

Performing Miracles (December 2005)

Bad news. That story about the Maccabees and the miracle of the oil—not true. Never happened. But before you overreact and start to make other plans for the evening of December 25, hold onto your latkes. The story is still worth telling.

There are some very good explanations as to why the rabbis of the Talmud chose to include (and perhaps even invent) the story of the miracle of the oil in their explanation of Hanukkah. The truth is they had some real issues with the Maccabees (who were actually known as the Hasmoneans) and the decisions they made which broke from traditional Judaism (like setting up their own monarchy and priesthood, thus breaking from the lines of David and Aaron). But political realities notwithstanding, the rabbis had another reality with which to contend; namely, the immense popularity of the Maccabean rebellion. You see, we all need heroes.

Our best source for what might have really happened comes from the books of Maccabees, and what they tell us about Judah and his cohorts is not all that different from the story we were raised on. There was, indeed, a rebellion against forces trying to stifle the practice of Judaism. And although the impetus for this cultural repression emanated from the Syrian Greek leader Antiochus Epiphanes IV, the real enemy of Judah and his father Mattityahu were the assimilated Jews of Judea who had already bought into the new and popular world of culturally rich yet still very pagan Hellenism. These were the ones apparently most enthusiastic when it came to outlawing the expression of Judaism. So Mattityahu and his sons and a relatively small band of religious loyalists took to the hills and, like a modern-day guerilla army, attacked the enemy in hit-and-run encounters over a three-year period until they were finally able to reclaim Jerusalem. Alas, the Temple had been profaned. It was in a state of utter disarray, the sacred objects destroyed, the altar desecrated through the slaughtering of pigs. So Judah did what anyone in his position would have done—he cleaned the place up and threw a party. For eight days they celebrated (which the Book of Maccabees suggests was because, while living in the hills, the Maccabees were unable to observe the festival of Sukkot—an 8-day festival) and, in a manner consistent with any revolutionary and independence movement, they decided that this historic moment should be preserved through an annual celebration on the very day of victory, the 25th day of the month of Kislev.

That's it. The whole story, more or less. No mention of oil or miracles. So why did the rabbis invent the story? Even more, why should we perpetuate the myth?

Despite their ambivalence about the Hasmonean dynasty and their discomfort with the militaristic theme of the Hanukkah story, the rabbis knew a good thing when then they saw it. They appreciated that there was something deeply meaningful in the heroic efforts of Mattityahu and Judah. But rather than celebrate a war (reflective of their inclination is the haftarah reading for the Shabbat of Hanukkah which, from Zechariah, teaches “Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit...”), they chose to shift the focus to something a bit more spiritual.

Light, to be sure, has universal symbolic value. To all peoples, the power of light is primal in its message of hope. This is especially true in Judaism. Light is representative of God’s creative power. Light is the symbol of Torah. Of wisdom and learning. The ner tamid. The Shabbat candles. The yahrzeit flame. They all share a common theme: light banishes darkness. And darkness, as our inner voice reminds us in this season of decreasing light, is heavy, like a plague. But I think that the rabbis’ version of the Hanukkah tale is more than just a countervailance to the winter solstice. It’s more than just a miracle of a small cruse of oil giving light for eight days. For me the great value in the story of the Hanukkah light is that it starts with a simple kindling. God made the light burn for a period longer than anyone imagined possible, but none of it happens without someone first lighting a match. All miracles begin with mundane acts. And that’s where we come in.

We need to know that myths, despite their wanting for factuality, are mechanisms though which we sustain the deeper truths of sacred reality. They give our lives meaning. And this is a myth the underlying truths of which we particularly need today.

When we see the darkness that shrouds our world, how do we respond? Do we sigh? Do we cast blame? Do we just walk away in disillusionment, or even worse despair? Do we feel like the genocide in Darfur is beyond our reach, as if the turmoil of the Middle East or the havoc left in the wake of nature’s tragedies this past year are just too much for any one person to take on? But what if Judah and his father Mattityahu had felt that way? Or Rosa Parks? These are the heroes the rabbis understood we need, because their simple acts of courage inspire us to do the same. So Tarfon has taught us: “You are not expected to finish the task, but neither are you free to desist from it.” All great miracles begin with small acts. Even by you.

The Hebrew word for miracle—Nes—shares the same consonants as Nisa (which means “to test”), as in “V’ha-Elohim nisa et Avraham”—God “tested” Abraham (the opening words of the Akeda or “Binding of Isaac”). This coincidence suggests to me that there must be a relationship between the challenges and miracles of life. Miracles are not so much things God does for us

but rather the “consequence” of our affirmatively responding to sacred challenges, and for that to happen we need, a la Judah and Mattityahu, a faith in things greater than ourselves. For me, miracles are the result of our willingness to believe that we can make a difference. This is the real message of Hanukkah. Even if the story fails the test of historical accuracy, its measure of truth is unassailable. This is why we still light the menorah. This is why we still tell the story. Because light gives us hope. And we have the power to create light. Of course when God did it, all that was required was a simple utterance, “Yehi Or—Let there be Light.” For us, it’s a little more labor intensive. We have to light a match.