, and we were all pretty tense.

I really appreciated my home congregation that year. Just as we now do at Temple Shalom, they had taken it upon themselves to send menorahs (the special Chanukah candelabra) to all the college students from the congregation. I sure hadn't thought ahead to bring one of my own. And neither had anyone else.

I took down my new menorah and invited everyone who wanted to come into my room, and we lit the candles and said the blessings and sang, and stood looking at the candles in the window, the burning flame against the dark, rainy night. Then, quietly, we took each others' hands, few and lonely, feeling that we were standing there against something, but also affirming something larger than ourselves, in ways we didn't know how to express.

Chanukah, 2015, coming soon to a home and synagogue near you. In the wake of terror and fright, conflict and confusion, still we turn to our collective recollection of celebration. For eight nights there are candles to light, and words to say. For eight nights Jews around the world will say a blessing meant to prod our memory and stir

our historic consciousness to recall the triumph and glory of an age gone by.

"Blessed are you, Adonai our God, sheasah nisim l'avoteinu, bayamim hahem bazman hazeh -- who performed nisim, miracles for our ancestors at this season, in their days."

And one more time the story is told: Brave Judah and his brothers beat the nasty Greeks, burst into the Temple, dump the statue of Zeus that the evil king had made them put there, clean out the remnants of the pigs that had been sacrificed just to make them mad. And they begin the *chanukah*, the rededication of the Temple.

The *Ner Tamid*, the eternal light has gone out -- so they look for pure, extra-virgin olive oil to light it again... and they find only *one* container. Enough for *one* day's light. They light it anyway and... a miracle... it lasts for eight days!

It's a wonderful story. Children love it. There's only one problem. Shhh... don't tell. But it probably didn't happen that way at all.

The *first* time that the story of a single container of oil lasting eight days appears is in the Talmud, *four hundred years* after the events themselves. There are sources that are contemporary with the events of the Maccabean revolt. They are called the First and Second Books of Maccabees. But these sources mention only the political intrigue, and the stories of guerilla warfare and military genius. They describe the Temple being cleaned -- but nothing about this oil and light stuff!

And yet, every Chanukah we thank God for the miracle of the season. Are we merely kidding ourselves? Did we just invent the miracle story later? What *was* the miracle that took place "in their days," so long ago? **The miracle was this: they survived. Survived for us to be able to call them "our ancestors."**

This is a miracle, you ask? The parting of the Red Sea -- now *that* was a miracle! The sun standing still in the sky? That's the stuff that miracles are made of. But *survival*? That's the most basic human instinct. Granted, Jews have survived for a long time. It *is* a great accomplishment. But we have had *many* trying times in our history. Why single out this one, and call it a miracle?

It's not just that we survived a crisis. That could have been by chance. But it was more than that. Think about it! Of all the ancient peoples that confronted Greek civilization... so many, so many...we alone lived to tell the tale. We are the only ones! The Edomites, gone; the Phoenicians, history; the ancient Egyptians, a pale memory in the sand dunes of a new nation.

In that far distant time, not just a chance survival took place. At this season so long ago, our Jewish ancestors developed a *strategy* for survival that worked and continued to work throughout our history. And that strategy remains relevant -- even urgent -- today.

Once upon a time, Greek culture was the rule and the rage in the entire known world. It was sophisticated. It was attractive. It had the best in arts and information programming, it excelled in theater and in

music. And of course, it had an absolute monopoly on professional sports. They had Olympics. There were travel and trade opportunities. Big business flourished. There was even an air of cosmopolitan tolerance, to an extent. And to go anywhere that was "in," to do anything or be all that you could be... all that was required... was one simple ticket: the Greek language. Assuming you had enough drachmas to afford it all.

And in world that was actually willing to accept them, many Jews started saying to themselves: "Well, we're not really all *that* different. It's true, we circumcise our baby boys, so the Greeks think that we look funny when we play nude in their athletic games. But we don't really need that ceremony, do we? And besides, we've heard that there are doctors down in Jaffa who can *undo* or reverse our own circumcisions. We're not quite sure how its done, but it might be worth it if it made us fit in better.

"Oh, yeah, and one other thing: we believe in one God, and they believe in many. But they have a chief god, don't they, called Zeus? Well, we could sort of, like, pray to one god at a *time* couldn't we? Anyway, we want tickets to their games, and good seats, and they pray in their way before the game starts, so we'll just have to join in. We wouldn't want to be rude, would we?"

At first, the pro-Greek sentiment among us was overwhelming, especially among the more secular, urban Jewish aristocracy. They taught their children Greek earlier than Hebrew... and they build a gymnasium in Jerusalem -- a place of sport and study and service that was much less innocuous than a YMCA -- for in Greek culture the gymnasium really did have religious overtones. It really was the G.C.C.

Their zeal for Greek culture continued... until they met protests from more traditionally minded religious Jews. So the assimilators turned to Damascus, to the governors nominally ruling their land at the time. They invited the Syrian Greeks in to Jerusalem to help them put down the protests of their fellow Jews. But the Syrian-Greeks, under King Antiochus Epiphanes IV, went even *further* than the pro-Greek Jews wanted them to go. For Antiochus officially *outlawed* Judaism, and put up statues to both Zeus and himself in the Temple.

With the Temple defiled, loyal Jews would not go there even had they been allowed to do so. With actual idols staring them in the face, the Temple was effectively closed down. Holiday after holiday went unobserved. Especially painful to miss, for the farmers in the countryside, was Sukkot. If you were an ancient Israelite farmer, Sukkot was a big deal holiday. It was the eight-day celebration of the harvest, not only in private huts but also at the Temple, and at that time the sacrifices and thanks that we offered to God for last years' harvest... were thought to be the only thing that would guarantee God's good graces... for a bountiful harvest the following year. To miss Sukkot was an affront to God *and an agricultural gamble*.

The revolt began not in the city, but in the country, in the small village of Modi'in. Here begins the story of the Maccabees, of Mattathias, who in anger slays a Jew he sees bowing down to an idol; of his sons, including Judah, who organizes the people into an army and leads them to recapture the Temple. And the first thing these farmer-soldiers from Modi'in did... when they recaptured the Temple and had straightened up a bit... *the very first thing...* was to celebrate Sukkot. Even though they

were a few months late. It was the Hebrew month of Kislev, not Tishrei... it was December, not October. But there they were, in the Temple, and they were farmers... so they celebrated Sukkot. And Sukkot... *is an eight-day long holiday*.

There were more battles, and Judah died. His brothers, one by one, led and ruled in his place, and eventually the Maccabees secured a measure of independence and a moment of peace, and they made themselves into kings. They had overcome the tyranny of Greek rule.

But the story goes on, and the next step is vital -- as important a part in the survival of Judaism as was the military victory. For at that time, secure in their independence, Jews began imitating the Greeks *again*. And this time, *the imitation did not threaten, but rather ensured our survival*.

The Maccabees themselves soon took on Greek style names. And in the years following their victory, when they *were* able to celebrate Sukkot on the *right* date... they had *another* eight-day holiday in Kislev, in December... to celebrate the anniversary of their victory. The very notion of celebrating a military victory as a religious holiday was a *Greek* idea: what Jew had ever heard of having a holiday that wasn't commanded in the Torah? At a deeper level, ideas of Greek origin crept into our thinking -- ideas like life after death and the notion of a "soul." These ideas later became central to our tradition.

If the Maccabees themselves, the leaders in the war against oppression, stalwarts in the fight for Judaism... if they themselves so soon succumbed to Greek styles and influence... how were they any different from the assimilationists that had come before them?

The difference was this. The Maccabees, although eventually open to the world around them, were Jews first. And by being Jews who were *selective* in their openness they *guaranteed* rather than threatened Jewish survival. Their predecessors would have taken *anything*, would have substituted Zeus for God and trophies for circumcision, the ancient mark of the covenant of our people. In the end they would be as the Amorites and the Edomites, as every other ancient people who, in swallowing Greek culture whole wound up digesting themselves. With total assimilation, we would have vanished as a separate people.

But we would have equally well been a footnote of history had our answer to the ancient Greeks been one of total isolation. For Greek culture had appeal -- and that appeal *had* to be addressed if Judaism was to remain vibrant and relevant. The Egyptian culture cut itself off from Greek thought, remained totally purist... and perished when all of its young people flocked to mystery cults and eventually abandoned the teachings of their ancestors all at once.

Twin perils loomed: *assimilation on the one hand*, the pursuit of every fleeting fad and fashion until any rooted sense of who you are is gone. *Isolation on the other hand*, a rigidity and resistance to change that cannot be maintained indefinitely. The Maccabees hewed a path on the narrow road of survival, with oblivion being the abyss that lay on either side.

This has become our Jewish model for survival: maintaining our identity, but not closing ourselves off from the outside world. Just as the Maccabees did not worship Greek gods yet were open to Greek culture, so this balance has been the secret of our survival in all of the different places where we have lived.

Chanukah is a holiday about Jewish survival, and about the miracle that that survival represents. It is a holiday whose very message cries out that it is **okay** to be different, to be proud of being different -- even as we admire and learn from our neighbors.

But now even our own holiday, our own celebration of survival and distinction is being threatened with mixture and dilution as once again we see and feel the powerful pull of an attractive majority culture.

The best example of a stirring together of different symbols until each and every one of them is emptied of its context and its content, came one year in the Taylor Gift Catalog. "To welcome both holidays," the ad said, "what could be more perfect? Musical Santa plays Hava Nagilah!"

Please! Is *nothing* sacred? Christmas trees themselves are beautiful! I even go out of my way to admire them... on the *private property* of my Christian neighbors.

We do borrow from the world around us. Chanukah itself has become a gift-giving holiday only under the influence of Christmas. We borrow, but we cannot completely blend, if we claim to be celebrating the *message* and *meaning* as well as the trimming and trappings of the Festival of Lights. We can most aptly celebrate Chanukah -- by continuing to be different, *by observing our distinct customs*. By being an articulate, comfortable, confident minority, we testify to the true message of *our* holiday of this season, the message of religious freedom.

The celebration thus contains the fulfillment of its own purpose: Chanukah is the story of how we stayed Jewish. We live it anew whenever, during Chanukah, we celebrate the holiday as Jews.

We will stand soon once again facing the flames that, across the centuries, have not gone out. From dorm rooms to family living rooms to the sanctuaries of our synagogues, wherever the menorah glows, the light of Jewish life shines. More than any presents given, this celebration is a gift -- a gift that both tells us about and allows us to express the story of our survival.

It is an ongoing miracle... and a story with no end...as we remain living, and growing, and after all of these centuries... still Jewish. Still Jewish.