

Hanukkah Drasha Rabbi Chai Levy  
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We have come to see clearly how the story that is told is shaped by the ones telling it.

When we hear a story, we know we have to ask:

Who is telling the story? What's their agenda?

What political spin are they putting on the story?

I'm not talking about Fox News and MSNBC!

I'm talking about the story of Hanukkah, or more accurately,

The stories of Hanukkah.

The rabbis of the Talmud asked: "Mai Hanukkah?" What IS Hanukkah?

For many Americans, Hanukkah is, of course, the Jewish Christmas and a chance to give gifts so the Jewish kids don't feel left out of the "holiday season."

But the story of Hanukkah is complex, with many layers,

which I'd like to unpack a bit and then offer an approach to Hanukkah

that perhaps we can all get behind,

even if you're not big on stories of military victories or miracles of oil.

So, first is the Maccabee version of the story.

The books of Maccabees, which aren't in our Tanach, tells the story of

The Maccabees' revolt in 164 BCE against Antiochus' oppressive laws and against

the Hellenized Jews. They were zealots and freedom fighters who reclaimed

Jerusalem from the Syrian-Greeks and rededicated the defiled Temple to the God of Israel.

The Maccabees version of the story is one that we've certainly drawn upon for

messages about Jewish survival in the face of assimilation,

and about Jewish identity, strength and pride.

At the same time, there's something troubling about celebrating a story of Jewish

fanaticism in which zealous Jews slaughter other Jews for their sinful ways.

It seems the rabbis also were troubled by this and told a different story of Hanukkah, the miracle of the cruse of oil lasting for 8 days, which is not even mentioned in the Maccabees version of the story! The rabbinic sages of the Talmud, a few hundred years later, put the Divine miracle at the center and de-emphasized the military victory of the Maccabees.

There are various theories behind the rabbis' new spin on the Hanukkah story. Art Green, *Judaism for the World*, p. 153:

“By the time of the rabbis, the Maccabees descendants had fallen into disrepute - their grandchildren had themselves become small-time autocrats and purveyors of the same Hellenistic values their ancestors had risen against. The Hasmonean kingdom became a Roman vassal-state... and the rabbis did not want to celebrate the victory of a Jewish kingdom that ultimately had sold out to the Romans.”

Or perhaps the rabbis realized that military victories are short-lived.

After the Maccabees' victory, the Hasmoneans reigned for a short time - less than 80 years - until Roman rule was imposed.

The Hasmoneans will be forgotten, and the rededicated Temple will be destroyed and the Jewish people scattered, but the story of God's miracle and enduring light was something the rabbis wanted to emphasize for future generations.

The rabbis wanted the Hanukkah story to be the message we read in the haftarah today “not by might and not by power, but by God's spirit alone.” (Zecharia 4:6)

So, we've got the Maccabee version of the story and the rabbinic version of the story.

Both have important ideas for us to draw from -

The miracle of Jewish survival,

the rededication of the sacred after a time of desecration -

And each version approaches the story from a different angle -

Telling the Maccabee version emphasizes human effort to fight for our freedom,

And telling the rabbinic version emphasizes God's role in our lives and in history.

There's yet a third version of the story (and probably others too),

But the one I want to think about is Hanukkah as a winter solstice festival. Moshe Benovitz, who was a professor of mine at Machon Schechter, has written on the subject that the kindling of lights seems to have been added about 100 years after the Maccabees' victory, in the days of King Herod, shortly after Julius Caesar introduced the solar calendar throughout the Roman Empire in 46 BCE.

With the adoption of this calendar, many began celebrating the birthday of the sun and the hours of daylight beginning to lengthen. How? By lighting candles! It was at this time that Saturnalia became a Roman winter solstice festival. Benovitz argues that although the Jews didn't adopt the Julian calendar, they did begin lighting lights in the winter, which the rabbis then drew upon in their version of the Hanukkah story!

There's even a rabbinic midrash in the Talmud (Masechet Avodah Zarah 8a) about the first winter in creation for Adam, and his instituting a winter solstice festival: "When Adam saw the daylight hours getting shorter and shorter, He said 'woe is me! Perhaps because I have sinned, the world is getting darker And returning to *tohu v'vohu*, chaos!' and so what did he do? He sat in fasting and prayer for EIGHT DAYS (8 days!) But then at the winter solstice, when the days started getting longer again, He said: 'oh, this is just the way of the world,' And he established an 8 day festival"

So, Mai Hanukkah? What is Hanukkah?

The story is complex, with many ways to spin the story.

The story is like an archeological tel,

a mound that contains layers of history to dig and sort through.

We might celebrate Hanukkah by having in mind the Maccabee version or the rabbinic version, but what if we also had in mind the winter solstice version?

Perhaps today, we might feel like the first Adam that first winter,

wondering if the world is returning to chaos and coming to an end.

What if in this time of climate crisis,  
caused by our disconnection from the natural world,  
we focused on the cycles of the seasons, on the turning of the earth, and on the  
miracles of darkness and light that we share with all of creation?  
(especially on this day of Rosh Hodesh, this new moon of Tevet  
with the darkest sky of the entire year)

What if in addition to the stories of battles and military might,  
and of a supernatural intervention,  
we brought more into our Hanukkah consciousness the  
Interweaving of night and day, darkness and light,  
the cycles of the earth's seasons?

What if, in this time of raising our awareness about racial injustice,  
We reconsidered our metaphors and  
focused less on the binary victory of light over darkness  
And raised up the cycles and interweaving of darkness and light,  
like the waxing and waning of the moon, and  
celebrated the Holy One in these beautiful dark nights as  
*Yotzer or u'voreh chosech*, the Creator of Light and Darkness?

In this festival that celebrates rededication,  
How might we rededicate Hanukkah,  
just as it has been re-imagined in earlier ages, with new layers to the story?

Shabbat shalom

Hodesh Tov

Hanukkah Sameach