

“More than a Miracle”

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There is a wonderful story about Chanukah
that concerns two lifelong friends named David and Joseph.¹

Together, they survived the Holocaust in Poland.

After the war, they raised their families in the same neighbourhood,
worked hard, and eventually retired.

Though they never put it into words,
they were the dearest of friends.

They had so much in common;
and they agreed about everything—
everything, that is, except how to light the candles of the menorah.

Joseph believed that on the first night of Chanukah,
all of the candles of the menorah should be lit,
and they should stay lit for all eight nights.

After all, Joseph reasoned, this was the way God had done it
at the original Chanukah so many years ago.

“God,” he said, “didn’t make the lamp burn brighter as the week went on.”

“Oh, you’re full of it,” David told him. “You know nothing!”

Instead, he explained, following the more common practice,
“Each night you light another candle—
the first candle on the first night;
the second one on the second; and so forth.”

“That’s to symbolize that each day, as the week went on,
the faith of the Maccabees grew stronger and stronger.”

Unfortunately, David and Joseph just couldn’t agree to disagree

¹ Drawn from Rev. Jeffrey Symynkywicz’s telling of this story in his sermon “Light One Candle,”
December 10, 2006.

on how to light the menorah.

So, each year they argued, and each year,
Joseph would light all the candles on his menorah on the first night,
and David would light a single candle, then two the next night, and so on.

And as they passed each other's windows,
each would shake his head, and mutter
what a stubborn fool his dear friend was.

One year, though, they argued as ever, each night for the first four nights.

But, on the next night, things got a bit more heated than usual.

Joseph was so angry he turned to David and said,
“By all that is holy, you cannot even call yourself a Jew!”

A chill settled over the room.
Neither of them had ever spoken to the other like that before.

David then turned to Joseph and said, “Get out of my house.”

And Joseph did.

On the next night, Joseph stayed home, too.

He didn't call; he didn't walk by David's house.

But on the following night, he did go out,
and as he passed David's house,
he noticed that only five candles were lit.

“Stubborn fool,” he said,
“now he's waiting until the last night to light them all.”

On the sixth night, though, no more candles were lit.
Nor on the seventh.

At that point, Joseph started to worry.

When there were no candles burning on the eighth night—the last night—
he knew something must be wrong.

So, he went to the door and knocked and knocked,

but there was no answer, no response.

So he used the spare key to the apartment
that David had given him years before (just in case).

When he opened the door, there sat his old friend,
slumped in his chair in the living room,
his chin down toward his chest.

“Oh, my dear friend, what have you done?” cried Joseph.

His heart filled with remorse.

They had been through so much together,
and now, nearing life’s end, they had allowed this silly argument
about how to light the candles separate them.

How could he have been such a fool, Joseph thought.

He walked to the window,
and taking a box of matches out of his coat pocket,
and then taking a single match in hand, he struck it
and lit the sixth, the seventh, and the eighth candles on the menorah—
so that on this, the last night of Chanukah,
all the candles were burning brightly.

He stood at the window, and through his tear-filled eyes,
gazed at the candles all aglow.

Then, he heard the voice behind him say:
“Ha, you old goat, finally you’ve learned
that the eighth candle can’t be lit until the final night!”

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I often think there’s no more seductive temptation
than the very human urge to be right.

It’s an incredibly satisfying feeling—
especially if we’ve put a great deal of effort
into convincing others of just how correct we are.

But when we look at our lives—
when we look at human history—

how much have we paid along the way for this privilege?

What pain and suffering have we left in life's wake,
all for the satisfaction of being proved right?

As the story of David and Joseph shows,
the price to be paid for that sense of satisfaction is sometimes painfully high.

Giving a good "my-way-or-the-highway" ultimatum
rarely feels as good and gratifying as we think it probably should.

As it turns out, there's often a remarkably short distance
between righteous indignation and self-righteous indignation,
between genuine moral outrage and a feeling of moral superiority.

This was a point I was reminded of recently,
when listening again to Barack Obama's address
after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize many years ago.

I found a great deal in this words to wrestle with,
but the line that grabbed me was one he made
in his extended argument for "Just War."

Speaking of the need to sometimes engage in direct dialogue with repressive
regimes, he acknowledged that doing so lacks
what he called "the satisfying purity of indignation."

"The satisfying purity of indignation."

Whether recognized as such,
this is a quality not entirely unknown amongst many of us.

Now, if you're wondering what any of this has to do with Chanukah,
let me say that it has everything to do with Chanukah.

Beyond the well-known story of the rededication of the Temple,
with its miraculous lamp burning for eight days on just one day's oil,
is a much more complicated and challenging story,
one of conflict and oppression, sacrilege and violence.

Even with the menorah set ablaze,
and with the chocolate gelt, the delightful doughnuts, and dreidel games at hand,
Chanukah is a hard holiday to hold on many levels.

But if we dig below the surface
and plumb the depths of its complexities,
what emerges is a very human story—
one that may, ultimately, be more familiar than the tale of the oil itself.

In the several centuries before the Common Era,
the Jewish people found themselves living, variously,
under the rule of the Persians,
and then, thanks to Alexander the Great,
as part of the Hellenistic kingdoms of Egypt and Syria.²

At that time and in that part of the world,
with all its spiritual and ethnic diversity,
religious persecution was actually quite rare.

If the peace was kept and taxes paid,
the authorities rarely meddled in matters of belief.

And the Jews rarely had reason to rebel.

More often than not, when a conflict arose,
a delegation would go to the king
and work out an agreeable solution.

Under those circumstances, many Jews not only embraced,
but even willingly incorporated elements of Greek culture into their lives.

While some were deeply concerned about Jews being assimilated
into the dominant Hellenistic culture,
things were relatively peaceful until King Antiochus came to power.

For reasons that scholars still don't understand,
something sparked a dramatic shift,
and religious persecution of the Jews suddenly became the order of the day.

An altar to Zeus was erected in the centre of the Temple in Jerusalem,
and key practices, such as circumcision and keeping Sabbath, were forbidden.

Ritual sacrifices were to be made no longer to Yahweh, but to other gods.

Now, as you might imagine, none of this went over so well.

² I've drawn primarily on Shaye J.D. Cohen's *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, 21-23.

Tradition teaches that the first Jew to attempt making such a sacrifice was killed by a priest named Mattathias, who with his five sons fled to the hills for their safety.

In time, one of those sons, Judas Maccabeus, raised an army of 6,000.

Exactly three years after the statue of Zeus was erected in the temple, Judas and his followers overthrew their Greek rulers, and then they purified and rededicated the temple in a festival lasting eight days.

This rebellion is the first recorded struggle for religious freedom, and an important turning point in resisting the assimilation of Judaism into the context of surrounding cultures.

And while that sounds and is a laudable thing, we would do well to remember that the revolt pitted reform-minded Jews against more orthodox Jews, the Maccabees, who wished to keep the faith exactly the way they had found it.

During the revolt, the Maccabees expelled or killed many of the Jews who were the “old guard” in Jerusalem, for not having kept the faith as pure as they thought it should be.

What has long been viewed as a struggle between the Jews and their outsider oppressors is more likely to have been a civil war between the orthodox Jews from the countryside and the urban Jewish reformers in Jerusalem, who had welcomed and embraced the influences of Greek culture.³

So, as you can see, this makes for a somewhat complicated holiday for us as Unitarian Universalists.

On one hand, it was a great victory for religious freedom; on the other, the theological conservatives were the ones who won.

It was a mixed day for liberal religion.

In time, the well-known story of the oil and long-burning lamp emerged to soften the hard edges of the historical record; which not only put a positive spin (and added God’s blessing)

³ Schultz, Joseph P. Schultz, *Judaism and the Gentile Faiths: Comparative Studies in Religion*. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 155.

on the rededication of the temple,
but also avoided upsetting the authorities
when the Jews once again found themselves under foreign rule.

Turns out that the public celebration of a past revolt
was considered poor form, if not downright dangerous,
when living under Roman occupation.

So, it's fair to ask, some 22 centuries after the fact,
just what this story, when deconstructed a bit, has to say to us?

Plenty.

I, for one, find it a much richer story,
and much more satisfying than simply celebrating
the oil that kept on burning for more than a week.

I've never been that big on miracles, anyway,
and the messy story with its layers upon layers of conflict
seems to at least have a real ring of truth about it.

This version of the story has a great deal more to teach us.

The first lesson I take from this more nuanced reading
is that real religious freedom has to mean real religious freedom for everyone,
for those who hold to the old ways,
as well as for those pushing the boundaries of belief.

While I can appreciate the genuine fears of assimilation
any minority group might feel—
and absolutely abhor the kind of religious violence
that would defile the sacred space of another
or require people to violate the core commitments of their faith,
I am sobered by this cautionary tale—that reminds us
of how easily the oppressed can become the oppressor.

The historical story of Chanukah, then,
arguably calls us away from self-righteousness
to a place of humility and curiosity,
that we might extend true tolerance to others,
especially those who find themselves in the minority,
whether that be in our culture at large,
or within the very culture of our own congregation.

It is important to remember that there are many ways
to light the candles that bring light to the world.

A second lesson I draw from this understanding of Chanukah
is the recognition that our UU approach to religion,
our mixing and melding of different traditions,
our constant evolution and openness to new understandings,
is objectionable, if not downright threatening, to some.

One of my professors in divinity school,
a prominent Jewish scholar,
who is well-acquainted with UU students,
and taught a good number of us through the years at Harvard,
pulls no punches in decrying what he calls our “salad bowl” faith.⁴

He finds our hyphenated, postmodern faith
lacking in integrity and our rituals illegitimate,
when untethered from the authority of Biblical law and tradition.

Now, this is, of course, a matter where we must agree to disagree.

But I think it’s important for us to be aware of this kind of critique,
mindful of how we relate to those from other faiths,
and cognizant of how we utilize rituals from traditions not our own.

There are many ways to light the candles—
but for those on the liberal end of the religious spectrum,
we must do so with integrity and care,
with respect for the traditions from which various rituals come,
and with deep regard from the cultures that practice them.

The last lesson I would hold up for you concerns commitment.

While we might wish the Maccabees had found within themselves
a greater capacity for tolerance of their fellow Jews,
we cannot say that they showed any lack of commitment to their ideals.

I don’t know about you, but I am usually quite uncomfortable, if not nervous,
around people who are absolutely convinced they possess the truth.

Not only can such certainty be tedious,
it is, of course, all too often dangerous.

⁴ Jon D. Levenson, “The Problem with Salad Bowl Religion,” *First Things*, December 1997.

But I do admire those who are inspired by their faith
to a level of dedication that makes a difference in this world.

To wit, I'm a bit envious of the Jewish law that requires menorahs
be placed in a window where they can be seen by others.

This is no hiding one's light under a bushel.

At many points in history, this has been no small commandment,
as it came with a certain level of risk for Jews to make their religious identity
known.

And with the worrisome rise of anti-Semitism we are seeing in our own time,
there is, unfortunately, once again, some risk involved
in lighting a menorah and placing it on the windowsill to be seen by passersby.

I thought of telling you this morning that a new by-law has been passed
requiring every UU household to place a flaming chalice on their windowsill. . .

But the truth is that such an act of faith and identity
cannot be meaningfully commanded or compelled.

It can, however, be inspired.

So, let us, during this Festival of Lights,
be inspired by every menorah we happen to see
to truly cherish religious freedom—
for others as much or more than for ourselves;
to honour our differences of belief,
and seek ever greater integrity within our own;
and to consider the depth of our own dedication
to this faith that is unfolding ever and always.

In closing, I leave you with these words of blessing
from UU minister Mark Belletini:

“The Miracle of Hanukkah”

The miracle is not that oil lasts,
but that our hope lasts, despite disappointment.
Barukh atah, tiqvah! Blest are you, hope!

The miracle is not that fire illumines,
but that we grow brighter.
Barukh atah, zohar! Blest are you, brightness!

The miracle is not that people tell ancient stories,
but that people dare to live their own stories.
Barukh atah, midrashim! Blest are you, stories!

The miracle is not that tyranny is resisted,
but that resistance recreates us into new beings.
Barukh atah, khadash. Blest are you, new being.

The miracle is not that courage exists,
but that courage does not, every time,
have to ball itself into a fist...
Barukh atah, khayil. Blest are you, courage.

With our one candle burning,
may we do our part to bring forth the miracles
of bright hope, stories of new being, and a heart of courage.

Now and always.

Amen.