

Hanukkah in a Time of Economic Decline

*Rabbi Simkha Y. Weintraub, LCSW/Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services
Kislev 5771/December 2010*

The story of Hanukkah, as everyone knows, entails a miracle whereby the group of Jews who came to reclaim their defiled Temple in Jerusalem found only a small cruse of oil, barely enough to kindle their candelabrum for a day -- and yet somehow, miraculously, this tiny amount kept their candelabrum brightly aflame for more than a week.

This is a challenging season for anyone who is struggling, depressed, or alone. The days are shorter and colder, and it somehow feels like everyone else is content and happy, if not thriving and partying -- while we are alone, with little to celebrate, collapsing under our burdens, 'out in the cold' and 'in the dark.'

And we are living in a time of substantial constriction -- not only are belts tightened but careers and homes have been lost, dreams evaporating, hopes dashed.. Resilient and resistant, we may suppress this reality, but it is, in fact, daily life for so many -- marked by anxiety and grief, and for many, despair and dread. *How can Hanukkah help us cope with this sense of loss and devastation?*

Hanukkah offers many tools and lessons for those dealing with the downside of the holiday season. What follows are eight possible teachings gleaned from Hanukkah to support those who are troubled and beleaguered this year. Select those that might be of support or inspiration to community members you seek to help.

I. Spirit over Suffering

“Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord of Hosts...”
Zechariah 4:6, from the Prophetic Reading for Shabbat Hanukkah

This assertion, which counters the Hanukkah's story's potential to over-invest us in military prowess, might also suggest the triumph of the Spirit over suffering -- the possibility of spiritual growth and healing even when material comfort is still remote. We reach for the spiritual dimension, for the victory of transcendence and inspiration.

II. The Whole Community

All Jews are, traditionally, obligated to light the Hanukkiah -- including women and children, who, for different reasons, are excluded in the traditional framework from the obligations of many other commandments. The reason given for this universal requirement is that everyone took part in the miracle, the entire nation, *all together*.

Healing depends on the participation of everyone -- it truly takes “the village,” the whole community, to reach for wholeness, comfort, support, and strength.

III. Start with the Rededication of the Self

“The one who comes to purify, is helped (from Above)...”
Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 38b

Hanukkah means “Dedication.” We don’t have to feel that we have arrived, but that *we have re-dedicated ourselves*, re-oriented ourselves in our journey, that we have taken some first, solid steps towards Wholeness and Holiness.

IV. Light One Candle – Building from One to Eight

Way back (*see Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 21b*) Jewish scholars debated whether to commemorate the miracle by lighting eight candles and then progressively lighting fewer and fewer candles (which would, after all, reflect the diminishment of that ancient cruse of oil) or to light one candle and then add lights progressively during the ensuing week. The approach that ‘won out,’ of course, is the latter approach, to go from 1 to 8. Why?

Rather than curse the darkness, we seek to fan the sparks of light -- to find blessing where we can, locate community where it may exist, to treasure moments of joy where we may. A person can’t be asked to suddenly “jump” to 8 lights of joy, but we can help each other build from 1 to 8.

V. Pleasure of/for the Soul

The Gerer Rebbe (*Isaac Meir, died 1866*) explained why a special feast is ordained for Purim but not for Hanukkah. On Purim we celebrate the annulment of a the royal edict to destroy the body; therefore, we partake of an enjoyable meal in order to give pleasure to the body.

On Hanukkah, we were rescued from a decree which would have destroyed our soul. Therefore we chant the psalms of Hallel and gratify our soul.

From Siah Sarfei Kodesh, by J. K. K. Rokotz (Lodz, 1929), vol ii, page 46

VI. From Fast to Feast

When Adam saw the days getting gradually shorter, he said: ‘Woe is me, perhaps because I have sinned, the world around me is being darkened and returned 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 keeping an eight-day fast. But 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.

Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah 8a

We, too, can *move from Fast to Feast*, despite the darkness we feel, with the help of resources in the Jewish community (UJA-Federation’s Connect-to-Care) and tradition.

And just as the days will assuredly grow longer, we light candles to affirm our *relatedness to Nature and the Cosmos*, another critical source of comfort and reassurance for people who may feel disconnected, alienated, out of sync, alone.

VII. 36 Lights: Human Initiative and God’s Response

To the Jewish mystical mind, the initial, proactive awakening of the Hasmoneans is what triggered Divine animation, and together, this human-Divine partnership is what began to redeem the Jewish minority from the oppressive Graeco-Syrian empire.

Kabbalah teaches us that primeval Adam/Eve, created the morning of the sixth day, enjoyed a special light that illuminated their world through Shabbat – 36 hours total. This light was then stored as a treasure to be summoned in dark times, a resource for hope and redemption.

And, indeed, during Hanukkah's eight days, our Shammash candle lights 36 candles, total. In our modest, yet also public, lighting, we affirm in the shortest days of the calendar that Spirit is never extinguished, that through community and tradition we illuminate a better world. We celebrate eight days and not seven, suggesting that the one precious cruse of oil, the earthly awakening, is equal to the seven days of creation, since without mortal initiative, the Divine response would not have been ignited.

Hanukkah comes at the moon's waning, underscoring that we are not drawing on the natural lights of sun, moon, and stars, but on a different dimension, a spiritual light born of human-Divine partnership, pointing to the ultimate redemption in history. God is relying on us to actualize a planet of moral and spiritual light; if everyone lights their own light, godliness and goodness will triumph over darkness.

VIII. Hope not Hype

The simplicity, the very delicacy, of the Hanukkah ritual -- lighting simple candles in the window, with blessing, song, silence, reflection, and togetherness -- is in itself a great resource, pointing to *inner light and warmth*, not outer flash and hype.

And we light the Hanukkiah in the window in order to publicize the miracle. The miracles of life – which are as everyday as a breath, a step, a word – must be acknowledged, advertised, shared, celebrated.