

Because Rabbi Ellis is both an erudite rabbi and an amateur historian, his discourse into Hanukkah proved to be charged with precious information. Although every statement made is relevant, the constraints of such a brief commentary as this one limits me to highlight only a few salient points. For the overall view of Hanukkah that the Rabbi presented, I would strongly suggest you listen to the recording of his most instructive talk. Some salient aspects to the Hanukkah story follow:

While Purim celebrates the victory of the Jewish people over physical annihilation, Hanukkah celebrates the victory of the Jewish people over spiritual annihilation. Although Jews constitute a nation, the religious element is at the core of their peoplehood. A spiritual annihilation, therefore, would have meant the end of the Jewish people.

For the first time Jews were exposed to a culture as alluring as their own albeit its values were antithetical to Jewish culture. This imposed foreign culture that prohibited circumcision, observance of Shabbat, kashrut, and, it seems, allowed for the right of the governing official to abduct the bride following the wedding, nevertheless swayed many, especially the young. It enchanted with the senses: In its deification of the arts, the body was worshipped as an exemplar of beauty visibly majestic and expressive in athletics.

As with Purim it is a woman who is responsible for Jewish victory. The beautiful widow, Judith, offered herself to the region's highest-ranking general. With obvious seductive guile, this valiant woman persuaded the general to drink until he fell into a drunken stupor. Committing an evil act to prevent a much greater evil from occurring, this Jewess beheaded the powerful officer famous for having conquered all the lands he had been appointed to. Without this general, the military was defeated.

The stories of Jewish revolt against the Romans are found in the Mishnah as well as in the Babylonian Talmud, the Talmud that is the one most studied. Known as "Hanukkah", this celebration of Jewish survival is our most recent holiday. Its history is extremely well-documented with sources to be found in both Jewish and non-Jewish studies. The holiday commemorates not the victory of war in 165 B.C.E., but the victory of the Jewish understanding of life over the dominant one of the times. This victory is defined by the liberation of Jerusalem and the rededication of the HaMidrash, symbolizing a people's recognition of God in their history.

While Hanukkah is not a part of the Torah (as yet?), it is a holiday that is celebrated throughout the Jewish world. Ironically, it was Reform Judaism that made this holiday, of profound significance, one which children would very much enjoy. As adults, we, too, enjoy the songs and food that have become traditional for this holiday, but our real joy is in celebrating the major historical and religious moment of redemption that Hanukkah represents.

Gigi Bitton for the WLG
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