



December 11, 2020 – 25 Kislev, 5781 – Shabbat Chanukah

Dear TBE Family and Friends,

Even in the comparatively southern latitudes of the Levant where Judaism was birthed, the waning days of December were a comparatively dark and foreboding period. Days were growing noticeably shorter and colder, the light taking on a more subdued cast, and there was a sense that the very life force of the Earth might be dwindling as winter set in.

Indeed, there is a midrash related in the Babylonian Talmud (*Avodah Zara* 8b) that speaks to just this phenomenon, describing Adam HaRishon, the first created being, being filled with a sense of dread as the daylength diminished. Fearing that the perceived withdrawal of the sun – the most visible marker of God’s presence in the world – marked the Divine’s growing displeasure with humanity, Adam took up a routine of fasting and prayer, seeking to convince the Shechinah (God’s most proximate manifestation) to return to the mortal realm and restore conditions of normalcy.

Even as they penned this tale (or at least transcribed it for posterity), thereby normalizing the anxiety and depression that can accompany the winter solstice, the Talmudic Sages were in parallel concocting an even more audacious response to this – and other – instances in which we feel our world closing in on us, hope receding. Casting their gaze as a folk celebration, marking the defeat of the Seleucid Greeks by the Hasmoneans, the early rabbis saw – and seized – an opportunity to project a message of not only hope, but also empowerment.

Whereas the fable of Adam HaRishon had cast humanity in a comparatively passive position in their quest to gain traction over their circumstances, the story of the Maccabees – already founded on an improbable military victory – elevated by the super-imposition of the miracle of the oil, created a vehicle for communicating to the masses that they could be not only the beneficiaries, but the agents of changed circumstances, that (presumably) with God’s blessings, but at their own initiative, they could push back the darkness that surrounded them and gird themselves with light.



The narrative of self-actualized redemption that our Sages appended as a coda onto the Maccabean victory provides a more powerful example than their military exploits ever could. For while it is easy to see strength in the image of an armed warrior and to imagine even an outnumbered phalanx battling off a contingent of adversaries, the notion that we – each of us – through an act as simple, yet profound as lighting a flame could ward off a paralyzing darkness is far more empowering and enduring.

Wishing everyone Shabbat Shalom and Happy Chanukah – Hope to see you at Shabbat’s end (Sat, 6 p.m.) for the Azameyra concert (click [here](#) for access),

-- Rabbi Rachel Safman

P.S. – Please check your porches or carports for sweet surprises that may have been left off without your notice. Chanukah gift bags are being delivered to all our local members, but on a staggered basis due to the seasonal unavailability of magic reindeer 🦌.