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ASBI Congregation
Hanukkah 5782

Holy Ground

My elementary school assemblies and concerts took place in the auditorium of the Ethical Culture Society of New York, Ethical Culture is a national movement for secular humanism, founded in the 19th century by Felix Adler who was, of course, a Jew from a rabbinic family. The auditorium was used by the society for their weekly gatherings; it was a secular church.

Over the stage at the front of the auditorium was this motto: “The Place Where Men Meet to Seek the Highest is Holy Ground.” At some point in the 80s or early 90s the motto was updated to say “the place where people meet to seek the highest is holy ground.” This humanist definition of holy space makes holiness the outcome of human choices and human striving towards noble ends. Holiness does not inhere in a location just because. It isn’t ontological, a sacred space is a place where we seek the highest.

I thought of this definition today because the definition of holy ground may explain a curious practice for whenever Hanukkah coincides with Shabbat.

Tonight, when three stars appear in the sky we will have two mitzvot to perform. We must recite Havdalah and we must light the Hanukkah candles. Which should we do first? You might think that we should make havdalah first. And you would be correct! Havdalah marks the end of Shabbat and prepares us for all of the activities of the workweek that were forbidden on Shabbat...such as lighting Hanukkah candles. Once we have recited havdalah, we can then light Hanukkah candles.

But in shul, when Shabbat ends we will have a different order of operations. First we will light candles, and only after will we recite havdalah. What explains this difference?

The mitzvah of lighting Hanukkah candles is a home-based mitzvah. This is a basic fact about Hanukkah that has launched thousands of pages of learned scholarship around questions about whether those who are traveling over Hanukkah can light and where and what about students who sleep in a dorm but eat meals elsewhere and how about guests spending the holiday with family etc.

There is one exception to the basic rule that Hanukkah candles can only be lit in home and that is the practice to light Hanukah candles, with blessings, each night in shul. This is a curious practice. Why do we light candles in a location where the mitzvah cannot be fulfilled? Everyone in shul should go home and light there. But the lighting at home raises questions too. Why does the home emerge as the primary location for a mitzvah that is oriented around “pirsumei nisah” or publicizing the miracle of Hanukkah?

Answering these questions satisfactorily will have to wait until another day, but I’m eager to hear your ideas, but I do want to share an explanation for why we reverse the order of operations in shul and light Hanukkah candles before Havdalah on Saturday night.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, as recorded in the book *Harerei Kedem*, explained that a shul was not defined by four walls and a roof, not even by a sign with Hebrew letters outside the front door. A shul was, by definition, a place where people gather to perform mitzvot. Once we recite Havdalah in shul on Saturday night, it is too late to light Hanukkah candles because we've finished the mitzvot for the night, our minds are elsewhere, we are no longer gathered for a purpose, and, in a real sense - we aren't in shul and therefore have no excuse to light Hanukkah candles. Rav Soloveitchik is claiming, to paraphrase Felix Adler: the place where Jews meet to seek the highest is holy ground.

There are several reasons why I wanted to share this message with you today. First, I want to encourage you to come back to shul this afternoon for Maariv, Hanukkah candle-lighting, and Havdalah. It's a special moment that only comes once each year and it is made more special when we experience it with large numbers together.

But I also want to encourage you to think about how we can create holiness while we are here.. This building's sanctity as a shul is not the result of the stained glass and is not even fully the result of the sifrei Torah behind me. This is a shul, in the fullest sense, because this is a place where Jews seek the highest. This is a place where heartfelt prayers can take place. This is a place where we can try to speak to God, as individuals, and as a community. This is a palace where one generation creates joyous Jewish memories for the younger generation so that the younger generation has a chance to form attachments of love and loyalty to Torah and mitzvot. You've already invested the time in coming here, why not invest the focus and intention to seek the highest.

This community is a catalyst for care and concern: In the span of 24 hours this past week, I received two inquiries from two members of the community who are bringing food to two other members of the community who are not able to easily shop for themselves right now and I signed checks to distribute financial assistance to an additional two people. Six individuals, connected in a web of Hesed and care and tzedakah, and this community is the catalyst for those sorts of connections and bonds day in and day out. That too is the result of people coming together to seek the highest.

There is a humorous saying that every Jewish holiday boils down to "they tried to kill us, we survived, let's eat." But that isn't true for Hanukkah. Jewish lives were never at risk during the Greek persecutions. In the language of the siddur, they tried to make us forget the Torah and its mitzvot. So we light Hanukkah candles in shul because the shul is a physical space dedicated to reinforcing our connection to the Torah and its mitzvot and transmitting that loyalty to the next generation. We will light Hanukkah candles in shul before Havdalah so that the candles will be lit in the presence of a Jewish community that is here for a reason. May the lights of Hanukkah inspire us to seek ever higher.