

“Without Faith We are But Stained Glass Windows in the Dark”

Shabbat Hanukkah/Rosh Hodesh Tevet

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Rabbi Adam J. Raskin, Congregation Har Shalom

The Shulchan Aruch, the expansive 16th Century Code of Jewish Law written by Rabbi Yosef Caro begins the section about Hanukkah with the words: *Be-kaf hey Kislev, shmonat y'mei Hanukkah, v'asurim b'hespered v'ta'anit...* The eight days of Hanukkah begin on the 25th day of Kislev, when it is forbidden to give eulogies or to fast. These are days of *simcha v'Hallel*; joy and thanksgiving, when it is incompatible to grieve and wail and fast so explicitly. I confess that I stand before you this morning in gross violation of this prohibition. This past week will go down in the history of Har Shalom, as well as the history of the United States, as one of prolific eulogies. This was a week of substantial mourning, both locally and nationally. And with regard to the prohibition on fasting, after the third funeral in our community this week I actually thought about calling for a communal fast. Once upon a time, people declared fasts for all kinds of communal concerns... The Mishnah in Ta'anit (3:8) says: *Al kol tzara shelo tavo al ha'tzibbur*, people would once fast for any number of troubles that afflicted the public. Our *tzibbur*, our public here, our community has been reeling with losses, and part of me really wanted to fast and pray that this scourge would come to an end! But it's Hanukkah, so no eulogies or fasts are permitted! Unfortunately, we don't get to plan when we lose someone we love, and sometimes that loss overlaps with a time when we would otherwise be celebrating... What then?

There is a pretty radical version of the Hanukkah story¹ that is conveyed by a 17th Century Polish rebbe by the name of Jacob Falk. Often he is referred to by the name of his most important work the “P'nei Yehoshua.” Let me assure you that while his version of the Hanukkah story flies in the face of what we all learned in Hebrew School or Jewish Day School, he is hardly a minor or marginal figure. The P'nei Yehoshua is an *acharon*, a leading rabbi and halakhic decisor. His commentary is consulted in traditional yeshivot, and by many serious students of the Talmud. In the first of his four-volume commentary on the Talmud, Falk mentions a detail that is almost always overlooked. He says that there was no need for ritually pure oil to light the menorah in the Temple. **What?!** That's the whole purpose of the miracle of the oil, right? There was only enough ritually pure oil with the *hekhsher* of the High Priest still in-tact in order to light it for

¹ Grateful to Rabbi David Hoffman, Vice Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, for introducing me to this text

one day. But one day was hardly enough time to clean up the unholy mess the Greeks made in the Temple. Citing the Talmud in tractate Yoma, page 6b, the P'nei Yehoshua says that it is actually permissible to use things that have been rendered ritually impure, as long as they are being used for the benefit or need of the community! So they didn't need to have that one vial of ritually pure oil to light the menorah...really any oil would have sufficed, because the project of rededicating the Temple was certainly a need of the community! What's happening to the story we all grew up with???

The P'nai Yehoshua doesn't say that the miracle didn't occur at all, God forbid. Rather, he encourages us to interpret the miracle differently. He says that while our ancestors could certainly have used impure oil to keep the menorah burning longer, the one day's supply kept on burning for eight days. He says the *ikar ha'nes*, the essence of the Hanukkah miracle was *lehodia chibat Ha'Makom aleihem*, to remind the Jewish people that in the midst of all the destruction, all the loss; as they stood in the shambles of their once Holy Temple, that God still loved them. *Nes zeh b'inyan haneirot she'hu eidut l'Yisrael she'has'chinah shura bahem*...The miracle of the lights, he said, was meant to be a testimonial that God still dwelled among the Jewish people, precisely when they felt the most remote, the most removed from God.

I absolutely love this interpretation...particularly at times like these. When we are engulfed in darkness and despair it is common to feel a sense of abandonment: Whether it was the Jewish people feeling that God had forgotten about them in the ransacked Temple, or members of our community here feeling such disorienting loss following the death of a loved one. I think what the P'nai Yehoshua is urging us to do is to find a little light amidst all that darkness. Kindling the menorah, its light increasing with each passing day, is an act of defiance against the gloom. Returning each night to light one more candle means that day by day we emerge a little bit more from the shadows and the sorrow, and reclaim hope, healing, optimism, and light.

In the homily that the pastor of the church attended by the late President Bush gave at the funeral on Wednesday the Rev. Russell Levenson, Jr. mentioned how Bush was at the National Cathedral in 1990 for its dedication ceremony. I had to google that because I was pretty sure the Cathedral had been there for more than just 28 years. Indeed, construction was begun 112 years ago, when President Theodore Roosevelt laid the foundation stone. Apparently it took 83 years to complete though. And you thought the your contractors at your house worked slowly??

Eighty three years later President Bush laid the final stone, and the building was officially dedicated. The priest referenced Bush's remarks at that ceremony. Pointing to a massive rose window in the cathedral the president said: "The rose window high above seems black and formless ... [from the outside] but when we enter, we see it back-lit by the sun. It dazzles in astonishing splendor and reminds us that without faith we too are but stained glass windows in the dark." Levenson continued: "The president understood that even in the darkest of nights things can be transformed if handed over to the redemptive power of the Almighty." I think that is precisely the message of the Hanukkah menorah. Even in the darkest of nights, things can be transformed; things have been transformed; miracles have happened and will continue to happen, whenever we look for the light, whenever we kindle the light, and have the courage to dispel the darkness that surrounds us.

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Hanukkah