

RABBI'S MESSAGE

The Gift of Hanukkah – A New Narrative

How did Hanukkah, the historic account of a difficult battle that almost destroyed the Jewish people become associated with giving gifts? The simplest (and admittedly, the most likely) explanation has nothing to do with the Hanukkah story. Hanukkah is celebrated at Christmas time, and because so much of the world – especially the American world – celebrates Christmas, it gives us a chance to be like everyone else.

But being Jewish isn't about being like everyone else. Without taking anything away from the practices that have now become the accepted tradition, I wonder if we might find a better reason than assimilated conformity.

The most accurate story of Hanukkah, the best we can re-create it, is not pretty. There is the element of discrimination and forced conversion. We also have the heroic Maccabees, who had no patience for any of their fellow Jews who might have considered exploring the Hellenistic religion. The ensuing battle desecrated the Holy Temple. Many died and many were disillusioned before the Temple was rededicated (the word "Hanukkah" translates to rededication). In some cases, Jews fought against each other because some wanted to embrace aspects of Greek culture that were forbidden by the pious and powerful Maccabees. The Maccabees were fighting to prevent the Jewish people from assimilating into Greek society. The result of the total assimilation that the Greeks wanted could have been the end of Judaism.

So, it is quite ironic for people in the modern world to think of Hanukkah as "the Jewish Christmas." The very assimilation that the Maccabees were trying to prevent can happen today. What can keep this from happening? A clearer understanding of why we do what we do.

We honor the concept of Hanukkah when we stand up for the right to be different. Not just a different religion of Judaism, but also the right to practice Judaism in the way that is meaningful to every unique individual. We honor a new concept of Hanukkah when we respect those whose practice of Judaism is different from our own. As a child, I thought that if a Jewish family had a decorated tree inside their house in December, they were denying their Jewish identity. When I lived in the winters of Pittsburgh, I was in my early 20's when a former teacher of mine, someone whom I greatly respected, told me about her tree. I was aghast. She said, "Don't look at me like that. It's cold and gray and ugly outside. I've got something that's green and pretty and smells nice inside." It didn't have to be called a Christmas Tree or a Hanukkah Bush; it was a seasonal decoration. I decided then to honor individual choices. Some Jewish people would not be comfortable with a tree because it's a symbol of another religion. That's fine. (Of course, the tradition of the tree is an old pagan custom that has nothing to do with Christianity, but that's for another article.) I've come to realize that the intentions behind our actions are just as important as the outward symbols. When we place our Hanukkah menorah in the window for all to see, we demonstrate pride in our identity. It is not diluted by sharing others' traditions. We can enjoy a holiday festivity with our neighbors without "worshipping other gods."

Perhaps the true gift of Hanukkah is being able to openly embrace who we are as well as with whom we share the world. We can learn about others without changing our beliefs. We can find our own personal and unique paths while respecting the paths of others. It's a gift you won't find on sale at the mall.

It's priceless.

L'shalom,

Rabbi Dan Gordon