

Sunday December 13, 2009

"Hanukkah"

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This weekend potato latkes were once again fried up and covered in apple sauce. Fresh candles were brought out for the menorah. Ah, and yes not to forget the donuts or the delicious challah, or sweet bread often made with chocolate or the gelt, those chocolate coins used to gamble with the dreidel (or top).

Last Friday was the beginning of the eight day festival of the lights or the winter holy days of Judaism known as Hanukkah. It will conclude next Friday at sunset. And within this time the story of Hanukkah will be retold and with each day another candle and prayer of praise will fill the oncoming dark of evening to light the corner of the rooms of Jewish family and friends with the richness of this religious tradition.

Every year when this season approaches I find myself being thankful for my religious roots. Judaism as a culture is matrilineal and my mother was Jewish, so by conservative Jewish law I'm a Jew too, in a way, even though my tradition of birth is Unitarian Universalist. Because of my mother I know some of the stories of

Judaism and we celebrate Hanukkah and Christmas both in our home.

In this world of polarities where claiming a single religion is the norm this can sound strange to some and sacrilegious to others. But in our Unitarian Universalist tradition, we can recognize the meaning offered by both. That's one of the unique pieces a truly liberal religious institution offers, a place for folks with roots in varied religious traditions.

Actually, Judaism is much closer to all of us than many Unitarian Universalists would imagine. Although we draw on and claim that other tradition of Abraham Christianity most often, our historical ties to Judaism reach much further back, hundreds of years before the reformation. We understand Judaism to be one of our religious historical antecedents, part of our genesis, and list it in our sources.

In fact what was to become Unitarian theology and Universalist theosophy were both born as sects of Judaism between 200 BC and 70 AD in the Midrash, the rabbinical discourse on scriptural texts. Eventually they became articulated as distinct doctrinal concepts or teaching around 150 AD.

So it is line with our history as Unitarian Universalists that we should remember, even observe if you wish to, the richness of Hanukkah. In fact, this morning we all become Jews by simply attending as we ask this one question from the Talmud: repeat after me; ‘What is Hanukkah?’

This question, ‘What is Hanukkah, or Ai Hanukkah?’ is a primary question asked of all Jews in the Talmud. The Talmud is the rabbinical writings that set religious authority for Orthodox Judaism.

Most know Hanukkah as eight holy days in winter or the festival of lights. Like all Jewish holidays it is tied to a lunar cycle that shifts from year to year. It is not particularly a high holy day for Jewish people. Rather it is a fun and rich time for family and friends. But because it falls around Christmas time, it has become the most recognized of Jewish holy days among gentiles or those who are not Jewish.

According to the Talmud, Hanukkah is a celebration of remembrance of the defeat of the Hellenistic Syrians and the recapturing of the temple in Jerusalem by the Maccabee children somewhere in the first century B.C.E. At this time Alexander the

Great had conquered the Near East, which included Israel. Then after Alexander's death the empire started to fall apart and the area that was Israel fell under the control of the Seleucid dynasty, what we know now as Syria, around 160 B.C.E.

The King of that land, Antiochus Epiphanies, decreed all people under his rule should Hellenize, become more like the Greeks of the time. Therefore practices which were traditional in the Jewish world such as Sabbath and circumcision were outlawed. These decrees had a mixed reception among the Jews: some were concerned yet it seems that others were not.

During this time the Temple in Jerusalem was turned into a gymnasium, which was a Hellenistic or Greek idea of religious worship or spiritual practices. Olympic gatherings and the like were all about divinity within the human body. There is reason to believe that this is why we call spiritual efforts “exercises”, because of this Greek perspective. Hellenistic religion was also Pantheistic, or faithful to many Gods and Goddesses.

At some point the Greeks began to sacrifice pigs in the gym as a religious act. Some maintain it was a kind of final claim on the space which had originally been the temple. We really don't know

the motivations—just that the practice started. Again this practice was apparently seen as OK by some Jews, while it really bothered others.

The Greek sacrifice of pigs continued to spread. One day in a small village the Greeks set up an altar and called the community to bring a pig to sacrifice in accordance to Greek religious rule. An old priest by the name of Mattathias just couldn't handle it and went mad attacking the man sacrificing the pig and killing him.

A fight ensued and developed into a major conflict with the Greeks but Mattathias and his five sons had managed to escape into the hills. From there they mounted a guerrilla war against the Greeks and their Jewish allies.

When Mattathias dies leadership was passed to his son Judah, the Maccabee, and he continued the fight that led to the eventual defeat of Antiochus and retaking of the temple.

“And it is said on the day of conquest they could only find one cruse of oil, enough for one day, but when they filled the temple menorah with it, it burned for eight days.”

That is the common tale of Hanukkah, remembering the miracle of the oil and the Maccabees and the war they fought. It is one of the most culturally documented Jewish holidays with lots of information to draw from.

However, this is not the only story. As more archeological information and more old writings have come to the surface, another history emerges. Actually, there is no mention of Hanukkah, the lights or oil in the Jewish Torah, the Hebrew bible, and that presents a problem. Hanukkah, the miracle of the lamp can't be found in any historical documentation or scripture. Neither is there any mention of the laws for lighting of the Hanukkah candles in the Mishnah, the early rabbinical works about ritual and proper observation of holy days of the Torah.

The earliest version of what we know as the Hanukkah story is found in the first and second Book of Maccabees. There is great detail about the cleansing and rededication of the temple. The relighting of the lamps is mentioned, but there is no oil, no miracle of the lamp.

In this story the Hanukkah ritual of the lighting of the menorah is actually a re-design of a much older holiday called Sukkot.

Sukkot is a winter season ritual about abundance observed at the end of harvest time just before winter. People build small enclosures of sticks and grass in which to live for seven days.

"You shall live in huts seven days, all citizens of Israel shall live in huts in order that all future generations may know that I made the Israelite people live in huts when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I the lord your God."

When the Maccabees were in the mountains waging war they were not able to observe Sukkot. So Hanukkah was developed with eight days as a kind of way to do Sukkot while in exile.

So that's where it seems the miracle of the lights finds its way into the Hanukkah story, through Sukkot and the remembrance of the Exodus. If true, it is a classic example of doctrine turned to dogma.

Only when one looks at the Gomorra, a collection of later rabbinical materials is there reference to Hanukkah. And it is there that the question is asked: "What is Hanukkah?" and we first see the miracle of the lights.

And the prescribed answer for the big question is there as well:

“The Greeks defiled the temple and when the Children of the Maccabees defeated them they found only one curse of oil with its seal unbroken. It contained enough oil for only one day, but a miracle happened and the menorah burned for eight days.”

Still the story of the Maccabee war and victory over the Greeks persisted, and the prayers that are recited at the opening and closing of each of the eight days of Hanukkah stress the military victory.

But for those who study history and culture always know that there are many sides to the same story. Yes, there is still another story of Hanukkah yet, which has quite a different take. This story questions the role of the Greeks and Antiochus in the whole deal.

This story sees only a veneer of Hellenism in Israel in the second century B.C.E. Jewish Scholars maintain that Antiochus being a polytheist would not have had any real concern over the Jews continuing to worship their own God, as there were already so

many Gods in his own pantheon, it shouldn't have bothered him a whole lot for one more to be around.

So in this version the finger of conflict points to a Jewish aristocratic group that has become known as Hellenizers, adopting Greek ways. They would change their names like Joshua to Jason and that worked to make themselves more in line with the Greek culture and commerce, to the point of developing and undergoing extremely painful operations to simulate a reversal of circumcision. The Hellenizers also wanted to form a Greek Polis or City State, Antioch of Jerusalem. Understanding the potential for economic and social opportunities this type of metropolitan expansion would bring, they were the ones who actually established the gymnasium in the temple.

When a segment of the population became opposed to these Hellenizers they appealed to Antiochus and asked him to back them up with Syrian troops. A civil war ensued which eventually led to a Jewish state.

The Maccabees who had been primarily religious people shifted their emphasis to one of nationalism. They created the Hasmonaean dynasty, a short lived Jewish State, which did in the

end become more Greek in its culture. Over time they too were eventually all killed off by Herod who rose to power under the Romans.

These are the stories, and good ones all; take your pick. For the stories are just a gateway to remember who it is we are, a way to keep true to the passage of time and the road on which we are walking. We no doubt will continue to evolve these stories while keeping the patterns of the meaning as well as we can, in ritual and faith.

It seems as humans we often carry with us pieces of the past which we would do better to leave behind – and it seems we leave behind pieces we might wish we had bought along. That is always the dilemma, and one most often deliberated in hindsight.

Hanukkah is a tradition that in its evolution has a long and varied journey. But today the latkes and challah, the gelt and the dreidel continue unaffected by these stories, and that is the joy of Hanukkah.

So, at this time of celebration, ritual and joy, may this morning deepen your understanding of Hanukkah, with its own magic

miracle story. Choose whatever of these stories, or parts thereof that resonate for you, but keep faith with the power of ritual and the transforming truth of life this Hanukkah season. Remember that in the vast diversity of religious traditions, gifts await.

On Hanukkah some may give a small gift each of the eight days, while in other homes, only one gift is given. But the gift or gifts, and the special foods made and enjoyed are about how a people gather to share and strengthen community. The games that are played are really about the relationship of immediate family and a deep relationship to the stories and history of a people. And as the prayers are read and the candles lit on each of the eight nights of Hanukkah, know that it is a celebration of light—not only the light of knowledge and history but the light of evolving culture.

As much as Hanukkah hearkens back to the exodus and liberation of a people, it continues to shine its light on what it means to be dancing through this life. We remember where we came from, celebrate the spirit of human freedom and know that we have a choice to use this wisdom to evolve beyond our past. Like all good holy days, we once more step up with memory, faith and celebration, bringing forward the best that is within us, into a world which continues to unfold in grace and in promise. May we

never forsake this call to life lived well today. Or in the Jewish toast 'to life:' "L'chayim."

Have a great holiday season.

Shalom.