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 Shabbat Hanukkah 5783

Between Persecution and Salvation

I've told you before about the Christian family we met when we lived in Jerusalem fifteen years ago. They practiced a very austere form of Protestant Christianity which attempted to purify Christianity from what they saw as foreign accretions that Catholicism had grafted onto a biblical faith. Since Leviticus says "*Eleb Mo'adei Hashem*" these are the festivals of the Lord, they were opposed to celebrating any non-Biblical holidays. Christmas, to these Christians was an unacceptable corruption of faith which they blamed on the Catholics. Some of the Puritans who settled in New England in the 17th century also objected to the celebration of Christmas for similar reasons. So next time a politician complains about the "war against Christmas" you can remind them that this country was founded by people who wanted to wage a war against Christmas!

Given this background I was very curious to hear about their celebration of Hanukkah. The biblical Books of Maccabees are part of the Catholic Old Testament, but the Protestant Bible, like the Hebrew Bible, does not include those books. How could these strict Biblical Protestants celebrate Hanukkah as a biblical holiday if their bible, like our Tanakh does not contain Maccabees? They explained to me that Daniel predicted the persecutions of Antiochus in his prophetic vision recorded in Daniel Chapter 11 and in this way Hanukkah is a holiday endorsed by Scripture. I think it is cool and interesting that they celebrate Hanukkah as Christians. But I think they are wrong about Hanukkah being a Biblical holiday.

It is true that Daniel contains a detailed prophetic vision of a persecuting monarch whose life and actions line up very closely with what we know historically about Antiochus and his persecutions. Historians even go so far as to see these details as being definitive proof that, at least those sections of Daniel were written by an eye witness in Eretz Yisrael of the second century BCE and not by a Babylonian Jew centuries earlier. But from the perspective that interests me this year, it doesn't matter if Antiochus was described in a detailed prophecy or by an eyewitness. (And for what it is worth I do not think it is a violation of any principle of faith to think that sections of Daniel were written in the 2nd century BCE). What interests me is the fact that Antiochus and his persecutions made it into Tanakh and the Maccabees did not.

One way to explain this phenomenon is to elaborate on all the ways that Hazal and their predecessors were skeptical of the Hasmonian dynasty established by the Maccabees. We know that within three generations the Hasmonian kings were thoroughly Hellenized and even persecuted religious Jews. The fourth generation devolved into civil war and invited the Romans to come to Eretz Yisrael. And Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi famously declined to give Hanukkah its own tractate in the Mishnah and the holiday itself is barely mentioned in the Mishnah.

But, this year, I'm more interested in thinking about that space between persecution and salvation, between Antiochus and the Maccabees, between Tanakh, and the period of Oral Torah that blossomed after the closure of Tanakh. The age of Scripture ends with a detailed prophecy of persecution. But the salvation itself is kept out of scripture and left to the Oral Torah to describe and left to the Oral Torah to commemorate.

How do we commemorate that salvation? There are two primary ways that Hanukkah is celebrated. We recite Hallel, in shul and we light candles at home: *Hallel* and *Hadlakah*. Hallel is a mitzvah performed in public. Hadlakah takes place at home. Hallel expresses gratitude, Hadlakah is a form of praise. We recite Hallel in shul because we recite most of our prayers in shul. *B'Rot Am Hadrat Melekh*, the more Jews together in one space and one time saying the same words, the greater glory is reflected to the King. Of course Hallel is a public mitzvah that should take place in shul. But while Hallel can be said at home by an individual davening alone, the mitzvah of candle lighting can only be done at home. A public outdoor candle lighting fulfills no mitzvah and is just for show or for educational purposes. Everyone who attends needs to then go home and light for themselves later that night.

We light at home so that we can say a *berakhab* of “*she'asah nisim*” a blessing of praise that God has performed miracles for us. That *berakhab* takes place at home because the miraculous prompt for the *berakhab* is a Jewish home in which loyalty to the Torah has survived transmission to another generation.

Maharal, in the 16th century, wrote about the miracle of the oil that lasted eight days and questioned its relevance to a commemorative celebration. What difference did it make that one cruze of oil lasted eight days? How would history have been different if the oil had not lasted eight days or if no pure oil had been found? Where do we ever commemorate miracles that are nothing more than supernatural occurrences that accomplish nothing? Maharal answers that the miracle of oil was a sign from God to pay attention to the miraculous victory over the Greeks and their Jewish supporters. It was a sign from God that the Maccabees' victory was endorsed by Heaven (just as Zechariah's vision of an overflowing menorah in this morning's Haftarah signified God's endorsement of the Second Temple).

But the Maccabees military victory was also fleeting and would have amounted to nothing without a renaissance of Jewish commitment among the masses of Jews who made our own free choice to rededicate ourselves to Judaism just as the Temple was rededicated. Tanakh is the product of Divine revelation and of Divine inspiration. It comes from above and we receive it passively. The Oral Torah is also the product of revelation but it is also the product of human initiative and human creativity and our Jewish commitment that the covenant at Sinai should live for another generation.

We say Hallel, in shul, with a congregation to express our thanks for God's rescue of our ancestors just as we do on the other *yamim tovim*. But when we light candles at home and thereby demonstrate that another home is loyal to the traditions of Israel, we participate in something truly miraculous as our homes become another ledger on the side of the victory of Judaism over efforts to erase it. That ongoing project belongs to the world of the Oral Torah, the project of the Jewish people to sustain the Torah in every generation.