

Hanukkah: *The Holiday We All Need Right Now*

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On a sweltering day in July of 1995, Sari and I were Rome for a few days on our way to Israel. We toured the Jewish Ghetto, the Great Synagogue, the Vatican. I can almost taste the wonderful gelatos that cooled us off as we sat beneath the iconic fountains in Roman piazzas. But what I remember more vividly even than the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel is staring up at the southern panel of the Arch of Titus. The details are so distinctive, it's almost as if you are looking at a photograph...a snapshot of a historical moment. The great Roman general gallops into the city surrounded by his victorious army. Roman soldiers carry on their shoulders the implements of the demolished *Beit Ha'Mikdash*. The Emperor Domitian built the 50 foot arch in the year 81 CE, after his brother Titus's death to venerate him and to celebrate his victory and their father Vespasian's over the Jewish Rebellion in Jerusalem. The Arch of Titus sits on the Via Sacra, the ancient road that led from the outskirts of the city right into the Roman Forum, the city center. Triumphant armies would march along this road to the adulation of crowds who would gather to welcome them and celebrate their victories. Some of the images on the arch are not so clear. But others are absolutely unmistakable. The most unmistakable is the seven branched menorah being carried on the shoulders of Roman legionaries; that golden candelabra being among the most prized spoils of the war against the Jews. I remember being transfixed by that image. Standing there *schvitzing* on a Roman summer day, I was utterly amazed by what I was looking at. Yes it was sad to see this memorial to Jewish defeat and plunder. But it was also exhilarating to see actual proof that what we read about the Temple and its sacred vessels is real; historically verified; corroborated by a source other than the Bible!

I read somewhere that some Jewish holidays are "lucky" while others are not so lucky. Shabbat is not so lucky because only a handful of years after the mitzvah to keep Shabbat was given to the Jewish people, some were already breaking it. Hanukkah, it is said, is a lucky holiday, because 2 millennia later, most Jews still loyally observe Hanukkah!

On second thought though, is Hanukkah really all that "lucky?" There is a real irony to the Hanukkah story. What did the Maccabees fight for and ultimately achieve with such unlikely success? They fought against Greek culture being imposed upon them. They fought to preserve Jewish life, Jewish practice, Jewish uniqueness from the crush of Hellenism. They weren't fighting for land or treasure...they were fighting for the soul of Judaism! And they won! *Masarta...zeidim b'yad oskei Toratecha*: "You, God...delivered the arrogant into the hands of those who were faithful to Your Torah," we say in the *Al Ha'Nisim* prayer. But here's the irony...The successors of the Maccabees, the *Hashmonaim*, the Hasmoneans themselves became Hellenized! Just listen to some of their names: John Hyrcanus, Aristobulus, Alexander Janneus, Herod, Agrippa... None of these names are on the list of most popular Jewish baby names for 2020! But it goes much further...The Hasmoneans embraced the decadence, the physicality, the excesses, the materialism of Hellenistic culture. It was evidenced in their building projects, their use of Hellenistic symbols and language, their interest in secular culture over spirituality and Torah study. The Hasmoneans combined the office of King and High Priest, in open defiance of the Torah not to mention just basic *seichel*—it's never good to combine religion and state—and when they heard that a group of teachers known as "rabbis" were opposed to their political maneuvering, they had them killed! Before long, the Hasmoneans invited Rome to be the

protector of Judea, making way for the second and final siege on the Temple, in the year 70 CE. To make a long story short, in less than a century, the Hasmoneans looked an awful lot like the Hellenists that their Maccabean ancestors so valiantly opposed!

Some rabbis attempted to get rid of Hanukkah altogether. The Second Temple was destroyed, and much of what the Maccabees accomplished was undone. The rabbis prevented the books of Maccabees from becoming part of the Jewish Bible. But we Jews don't let go of our holidays so easily. It became clear that while buildings could be burnt to the ground, and people could be exiled against their will, the one thing that our enemies have consistently found impossible to destroy was hope. I think the power of hope goes all the way back to the story of Joseph in our *parasha* today. Did you notice that no matter what happened to Joseph, the guy never complained, you never hear one *kvetch*...he never loses hope! Thrown into a pit by his brothers, *doesn't complain*. Sold to a caravan of Ishmaelites, *doesn't complain*. All alone in Egypt, *doesn't complain*. Unjustly imprisoned, *doesn't complain*, in fact the Torah says: *vayehi sham be'veit ha'sohar, vayehi Hashem et Yosef*, the entire time that Joseph was in prison, God was with him. Not only didn't Joseph complain, he didn't lose faith and he didn't lose hope.

So how did the rabbis amplify the message of hope on this holiday? Well, by emphasizing the story of the oil and the fire that could not be extinguished. Each night of Hanukkah the light increases by another lamp, and more darkness is illuminated. The rabbis couldn't completely displace the Maccabees and the Hasmoneans, but they could refocus the story on what would become a much longer lasting victory than anything won on a battlefield. The victory of hope and faith no matter who or what came our way. Listen to the words of the great Rabbi Jonathan Sacks who so tragically left this world just five weeks ago. He said:

"Something in the human spirit survives even the worst of tragedies, allowing us to rebuild shattered lives, broken institutions, and injured nations. That to me is the Jewish story. Jews survived all the defeats, expulsions, persecutions and pogroms, even the Holocaust itself, because they never gave up the faith that one day they would be free to live as Jews without fear."

Could there be a more relevant, more poignant, more significant message than that right now? Hanukkah reminds us of exactly the kind of hope we need. The same kind of hope that lifted Joseph out of the depths is what lifts us up today. The same kind of hope that inspired our ancestors to kindle light even when there was so much darkness and dismay is what mobilizes us right now. The hope that has burned in the hearts of hundreds of generations of Jews is inside of each and every one of us at this moment. The real story of Hanukkah is the victory of hope over despair, faith over fear. In the year 5781 when there is so much despair and plenty of reasons to fear, Hanukkah is perhaps the most important, the most necessary holiday of all. As the words of the traditional Hanukkah song go, *Haneirot hallalu kodesh hen*, these lights of Hanukkah are holy lights! I think what makes them so holy is that Jews insist upon kindling them every year, in good times and challenging times, when we are free and when are not so free, because no matter what the message of hope that they stand for and that burns brightly in the Jewish soul will never be extinguished!

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Hanukkah!