

HANUKKAH

Amid the darkness of winter, we light candles to celebrate the story of the Maccabees. The story, as usually told, begins when the Hellenized Syrian rulers of Israel under King Antiochus forbade the practice of Judaism. An uprising led by the priest Mattityahu and his sons ensued. Despite the odds, the Maccabees, as they were called, defeated the Syrians and restored the Temple in Jerusalem to the worship of God. When they went to rekindle the Temple menorah (candelabrum), they could find only one small cruse of oil that had not been defiled. It should only have lasted one day, but miraculously, it burned for eight days. Ever since, we celebrate Hanukkah (which means "dedication") with the lighting of candles for eight days.

The holiday has two connected strands: the victory of the few against the many and the miracle of the oil. At different times in history, one or the other of these strands has been emphasized. In certain periods, the military victory has been the central theme; at other times the miracle of the menorah has been center stage. In the Middle Ages, the stories of martyrdom such as that of Hannah and her seven sons became prominent, reflecting the tragic experience of medieval Jewry. Like the flickering light of the candles, Hanukkah's meaning has continued to shift even in our times.

In modern times, the State of Israel has seen the Maccabees as models for Israel's own struggle for survival against larger foes. In America, Hanukkah has taken on additional significance as a Jewish parallel to Christmas. Since Christmas is so pervasive, Hanukkah became an increasingly important answer to children's question of why we don't

celebrate Christmas. This has led to an increased emphasis on the giving of presents at Hanukkah. Though there had been a tradition of giving children small amounts of money, "Hanukkah gelt," before the twentieth century, the American Jewish experience made this a major focus of the holiday. For all of these reasons, both its traditional symbolism and new meanings, Hanukkah is widely observed in the Jewish community.

Strikingly, the story we all know exists in none of the early accounts. Each of the ancient versions has only a part of it. Contemporary scholars question even its basic assumptions. They suggest that it was unlikely that King Antiochus, being a Hellenist and a pantheist, would have outlawed the observance of Judaism. Instead, the Maccabean conflict probably began as a civil war between Hellenizing Jews and those who remained loyal to the tradition. At some point, the Hellenizing Jews called for help from their powerful Syrian patrons. This makes the tale less black and white. Is this a fight between liberals and fanatic fundamentalists or between traditionalists and self-hating assimilationists?

Still, the story, with its victory of light against darkness, has inspired hope in many generations. For some, the military victory is itself miraculous, for the small number of Maccabees could hardly have defeated the Syrian armies without God's help. Hanukkah thus remains a story of a struggle for religious liberty. For many others, it is the symbolism of the light that illuminates the deepest dark and that can continue burning beyond all realistic expectation that is the reason to celebrate this holiday.

The Meaning of Hanukkah

When Adam saw the day getting gradually shorter, he said: "Woe to me, perhaps because I have sinned, the world around me is being darkened and returning to its state of chaos and confusion; this then is the kind of death to which I have been sentenced from Heaven!" So he began observing an eight-day fast. However, as he observed the winter equinox and noted the day getting increasingly longer he said: "This is the world's course," and he set forth to keep an eight-day festivity. [Talmud, *Avodah Zara* 8a]

This ancient proto-Hanukkah festival reflects humanity's deepest fears and hopes. Adam, exiled from the garden and living through the first year in human history, notices the ever-shortening day. He is worried that this trend will continue until there is no daylight left. Perhaps this is the death he has been promised as punishment for eating the fruit of the tree in the garden? Suddenly he notices that the days are getting longer and he understands that this is part of the natural cycle, no different from the daily cycle of night and day.

Afraid of the dark, Adam comes to understand that light will prevail. Like Adam we learn that our lives will be lived amid both light and darkness. Light itself creates shadows. Yet we are not to despair or believe that darkness will overwhelm the light. Instead, we light the Hanukkah candles to remember the miracle that even a small light can illuminate a vast darkness. The light represents the holiness that lies within each of us. Eight is a number that signifies "beyond the normal." Seven is a complete unit, as in the seven days of the week. Eight, then, is one beyond completion.

By lighting the menorah, we ignite the flame in our souls, the sparks that cannot be extinguished, that will burn not for eight days but for eternity. We place the menorah in our windows to be visible to those passing by, just as our inner light must shine against the darkness of evil and indifference and must kindle the spirits of our fellow humans. The menorah reminds us of the miracle that no matter how dark life may be, there remains a source of light deep inside us. The light in our souls reflects and refracts the light from the One who is all brightness. [From *The Jewish Holidays*, p. 177].

Customs of Hanukkah

The central ritual of Hanukkah is lighting the menorah. It is lit each night after dark. (Some people use oil, especially olive oil, instead of candles.) There is an extra candle on the menorah called the *shammash*, "helper." It is used to light the other candles. To show it does not "count" in the ritual, the holder for the *shammash* is often raised above those of the other candles.

While you have fulfilled the commandment if you light one candle each night, it has become the standard practice to light one additional candle each night. In this manner, someone seeing the number of candles will know which night of Hanukkah it is. Therefore, it is also the custom to have a menorah that keeps each light distinctly in view.

Since there is a desire to proclaim the miracle of Hanukkah, some have the tradition of placing the menorah in a window. Others will place it on a table to proclaim the miracle to the members of the household. Traditionally, you place the candles in the menorah from right to left, but light them from left to right.

After the candle lighting, some people sing Hanukkah songs, such as the hymn "Ma'oz Tzur" ("Rock of Ages") or the children's tune "I Had a Little Dreidl." Presents are given. Latkes (potato pancakes) or doughnuts are eaten. (Food fried in oil reminds us of the miracle of the oil.) It is an old custom to play games of chance during the long nights of Hanukkah. Spinning a top called a dreidl is a popular game. The dreidl has a Hebrew letter on each side—*nun*, *gimel*, *heh*, *shin*, an acronym for *neis gadol hayah sham*, "a great miracle happened there." (In Israel, *sham*, "there," is replaced by *poh*, "here.") The game can be played with nuts or pennies. Each player puts one in the pot and then spins the dreidl and follows the directions associated with the letter that is on top. *Shin* signifies "put in" or add one to the pot. *Nun* signifies "nothing happens." *Heh* signifies "take half the pot." *Gimel* is the big winner, "take the whole pot." You can also try just playing with the dreidl by spinning it upside down or spinning it to knock down other dreidls.

Some have the custom of sitting quietly in a room lit only by the Hanukkah candles. Some recite verses or Psalms related to the theme of light. The candles of the menorah can also be used as a focus for meditation. Or the time can be used to reflect on the meaning of Hanukkah.

Hanukkah is mostly a home observance. There are small changes to the liturgy including adding a special paragraph in the *amidah* and the Grace after Meals. Hallel is recited during morning services.

The mystics taught that the light of Hanukkah partakes of the *or ha-ganuz*, the "hidden light," the primordial light of creation. As we know from the first verses of Genesis, the world was created by setting apart

light from darkness. Yet the biblical text tells us that the sun and moon were created only on the third day. According to tradition, there was a primordial light that illuminated those first days of creation. By its light it was possible to see from one end of the world to the other. With the creation of the sun, this light was hidden away until the end of days, hence it is called *or ha-ganuz*, "the light that was hidden." Sitting in the light of the menorah, we can seek to see with the clarity of that primordial light. We can try to see past those things that block our vision or prevent us from having a vision of what could be. Hanukkah, which means "dedication," can be a time for us to rededicate ourselves to that which we "see" as important in our lives. In the midst of the darkness and cold at this time of year (at least in the Northern Hemisphere), months removed from the fervor of the fall holidays, we can reset our bearings by removing our blindness.

Rabbi Jose said: "I was long perplexed by this verse: 'And you shall grope at noonday as the blind gropes in darkness' (Deut. 28:29). Now what difference does it make to a blind person whether it is dark or light? Once I was walking on a pitch-black night when I saw a blind person—walking torch in hand. I asked: 'Why do you carry the torch?' The blind person replied: 'As long as the torch is in my hand, people can see me and aid me.'" [Talmud, *Megillah* 24b]

The light of the menorah lets us see each other and thereby enables us to help each other on our journeys. Despite the darkness, in its light we can see clearly from one end of world to the other.

KAVANAH

There is a debate in the Talmud between Hillel and Shammai about how the candles should be lit. Hillel says that we should light one the first night, two the second, and so on. Shammai says that we should start with eight candles the first night and then light seven the second, and so on. I would suggest that Shammai is following his general overriding principle—to tell the truth. The

truth is that we live in a world of ever-diminishing expectations. The moment we are born we begin to die. Each day brings us one day closer to our last day. Similarly, as we saw in the section about the Omer, Shammai says that on her wedding day, we should tell the truth about the bride: if she is beautiful, then we say that; if she is not, then we say that. For Shammai, truth is the ultimate value. Hillel says that every bride is beautiful in the eyes of those who love her on her wedding day. Similarly, for Hillel there is a deeper sense of truth at issue here. The deeper truth is that our lives become ever richer and fuller with the passage of time, not increasingly diminished. The light of Hanukkah reminds us of the potential that lies within each moment. The present can be filled with light and that light can increase no matter where we are in the span of our lives. Like life, light can pierce any darkness. It became the custom to follow Hillel's opinion that we light an additional light each night to make known the miracle of Hanukkah; that is, our light can grow exceedingly bright beyond any reasonable expectations.