

First Parish Unitarian Universalist, Bridgewater, MA
“Miracles & Martyrs”
Sunday, December 6, 2015 - 10:30am

Thought for Contemplation: “By bravely giving up my life now, I will show myself worthy of my old age and leave to the young a noble example of how to die a good death willingly and nobly for the revered and holy laws.”

-2 Maccabees 6:27-28

Reading "Religious Belief and Religious Tolerance,"
Rabbi Jeffrey Wohlberg, Adas Israel Congregation, Washington, DC

He's Orthodox, and it's from a sermon around the time of Christmas in 2004 – but you will find echoes of these issues this year as well – notably in the outrage over the simple red of Starbucks' holiday cups – no mention of Christmas! An attack on religion! Rabbi Wohlberg said,

.... The truth of the matter is, that while Chanukah and Christmas are two very different holidays, this year they both had something in common. Some people tried to take them away from us!

This attempt was made manifest in different ways; Federated department stores — owners of Macy's — told their managers to avoid displaying "Merry Christmas" banners, only "Seasons Greetings" was deemed appropriate. New York City's Mayor Bloomberg said that the tree he lit outside of City Hall was not a Christmas tree but a "holiday tree." And the founder of the company producing "Chrimukkah" cards (for Interfaith couples or those wishing to send greetings for both holidays) said, "Our intention wasn't to merge the religious aspects but rather the secular aspects of the holidays." But that's the whole problem! Chanukah is not a secular holiday, and neither is Christmas!

Chanukah is a holiday that celebrates a victory for religious liberty and freedom. Had the Maccabees lost the battle there would be no Judaism today. Indeed, there would be

no Christianity. In fact, until the 5th Century there was a day in the Church calendar commemorating the Maccabees! Even more, it's very possible that Christians were more familiar with the story than Jews were. The Book of the Maccabees was included in the Christian Bible, not the Jewish one. The events and personalities of the Chanukah story were used by Christians as archetypes for Christian ideals. Jewish martyrs, ready to give their lives for their faith, served as an inspiration for Christians facing persecution at the hands of the Romans. Everyone understood there was nothing "secular" about the Maccabees' victory and it certainly should not be celebrated in a secular way. If it is, its whole message is lost!

Similarly, Christmas deserves to be celebrated by Christians for what it is: A religious holiday, not a secular one.... I know many Jews psychologically bar their doors when someone goes on TV and says this is a Christian country. A statement like that bothers me as well. But sometimes we go overboard....

The fact of the matter is, America is not a Christian country, but an overwhelming majority of Americans are Christian! Why shouldn't Christmas be celebrated across our country? But I say it shouldn't be celebrated because it's a secular holiday. To me, that robs Christians of one of their most sacred days. It should be celebrated in America because 75% of Americans are Christians. And the other 25% aren't being forced to observe it. You want to get up early on Dec. 25th and go to work? Nobody's stopping you! But at the same time, nobody is forcing you to bring a Christmas tree into your home!

Dealing with issues of church and state is a central issue of our time. Most every country is now confronting it. But whereas in Islamic countries the effort from the very beginning was to impose religion and whereas in European countries, since the French Revolution, the effort was made to free people from religion, America was created to free people to practice their religion. And the freedom to practice requires not secularizing our religions, and not blurring the differences between religions, but learning to respect each other's religious beliefs.... The enemies of Judaism and Christianity are no longer each other. We both share common enemies — atheism, materialism, warfare, poverty, bigotry and ignorance, and tragically, to some degree, Islam. And the goals and messianic dreams of Judaism and Christianity are shared in common as well — justice, brotherhood, love and peace.

So let's put the "Ch" back into Chanukah! And, yes, let Christians put Christ back into Christmas. Let us not attempt to secularize our religions, or to blur our religious differences. Let us learn to respect each other's religion. Then there will truly be "peace on earth and goodwill toward all men" ... and women as well!

Ser mon “Miracles & Martyrs” Rev. Paul Sprecher

Isaac Bashevis Singer tells this story about Hanukkah in his book *The Power of Light*:

During World War II, after the Nazis had bombed and burned the Warsaw ghetto, a boy and a girl were hiding in one of the ruins—David, fourteen years old, and Rebecca, thirteen.

It was winter and bitter cold outside.... Every few days David would go

out to search for food. All the stores had been destroyed in the bombing, and David sometimes found stale bread, cans of food, or whatever else had been buried....

[One night David finally returned from his foraging with a feast and a surprise. When they finished their feast, Rebecca asked] "What is the surprise?"

"Rebecca, today is the first day of Hanukkah, and I found a candle and some matches."

"Hanukkah tonight?"

"Yes."

"Oh, how wonderful!"

[David lit a match, lighted the candle, and] pronounced the benediction over the Hanukkah candle, and Rebecca said, "Amen." They had both lost their families, and they had good reason to be angry with God for sending them so many afflictions, but the light of the candle brought peace into their souls. That glimmer of light, surrounded by so many shadows, seemed to say without words: Evil has not yet taken complete dominion. A spark of hope is still left.

For some time David and Rebecca had thought about escaping from Warsaw [to link up with the partisans in the forest.... Now, by the light of the Hanukkah candle, [they] suddenly felt renewed courage....

David had found an opening to a sewer which he thought might lead to the other side..., [and they] were soon on their way through the ruins. They came to

passages so narrow they had to crawl on hands and knees. But the food they had eaten, and the joy the Hanukkah candle had awakened in them, gave them the courage to continue....

Many miracles seemed to happen that Hanukkah night. [There was] a complete blackout, [and the bitter cold meant that] there were fewer Gestapo guards. David and Rebecca managed to leave the sewer and steal out of the city without being caught. [After a week they found the partisans....] It was the last day of Hanukkah, and that evening the partisans lit eight candles. Some of them played dreidel on the stump of an oak tree while others kept watch.

From the day David and Rebecca met the partisans, their life became like a tale in a storybook. They joined more and more refugees who all had but one desire—to settle in the land of Israel....

The Jews of Israel greeted them with a love that made them forget their suffering. They were the first refugees who had reached the Holy Land, and they were offered all the help and comfort that could be given. Rebecca and David found relatives in Israel who accepted them with open arms, and although they had become quite emaciated, they were basically healthy and recovered quickly. After some rest they were sent to a special school where foreigners were taught modern Hebrew.... When Rebecca was eighteen, she and David were married.

[Singer says,] “I know all this because David and Rebecca told me their story one Hanukkah evening.... David and I were playing dreidel with their little son, Menahem

Eliezer, named after both of his grandfathers. David told me that this large wooden dreidel was the same one the partisans had played with on that Hanukkah evening in the forest in Poland. Rebecca said to me, "If it had not been for that little candle David brought to our hiding place, we wouldn't be sitting here today. That glimmer of light awakened in us a hope and strength we didn't know we possessed. We'll give the *dreidel* to Menahem Eliezer when he is old enough to understand what we went through and how miraculously we were saved."¹

Singer's story is an example of a miracle of Hanukkah. The story of how the holiday came to be is a little more ambiguous, though. Michael Strassfeld, in his book *The Jewish Holidays*, concludes his summary of Hanukkah this way:

Hanukkah is the most historically documented of the Jewish holidays. We have early sources for the story in the First and Second Books of the Maccabees and in the works of Josephus. We have somewhat later accounts in the Talmud and other rabbinic literature. There is even a medieval work called ... The Scroll of Antiochus, which is modeled after the biblical Book of Esther. The problem we face is that in none of these accounts do we find the story [of the of the menorah that burned for eight days] as it is popularly known.²

So, the miraculous oil that stayed alight for eight days when it should have gone out after one doesn't appear in stories for some three hundred years, when it's described in the *Talmud*. It seems odd that so central a part of the holiday should be documented so late in the development of the tradition, especially given that the events behind the

original establishment of this holiday are better documented than any other Jewish celebration.

There are several reasons why the holiday took so long to be officially established by the religious authorities. While the battle waged by a small number of Jews loyal to their tradition more than 160 years before the birth of Jesus resulted in the liberation of the nation and certainly saved the traditional heart of their religious practices – circumcision, temple sacrifices, kosher laws, the teaching of the Torah and so on – it did not result in a political system that was admirable or longstanding, and it encouraged martyrdom in defense of religion, fomenting doomed uprisings, and even slaughtering Jews who had become more secular. There was also the uncomfortable fact that much of the impetus for abandoning traditional Jewish religious practice had come from Jewish leaders who themselves were embarrassed by what seemed to them to be primitive superstitions that they were happy to leave behind to participate in the more “modern” Greek way of life.

Unfortunately, the leaders who had defeated the Greeks were themselves corrupt and tyrannical, only to be followed by still greater oppression of the Jews by the Romans. Then, some thirty years after Jesus was crucified, a revolt against the Romans led by fanatics inspired by the Maccabees resulted in a still greater catastrophe – the destruction of Jerusalem and of the temple itself, along with the expulsion of the Jewish religious leadership from Jerusalem. Christianity, founded by Jews, established itself as an independent religion in opposition to Judaism and its traditional practices. Finally,

there was one more rebellion against the Romans in 132 C.E., led by Simon Bar Kochba, who had been declared by some of the Rabbis to be their messiah. This resulted in yet another military defeat at a cost of more than half a million lives, followed by the expulsion of all Jews from Jerusalem. It was in the wake of this seemingly unending series of catastrophes for the Jewish people that the Rabbis sat down to answer the question, “What is Hanukkah?”

Here is a contemporary reflection on that question from the *New Jersey Jewish News*:

What is Hanukka?

The rabbis were asking this question in the Talmud, aware that the story of the Maccabees and the miracle of the oil were subject to many interpretations.

Is it a holiday of religious freedom? After all, ... Hanukka’s villains are those who would suppress religious freedom, and its heroes are those who fight for it.

Is it a holiday about resisting assimilation? Like many of the people conquered by the Hellenists, the Jews were surely tempted to adopt their conquerors’ ways — and certainly many did....

Is it a holiday about Zionism? For centuries, the story of the Maccabees inspired Jews in their dreams of Israel....

Is it a holiday about hope? We light the menorah during the darkest time of the year, when dark days might lead to dark thoughts. But the number of candles increases each day, increasing the light and symbolizing our hope that things will get better.

In fact, Hanukka is a holiday about all these things, even when the lessons seem contradictory. That, after all, is the Jewish way, and another

lesson: We come to our celebrations both as individuals and as members of a people. We find our own meanings in our rituals — but we find them together. It's the happy paradox of a Happy Hanukka.³

As Unitarian Universalists, we have tended to prefer the interpretation that understands the holiday as a celebration of religious freedom and toleration, admiring the plucky few who defeated a mighty army to practice their religion in the manner they had been taught. The problem with this viewpoint is that the victors were not in fact interested in religious toleration; they opposed efforts to change the practice of Judaism by other Jews, and were willing to slaughter other Jews who disagreed. For us, this is a little reminiscent of the Puritans who founded our First and Second and Third Parishes in these parts; they fled to Massachusetts so they could freely practice their religion as they chose, but they then resolutely refused to allow others to worship as *they* chose, driving Anne Hutchinson, Roger Williams and many others out of the colony as heretics. If we were to transport ourselves back in time, our own sympathies would more likely be on the side of the so-called Hellenizers, those Jews who were attempting to modernize their religion and make it compatible with the more universal religion of the Greeks. This struggle highlights a potential weakness of our own universalism when we lose track of the particulars of our religious traditions and begin to wish that everyone would adopt our wiser and more “modern” willingness to see what is common across all religions and lose track of the particulars which give each religion its unique strength. Rabbi Irving Greenberg offers this critique of universalism in the context of Hanukkah:

One theme [of Hanukkah] is the clash of the universal with the particular.

Hellenism saw itself as the universal human culture, open to all.... [The conflict] preserved the stubborn Jewish insistence on “doing their own thing” religiously; never mind the claims of universalism that only if all are citizens of one world and one faith will there truly be one humanity. By not disappearing, Jews have continued to force the world – down to this day – to accept the limits of centralization. Jewish existence has been a continued stumbling block to whatever political philosophy, religion, or economic system has claimed the right to abolish all distinctions for “the higher good of humanity.”

The Maccabee revolution made clear that a universalism that denies the rights of the particular to exist is inherently totalitarian and will end up oppressing people in the name of one humanity. Universalism must surrender its overweening demands and accept the universalism of pluralism. Only when the world admits that oneness comes out of particular existences, linked through overarching unities, will it escape the inner dynamics of conformity that lead to repression and cruelty.⁴

I like the term “universalism of pluralism.” Our own Universalism arose out of the belief that every person – everyone in the whole universe – would ultimately be saved. In the context of the times that Universalism was founded, this meant that everyone would eventually get to heaven. For me, this means that we are not in a position to judge the particulars of each person’s religious beliefs and practices, but that our task is to acknowledge the particulars as they are while still finding common cause and common purpose in the shared humanity that unites us all; that despite differences and disagreements, *every* person must be treated as having inherent worth and dignity, as our first UU Principle puts it. As the whole world becomes more tightly knit by

communication, transportation and trade, Hanukkah is a good reminder to honor the differences, to tolerate the pluralism, to insist on maintaining the particulars, including our own.

Today, it is the pluralism represented by American Muslims that is suspect. Since the attack on the World Trade Center and more intensely since the heavily armed massacre in San Bernadino last Wednesday, Muslims in general have been regarded by many with unwarranted suspicion that has led to threats, vandalism and violence.⁵ Several presidential candidates have singled them out for special treatment as aliens in America; there are suggestions that all Muslims should register, that some mosques should be closed down, and that a Muslim should not be eligible to become President of these United States. And of course there have long been spurious claims that our President is a secret Muslim – a CNN/ORC poll last September found that 43 percent of Republicans and 29 percent of all Americans hold this opinion, while 20 percent of all adults continue to believe he was born outside the United States despite our President having produced his birth certificate.⁶

Given these un-American attacks on our Muslim brothers and sisters, we as Unitarian Universalists need to take steps to stand side by side with them and to support their right to religious freedom and tolerance as much as any other community of faith. Our long history of support for Freedom, Reason and Tolerance demands no less of us as we take our rightful place as proponents of the “universalism of pluralism.”

In the end, Hanukkah was too popular for the Rabbis to ignore, even though they were troubled by some of the unfortunate outcomes of the struggle of the Maccabees to free their people from the Greeks. It had become an important part of their religious life and so they found a miracle after all – the miracle of the oil that lasted eight days instead of only one. That miracle in turn marks Hanukkah as one of the almost universal festivals of light that fall around this time of the year, a celebration of the reality that on the shortest days of the year, when the light is more and more fleeting, there is still hope for a return of the sun. That hope has kept many alive in the depths of despair, and that hope is shared with Christianity’s festival of lights, Christmas. It is therefore appropriate that the Christmas star should help intensify the light of the menorah, while the menorah does the same for the Christmas star.

May we share the hope of this season of lights, and spread the love that makes hope possible. Thus may we all join in the joy of the season.

May it Be So, and Amen

¹ Excerpted from: Isaac Bashevis Singer “The Power of Light,” *The Power of Light*, New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1980, pp. 53-60.

² Michael Strassfeld, *The Jewish Holidays: A Guide and Commentary*, New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1985, pp. 161-162.

³ “Many Meanings,” *New Jersey Jewish News* editorial, Dec. 9, 2009, <http://njewishnews.com/article/editorial/many-meanings/>

⁴ Rabbi Irving Greenberg, *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays*, New York: Summit Books, 1988, pp. 278-279.

⁵ Laurie Goodstein, "Muslims in America Condemn Extremists and Fear Anew for Their Lives," *New York Times*, Dec. 4, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/05/us/muslims-in-america-condemn-extremists-and-fear-anew-for-their-lives.html?smid=fb-share> accessed 12/4/15.

⁶ Peter Schroeder, "Poll: 43 percent of Republicans believe Obama is a Muslim," *The Hill*, September 13, 2015, 03:18 pm, <http://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/253515-poll-43-percent-of-republicans-believe-obama-is-a-muslim>