

Late November 2010

Spoiler Alert: this is a slightly challenging look at the Festival of Lights - I'm just feeling a little cranky

Dear friends,

It's that season again... from the miracle of the oil to the miracle of the wise men finding the baby Jesus, this is the time of year that clearly is designed to bring hope in the darkness of the winter days. When I was a child the teachings about Chanukah's miracle were absolute. I heard no hesitancy in the voices of my teachers, my rabbi or my family as the story was told. God intervened in the redemption of the Temple and kept the holy lights burning for eight days while more "kosher" oil was found. Thus was the Temple rededicated (Chanukah) to serve God. Unfortunately for those of us who learned that version of the story, it seems that the miracle of the oil part was simply added to an old military story many years later. This fairly major change gave the holiday its spiritual content and headed us away from honoring the Hasmonean dynasty that followed this war, since it was corrupt and not worthy of God's intervention.

The often overlooked possible miracle (if you're in need of one at this time of year) is that a small force of Maccabees beat the much larger forces of the Syrians who had desecrated the Temple in a failed attempt to overwhelm the Israelites --both spiritually and physically. Historians now tell us that world politics distracted the Syrians and made the "win" not quite so miraculous -- but at least it makes some sense. The oil thing is a story for children, with the emphasis on story. Guerrilla forces always fight for a belief -- not just because someone tells them to do so. There is a power in that truth that children are too innocent to understand.

Originally, the "miracle of the oil" was not part of the story -- this was a great military victory. The newer (and more God-centered) story that we old fogies were taught repeats the victory over the Syrians but also clearly implies that it was because of God's intervention on the side of the righteous Maccabees. Combining the miracle of the oil and the defeat of the Syrians into one good winter holiday turned out to be a great idea. Pride, strength and God as our Defender in all things is affirmed in one holiday. It's not nearly as big a holiday in other parts of the world... but in America, Chanukah has developed a complex about that other big winter holiday, celebrating the birth of Jesus. The complex seems to have developed into a bizarre competition -- but I'm not going there. I have no standing to criticize what some think is truth and some think is story if it's not my truth or my story.

But I do have standing to criticize and be amazed by the fact that in America, Chanukah is the third most observed Jewish holiday, following Passover and Yom Kippur. Why? So many other cultures have managed to survive without a holiday involving more gift giving than spiritual growth. If this is an attempt at assimilation, it's a little embarrassing. Of all the possible choices to make to "protect" our children from feeling different at this time of year, trying to compete with Christmas is a losing proposition on more counts than I can possibly list.

I, personally, would like to opt out of the gift giving. I'm not being a Grinch -- I just think that gift giving is a secular experience when it's expected and the burden of figuring out who you will buy for and what you will buy takes a great deal of energy -- some of it negative -- and why I'm doing it still confuses me. Religion/faith/cultural identity all stand or fall for me on the significance of a godly event being honored on a festival or holy day or even when I wake up in the morning. There are rarely ribbons or gift cards involved. As you all should know by now, cultural identity is far less important to me than my spiritual identity so I often find myself in conflict with what I would call the Jewish norm.

So, if you'll excuse me, I will return to the pagan within to understand the need to celebrate with light in this dark season... that's an easy one... I love the urge to fight the darkness and almost every culture has a way to light up these short dark days. I want the sense of the holy being present to come as an unexpected gift. That has always been more than enough. Now this is strictly my struggle and I truly believe that there is nothing wrong with giving gifts or lighting candles -- but to call the experience a religious one leaves me cold. When we casually exchange the culturally sensitive "happy holidays" with others we should remember that's just shorthand for "happy holy days". I'm still looking for the holy.

Maybe, while the candles burn, some of these struggles of mine will find common cause... or maybe even comfort...

no answers... just questions...

*Chag Sameach* -- happy festival...

Still dreaming of peace,

Barbara

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