

Historical Overview

(Excerpted from My Jewish Learning.com)

In 168 BCE, the ruler of the Syrian kingdom, Antiochus Epiphanies IV, stepped up his campaign to quash Judaism, so that all subjects in his vast empire - which included the Land of Israel - would share the same culture and worship the same gods. He marched into Jerusalem, vandalized the Temple, erected an idol on the altar, and desecrated its holiness with the blood of swine. Decreeing that studying Torah, observing the Sabbath, and circumcising Jewish boys were punishable by death, he sent Syrian overseers and soldiers to villages throughout Judea to enforce the edicts and force Jews to engage in idol worship.

When the Syrian soldiers reached Modin (about 12 miles northwest of the capital), they demanded that the local leader, Mattathias the *Kohein* (a member of the priestly class), be an example to his people by sacrificing a pig on a portable pagan altar. The elder refused and killed not only the Jew who stepped forward to do the Syrian's bidding, but also the king's representative.

With the rallying cry "Whoever is for God, follow me!" Mattathias and his five sons (Jonathan, Simon, Judah, Eleazar, and Yohanan) fled to the hills and caves of the wooded Judean wilderness.

Joined by a ragtag army of others like them, simple farmers dedicated to the laws of Moses, armed only with spears, bows and arrows, and rocks from the terrain, the Maccabees, as Mattathias' sons, particularly Judah, came to be known, fought a guerilla war against the well-trained, well-equipped, seemingly endless forces of the mercenary Syrian army.

In three years, the Maccabees cleared the way back to the Temple Mount, which they reclaimed. They cleaned the Temple and dismantled the defiled altar and constructed a new one in its place. Three years to the day after Antiochus' mad rampage (*Kislev 25, 165 BCE*), the Maccabees held a dedication (*Hanukkah*) of the Temple with proper sacrifice, rekindling of the golden *menorah*, and eight days of celebration and praise to God. Jewish worship had been reestablished.

The rabbis said that when they reclaimed the Temple, the Hasmoneans found a single cruse of pure oil still bearing the unbroken seal of the high Priest. Although only enough to last one day, it miraculously burned eight days, the amount of time needed to secure a new supply of oil to keep the *menorah* lit. In the following year, the holiday, to be observed with songs and praises, was ordained, a distinction that presented Hanukkah as a rabbinic, and not Hasmonean, proclamation.

REFLECTIONS FOR CHANUKAH- Rabbi Fred Klein

Lighting the Chanukah Menorah- Inner Illuminations

And the land was desolate and void, and darkness upon the face of the deep (Genesis 1:2)

-desolate- this is the exile of Babylonia

-void- this is the exile of Persia

-darkness- this is the exile of Greece

-the deep- this is the exile of Rome (Bereishit Rabbah 2:5)

And a spirit of God hovered over the surface of the water (Genesis ibid)

-and a spirit- this is the spirit of the messiah (Bereishit Rabbah)

This powerful verse- the second in the Torah- describes the chaotic, formless state of reality before God created an ordered universe, defined by meaning and purpose. In the first chapter of Bereishit (Genesis), God did not simply create the universe, but gave the universe meaning. Every creature had its place, every organism had its Divine mandate, every species was declared 'good'. In giving the world form and place, God had given each of God's creations meaning. God's spirit 'hovered over the surface of the water'.

The rabbis, in an ingenious midrash, connect the primordial state of the universe with various historical epochs in Jewish history, specifically our various exiles. This chapter is a metaphor for history! Consider this. We have been exiled to Babylonia, to Persia, and to Rome. Just as God had given form to a chaotic universe, so God will bring the Jewish people back from exile 'to their place', the land of Israel. He will bring a messiah. This concept, so foreign to many, means nothing more than the return of the Jewish people to their proper place in history.

However, one of these exiles is unique, the exile of Greece, symbolized by darkness. In all the other cases, the Jewish people were exiles from the land of Israel. *During the Greek exile, the people were living in Israel!* What does the Greek exile mean, and what does the lighting of the menorah teach us?

We tend to think of exile as a physical and historical condition, but it is ultimately a spiritual condition. There are times in our lives when we feel empty inside, as if we do not know who we are or what our purpose is. In essence, we have forgotten ourselves.

This was the fate of those who lived during the Greek occupation of the Land of Israel. Antiochos IV (175-163 BCE) decreed that Israel should not study the Torah and Jewish traditions, Shabbat and holidays should be desecrated, circumcision was to be outlawed, and pagan temples were to be built throughout Judea. However, these decrees were not only enforced from without, but many Jews themselves supported these changes. Many, impressed by the dominant culture, wanted to 'civilize themselves', and they deserted their tradition which was most fundamental to who they were.

The rabbis compared this exile to darkness because this exile was defined by a lack of clarity and discernment, an inability to know our spiritual roots. It is not a coincidence that the Hebrew letters of the word darkness (*hashecha/ ch-sh-kh-a*) can be inverted to spell forgetfulness (*shichecha/ sh-kh-ch-h*). The exile of Greece was a time when Jews lost their *raison d'être*, their reason for being Jewish. This crisis can happen anywhere, even in the land of Israel.

When the Maccabees came in the year 165 BCE into the Temple, the spiritual center of the Jewish people, the first thing they did was to relight the candles of the Temple. Ultimately the Maccabees would establish national sovereignty, but historically we do not celebrate this event, which occurred over a decade later. Rather, we celebrate a spiritual victory, a rededication of the Temple, the center of Jewish identity. We celebrate that through lighting these candles, they brought forth light from darkness, clarity from doubt, and conviction from apathy.

In the midrash quoted above, the spirit of God hovers over the primordial abyss. As we mentioned, the world began as a formless, chaotic, and dark void. It was then that God declared, "Let there be light"; with that act God begins to create a meaningful universe. The midrash equates this spirit of God with the spirit of the messiah, because we are partners with God in perfecting and creating this world. Just like God declared let there be light, on Chanukah we say to the world, 'Let there be light'.

This historical event is a metaphor for each of us individually. In lighting the candles, we embark on a spiritual journey of illuminating our inner lives. As we look into the candles, we are challenged to look deep within our souls, and to find that inner clarity. For a Jew, this inner clarity must grow out of our collective historical, spiritual, and literary heritage - our Torah of life.

Each soul put into this world is like a candle, a reflection of the light of the Torah (see Proverbs 20:27 and 6:23). According to Jewish mysticism, the Torah was the blueprint of the universe. In this sense, the Torah is not an external text imposed upon us, but reflects our deepest sense about who we are. In lighting the candles we ask God to illuminate this place in our souls.

It is You who lights my candle
Adonai, my God, illuminates the darkness (Psalms 18:29)

Placing the Menorah at the Door

According to Jewish law, the Menorah is ideally placed outside, opposite the mezuzah. For safety reasons, today many put it in the window, but in Israel there are still many who place it in front of their doors. Why this interesting juxtaposition?

Anthropologists have commented about the symbolic importance of the doorway, as it separates between 'inside' and 'outside', 'safety' and 'danger', 'public' and 'private'. It is

a place of transitions and transactions. For this reason, doorways have always been identified as place of danger. The 'magical' dimension of the doorway is underscored in popular Jewish culture, where the mezuzah is often seen as a magical amulet, protecting from evil tidings and sickness.

As American Jews, the doorway metaphor is a useful metaphor for our lives. On the one hand, we come with our own unique perspectives and traditions. On the other hand, we are participants in a larger American society, and identify with many of these values. We are constantly walking 'through the door', and this creates considerable tension.

Historically, Jews have responded to this dynamic in many ways. On one extreme, there have always been those who have chosen to walk through the door and not return. During the time of the Syrian-Greeks, these Jews totally assimilated into the dominant Greek culture. In the open society in which we live, there are unfortunately many who have decided to opt out as well. While many may be idealistic, their values are no longer informed by their heritage. This is tragic.

At the other extreme, there are those who choose to remain inside and shut the door as tightly as possible. The open society in which we live is a seduction, and these people turn their energy inward. Despite the strong education of some of these people, it is often shared with only a select few. In closing the door, Judaism has survived, but has it flourished? In this world, can Judaism have the power to 'transform the world'?

The message of Chanukah is a lesson about how to we walk through that door. At the gates of the door we have the mezuzah, which is a constant reminder of our core values as Jews. Within that small box is a parchment upon which the *shema* is written, the fundamental confession of our faith. In the open society in which we live, we need to be *constantly* educating ourselves about what that verse implies in *our* lives. A bar mitzvah education will not sustain our need for passion, knowledge and meaning as adults. We are a people who have been commanded by God to engage in the study Torah and the performance of mitzvot in order to perfect the world, and the mezuzah reminds us of our constant obligation. However, it is not enough to 'guard the door'.

The menorah is placed at the door, because there is a mitzvah of *pirsumei nisa*, of publicizing the miracle of Chanukah. Our passion as Jews, our commitment, is not just for ourselves, or even our household, but is to be shared with others. In the open society in which we live, there has been no better time to do this. As we step through the door we should be a source of light, just like the menorah. May we play our role in healing our broken world, and bringing light to places where there is not. May we be a 'light unto the nations'.

The Shamash: A Meditation for Lighting the Menorah

In lighting our menorah, we use a special candle called the shamash. Technically, according to Jewish law, the light of the menorah is Holy, and represents the Divine

presence. As such, we cannot use the candles to light other candles or to use the light for 'mundane' purposes. We therefore use a shamash candle to provide natural light and to light the others, thereby preserving the sanctity of the Chanukah lights.

But there is a deeper meaning to all of this. We know that each soul is like a flame which is brought down into this world from God. (Proverbs 20:27) *Each of us is a shamash.* Each of us have the potential to light up the life of another human being. A simple smile, a kind word, and caring touch – all of these can make a difference.

A flame that is distinguished cannot regenerate its own light. There are times in our life that we suffer. Maybe we are lonely or depressed or uninspired. We are like the extinguished candle. Things are dark and we feel alone. It is at these moments that we look to another to ignite us and to inspire us once again. When we light up the life of another, we help them to release their Divine light.

There are eight nights to Chanukah, and each night we add a candle. In doing so, we bring more light into the world. In that same vain, each kindness we do for another person helps to heal them and make them whole once again.

As you light your candles, consider the following meditation.

As I light my candles tonight I ask you to bring hope into my heart tonight, and fill my soul with your healing. May the light of these candles bring to me strength and comfort.

As I light my candles tonight, remind me that there are so many people who are suffering around the world, people who live in dark places. Remind me of those who are afflicted by war, by disease, and by a world that chooses to remain blind.

As I light my candles, I ask You to make me like this shamash. Just as you heal, protect, and sustain me every day, sharing with me Your loving light, allow me to be a source of light to those around me.

As I light my candles tonight, I ask you to empower me to bring light to all those who need it, and to fill my life with opportunities to respond with justice and kindness.

As I light my candles tonight, I ask that you fill every creature with your loving and compassionate light, so each of us may turn towards each other in mutual love and understanding, and that we may all live together under Your Peaceful Wings.

Amen.

Some Good books for Chanukah

A Different Light: The Hanukkah Book of Celebration, by Noam Zion (Shalom Hartman Institute, 2000).

Chanukah: Its History, Observances, and Significance, by Hersh Goldwurm, Meir Zlotowitz (Mesorah Publications, 1981).

The Hanukkah Anthology, by Philip Goodman (Jewish Publication Society, 1992).

Good web resource: <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/holidays/Hanukkah.htm>