

RABBI'S MESSAGE

Hanukkah during Dark Times

While Hanukkah is really a minor holiday as far as its religious and spiritual content, it has certainly become a major holiday in the U.S. Of course, it is not really “the Jewish Christmas,” as some people like to think, but the seasonal gift-giving cannot be ignored. It’s December, after all. Children begin thinking about “what am I getting?” Adults with or without children hope to find ways to express to dear ones their love with thoughtful presents. Holiday parties have to do with people getting together with each other, rather than expressions of religiosity. It is a time for family and friends to reconnect.

For Jewish people, Hanukkah has all of that, plus the retelling of a story of liberation and freedom through military victory. The Hebrew month of Kislev is during the time when daylight is at its lowest point. Hanukkah comes at the end of winter’s lunar month, so the moon is barely visible in the sky. It is literally the darkest time of the year, and we light candles – one additional candle each night – to increase our joy as we bring light into the darkness. The well-known tale of one day’s worth of oil lasting for eight days brings us hope that even in the darkest times, we can find ways to shine more and more light every day we are together.

During the historical time of Hanukkah, approximately 160 years before the Common Era, Jewish people were divided. The fiercely devoted religious Jews included Mattathias and his sons, known as the Maccabees. Other Jewish people were attracted to the popular Hellenist culture of the ruling nation, and put their Judaism aside to blend in as they observed customs that had nothing to do with Judaism. In between these two extreme positions, there were probably many who did not consider either Jewish or Hellenistic customs as part of their lives. But it was a time of oppression, in which the King imposed his religion onto everyone in the land. The Jews fought back, and we won the right to observe Judaism. Like all wars, this came at a great cost. Loss of life should never be taken lightly. During battle, the Holy Temple was desecrated, but the Maccabees victory enabled Jews to rededicate at the end of the war. The word Hanukkah means “rededication,” though for many years, the holiday was simply referred to as the Festival of Lights, relating to the miracle of durable, long-lasting olive oil.

Once again, we are at war. Once again, the Jewish people are divided. We have been attacked by the most brutal actions since the Holocaust. While we are united in our resolve to rid the world of the evil Hamas regime, even Jewish people differ about how this should be done. Lives are in jeopardy, both innocent Israelis and innocent Palestinians. Just as frightening, public opinion around the world has turned on Israel, accusing defensive acts meant to protect Israeli citizens of excessive retaliation that results in too much collateral damage. This Hanukkah is truly a dark time. Hundreds of kidnap victims suffer the unknown mystery about whether they might be able to resume their lives, if at all. The kidnap victims’ families nervously wonder if they will see their loved ones again, and in what condition. Countless people are living in fear. Israeli citizens know they are targets of a group that does not value human life. Palestinian

citizens are put in harm's way as Hamas conducts military operations in tunnels under hospitals. Many Hamas leaders are safely hidden away, giving orders that result in death and injury almost indiscriminately.

Things are changing minute-by-minute. Even after I started writing this message, Hamas and Israel, with the help of Qatar and the U.S., reached a temporary agreement. SOME hostages will be released in exchange for SOME Palestinian prisoners being released from Israeli prisons and a TEMPORARY agreement for both sides to stop fighting and allow humanitarian aid to come to the citizens. By the time you read this, I'm sure things will have changed.

I wonder how I would feel if I were being held hostage and I was not one of the first 50 who were released. I wonder how I would feel if I had a loved one being held, and I didn't know their status. None of us is happy when others are controlling our lives. Human lives are in the hands of negotiators, playing a chess game of compromises that can result in life and death decisions. People have taken over choices that we believe only God has the right to make.

Compromise, almost by definition, means that both sides give up something. Nobody is happy unless nobody is happy.

What can we do from so far away? Safely distant in the United States, we may not feel as if our survival is threatened. But during the historic Hanukkah, part of the strife included a lack of unity among the Jewish people. While we can disagree on the many specifics of how we observe Judaism, we are one family. The Talmud says, *Kol Yisrael arevim zeh ba-zeh* – “All of Israel is responsible for each other.” Once we are able to care for our own family, I would like to extend that by saying, “all *humanity* is responsible for each other.” That may be too lofty of a goal for now, but, as Theodore Hertzl said in the early 1900's about the creation of the State of Israel, “If you will it, it is not a legend.”

Hanukkah is one of the holidays that is meant to be shared with our non-Jewish neighbors. We are supposed to put our *hanukiot* (menorahs) in the window, both to demonstrate pride in our Jewish identity, and to share a light with the world. Due to recent antisemitic attitudes, I have heard that some people have chosen to be less public about their Jewish identity. I suggest that this is an important time to demonstrate our pride and our unity, not to separate ourselves, but to share. When individuals get to know each other, and recognize the common humanity, there are fewer barriers to friendship and understanding.

In darkness, a little light can be the most powerful thing imaginable. When we shine together, we can help many others truly see the light.

L'shalom,

Rabbi Dan Gordon