

RABBI'S MESSAGE

What's in a Name?

The “holiday season” has gotten me thinking. My first question is: When does the “holiday season” start? We hear about Christmas sales right after Halloween, but the Jewish season is very full before that, with Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, Sukkot and Simchat Torah. But my thoughts about holidays have evolved to thinking about how the names of each special day no longer seem to reflect the original meaning. Thanksgiving is about turkey, Hanukkah is about gifts, Independence Day is about fireworks, Memorial Day is about barbeque and Columbus Day is about department store sales.

Last year, we had an odd occurrence; Hanukkah and Christmas coincided. A few years ago, Thanksgiving and Hanukkah fell at the same time. Purposes and meanings seemed to get blurred.

Perhaps if we imagined calling some holidays by a different name, or even a subtitle, it would help us get closer to the *kavannah* (sacred intention) that can give the celebration a different kind of meaning. Having just finished Thanksgiving, I noticed that many people use the nickname “Turkey Day” to reflect what has become, for some, the centerpiece of the day. What if, instead, we referred to it as “Gratitude Day?” Might that alter our focus a little?

Hanukkah already has a subtitle: The Festival of Lights. The candles are certainly a focus, as is the beauty of brightening the world during the darkest time of the year. But for many, the small, colorful candlelight is outshined by the anticipation of gifts. The Hebrew of the word Hanukkah is about re-dedication. Historically, it was about rededicating the Holy Temple in Jerusalem after a war. What if we made our metaphorical focus about rededication? It doesn't have to be about an ancient time, but for the present. We can use Hanukkah to think about what we want to rededicate for ourselves. Restoring the Temple took a miracle, but we did it! What needs to be restored in our own lives? It might be about personal health, about devotion to our relationships, about a motivation to expand our minds in new ways or to find deeper meaning in our connections with people and our connections with God.

On the Jewish calendar, the month before Rosh Hashana is Elul, a time to reflect about the coming year. In our blended Jewish/Secular lives, Hanukkah comes shortly before New Year's. Isn't that a perfect time to begin thinking about our next steps into the future? A New Year's “resolution” is often about a particular action. I'd suggest that a Hanukkah “rededication” can be about thought, emotions and spiritual connections. Each day of Hanukkah, as we light one more candle, we just may be able to see the light shine a little brighter into the future.

L'shalom,

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