



A Modern Orthodox Congregation

A Chanukah message

It's so much easier for Jews to celebrate Chanukah in South Florida. We don't have to imagine snowflakes and reindeer to get us into the holiday spirit. And on the eighth night, when the menorah is in full glory displaying dazzling embers, the only warmth it creates is in our hearts. Chanukah is the holiday that we all can crave as its demands upon us are minimal. There is no extra attendance required at services. No cleaning, cooking, or any burdensome obligations. Besides a little extra weight from sufganiyot and latkes, this one holiday seems almost too good for the rabbis to willingly incorporate into our canon.

Where is the guilt? Where the pangs of suffering that are normally associated with our holidays? Where is the subjugation and tyranny? Where is the ever-constant theme of anti-Semitism that is delicately woven into our historical past? On the contrary, during this period of history it seems everything was just great. The Jews were finally acclimating to their surroundings. The Greeks were comfortable accepting the Jews as equals and began treating them with dignity and respect. They allowed us to prosper and flourish and even to keep our temples functioning with newly appointed "high priests" and "rabbis". It appears that Jews were finally on the path of blissful coexistence.

The Greeks were clever in their approach and the average Jew was all too willing to embrace friendship instead of hostility. They assumed the price was not that high. All that was asked of them was to dissolve some radical and fanatical rituals, to refrain from acting differently from the prevailing culture, and to incorporate some of their more refined practices in our religious observances. And the Greeks brought some of their refinements into our temple. The Jew was unwilling to fathom the inherent danger lurking in the winds. The Hellenization (acceptance of Greek culture) of the Jew was delivering a near fatal blow. Intermarriage and assimilation became the norm and two thousand years of the Mosaic culture was destined to become an extinct religion. Before the last embers of Judaism disappeared, the Maccabees decided to stand up and fight. The Vegas bookmakers wouldn't have given odds on a victory, but they felt there was no other options. Either we fight for what we believe in or there will be no one left to believe. Our generation might survive but our children and grandchildren will cease to be.

Let's fast forward to 2018. Contrasting the Jew living in America with the Jew living during the time of Chanukah, we would be hard pushed to see a commonality. We have it so good and (almost) everyone admires us and our accomplishments. Our government is supportive of Israel and other Jewish causes. The federal government has given many synagogues (and hopefully Anshei Emuna) security grants of tens of thousands of dollars. We seem to reside in a utopia.

However, below the radar all is not perfect. Even legislation that appears to be above board are often attempts to delegitimize or question the integrity and essence of our culture. Recently the New York State Department of Education passed a new legislation. They now require that all

private schools be subjected to governmental oversight to ensure they are providing a minimum basic secular education. Of course, they don't openly say that they want to curtail Yeshivot from teaching an intensive Jewish curriculum, but they now require yeshivot to spend six hours a day on secular subjects. That is six hours plus recess and lunch breaks. Do the math; something has to give, or six-year-old children are going to stay in school until midnight. Failure to amend their curriculum will result in a cessation of government funding. This includes a loss of school bussing or free lunches for the economically disadvantaged. In other words, they are exerting power in order to influence what is taught. It feels as though we are, on the one hand, being assured that we are embraced with love and acceptance, but only if we change how we teach our religious beliefs and practices.

Now, I'm not a big fan of the anti-Zionist leader of the Chasidic group of Satmar. (They are the largest Chasidic group in the world, far surpassing Chabad in terms of numbers.) However, even though I find many things their 'rebbe' says to be outside the realm of acceptable, I think he is absolutely right in confronting this issue head on. Personally, I believe children should be properly educated and there is much lacking in that department in many Chassidic yeshivot. I think children born in the United States should be fluent in their native tongue and not only in "mamme loshon". However, governmental interference in a religious institution is a rather dangerous precedent. And are they demanding more from our institutions than they are demanding from their own?

I am not excusing the lack of educational standards in Chasidic schools and I believe these schools must offer broader academic options to prepare students for a successful future. However, I comprehend where they are coming from and the inherent fears associated with a greater focus on secular studies. I understand that once you open the door it's very difficult to control the outcome. But I also believe they should have the confidence and trust in their students' ability to choose right over wrong. Yet, Chanukah reminds the Jew that there is always a price associated with fitting in. And sometimes the price is so high that it leaves us wondering if it was worth it.

So now when I analyze Chanukah in contrast to other Jewish holidays, I realize there are more similarities than I imagined. Our history is replete with our enemies using the sword or threatening the Jew with banishment, exile, and forced conversion. Sadly, we are used to that approach. It is often far more difficult to discern our enemies' ultimate objective when they befriend us. My intention is not to spread fear nor to assume that everyone has an agenda that seeks to negatively influence the character of Judaism. On the contrary, I think it's of paramount importance to graciously acknowledge the myriad of kindness from our non-Jewish friends. (The State of Israel would have ceased to exist without the overwhelming political and financial support from non-Jews.) However, Chanukah reminds us to be careful; that never everyone that embraces us with a warm embrace are truly our friends. Laban who is mentioned at the Passover Seder as being an arch enemy and seeking the destruction of the Jewish People, initially greets Jacob with a warm embrace. He hugs him and kisses and hides the deeper recesses of his heart. While obviously there are many philo-Semites, a report circulated in the past few weeks indicates that one third of Europeans harbor anti-Semitic views. In other words, out of a population of almost 750 million there are almost 250 million that are anti-Semitic in one form or another. That still thankfully leaves two thirds of Europe that are either neutral or pro-Israel and the Jewish people. Yet, we must be cognizant of that less than silent minority.

Chanukah may be conveying to those that seek an intellectual understanding instead of a peripheral grasp is that comprehension of the essence is essential. Chanukah gelt, presents, latkes and candles are merely the fluff; it is like the froth of the cappuccino. But without the essence, without the espresso the froth becomes meaningless. The essence of Chanukah is that danger you are unable to recognize is potentially more frightening than the threats you easily see. The English coined the phrase "You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar" but to the Jew that lesson has been engraved in our psyche thousands of years ago. Over the millennia, honey

has been used to our detriment more often than we could care to admit. Sadly, that powerful message seems to be lost on our generation.

Happy Chanukah,

Rabbi Jack Engel