

A HANUKKAH P.S.

Shabbat Miketz

12/18/2020

Rabbi Norman Patz

I presented this sermon last erev Shabbat by zoom to my congregation in San Juan. I would like to share an edited version of it with you as well. NRP

I just can't let go of Hanukkah yet. In my San Juan congregation, we set up daily candle lightings by zoom – with shared greetings, smiling faces and wonderful personal memories described each night by members of the congregation from a variety of backgrounds. They were truly extraordinary and fulfilled the Hanukkah message: Banish darkness, spread the light. And wonderfully successful despite COVID and the technological limitations of Zoom.

My unwillingness to let Hanukkah go was reinforced yesterday afternoon by my participation, again by Zoom, in a lecture presentation by my colleague and friend Rabbi Dr. Rifat Sonsino, who spoke about Sefardic Hanukkah customs. In his childhood home in Istanbul, Turkey, his mother made a hanukiyah by pouring oil onto a plate and arranging eight wicks from the oil in the center of the plate to just beyond the rim and that was it! (Note: Sefardi Jews made beautiful hannukiyot too. One of the hanyukiyot Naomi and I lit this year comes from 19th century Iraq: it has five “yad” – hand/hamsa – designs and a Muslim crescent above the shamash.)

Rabbi Sonsino's family didn't give gifts or spin dreidels. They are Ashkenazic customs which he learned only when he entered rabbinical school in Cincinnati. They ate *burmuelos*, puffy fritters deep fried in oil – *fritos con azete* – and not potato latkes, and to this day Ines Sonsino, Rabbi Sonsino's wife, makes *bizkochos* (cookies) as a special Hanukkah treat. As for songs, no Yiddish of course; perhaps some Hebrew melodies plus Ocho Candelikas (the Ladino song with its counting refrain for “eight little candles”).

Rabbi Sonsino expressed a strong opinion about the Hanukkah miracle. He said very emphatically that he doesn't believe in miracles. God, for him, doesn't intervene in the workings of nature. Rabbi Sonsino emphasizes instead the military victory, as I do – with some additions I'll remind you of in a moment—and he explained how and why the oil miracle story entered the tradition very late – in the Talmud, codified around the year 500 CE, some 660 years later than the story of Hanukkah. The earlier texts – First and Second Maccabees, which are not in the Bible but in the Apocrypha, do speak about eight days, but indicate that the number represented a delayed celebration of Sukkot, which was a very important festival for an agricultural society. It was the end of harvest work and a time for celebration, entirely likely more important than Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur.

As you know, I too acknowledge that the oil story seems to be a late add on. For me, that addition itself is the real miracle of Hanukkah. Here is why:

It has two parts: First, it is a military victory against the great Seleucid empire, successor to Alexander the Great. How could a small group of rebels win against these great armies, particularly since the geography of the Middle East made Israel a very important and sensitive military area – the land bridge to Egypt, where the rival Ptolemaic Empire was located? Israel wasn't a backwater that the Syrian Greeks could ignore; it was like the DMZ, the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea today. So, what happened? The Seleucids were facing other military threats. On their east, the Parthians and on their west, the Roman Empire. These were their main strategic concerns. In that context, Judea, while important, was more of a distraction than a strategic threat for the Seleucids. What's more, Judah Maccabee very wisely had made an alliance with Rome. These factors help explain how the Maccabees could have achieved a military victory.

But there's a second part to the miracle. The Maccabee revolt unleashed the power within the Jewish community to update Torah law. Why was that necessary? Because of changed circumstances. Before the Greeks arrived, Judea had been an agricultural society with one city, Jerusalem. The Greeks changed all that, creating many new cities populated by merchants and urban workers as well as Greek soldiers who settled there with their families, forming a new elite class in Judean society.

The urban Jews needed new ways to observe Torah law. A struggle developed among rich and comfortable conservatives who were not affected by the changed situation, assimilationists who wanted to discard all the old laws and become Greeks, and the large mass of urban dwellers who were essentially disenfranchised in their daily lives because Torah law wasn't working for them.

An emerging class of teachers, who eventually came to be called Rabbis, figured out how to address the challenges. They formulated new interpretations of Torah law that met the needs of these people. In addition to this internal process, they also figured out how to deal with powerful conquerors. By 63 BCE, Rome had come to control Judea and the Roman armies were invincible. Jews could no longer hope to establish Jewish political sovereignty as it had been in previous centuries. The Rabbis' solution, symbolized by Yochanan ben Zakkai's founding of an academy in Yavneh, was to surrender political sovereignty as a means for national survival and replace it with religious autonomy granted and backed by the Romans.

That's the real miracle: assuring both spiritual and physical survival for the politically powerless Jewish people.

And that external strategy explains the story of the oil. The Romans could not see it as an challenge to their control if it was God, not human rebels, who brought about the rededication of the Temple (especially if the Maccabees were barely mentioned at all in that connection). And the miracle of the oil provided an appealing and Jewishly acceptable parallel to all of the winter solstice fire ceremonies of the neighboring pagans.

The Rabbis of that era were brilliant, inspired strategists and tacticians. We are their heirs. We praise them, along with the Maccabees, in the English language setting of the song *Mi y'ma-leil* with the rousing – and remarkable – paralleling of the military and spiritual victories with the words: “In every age, a hero, a sage, came to our aid.”