

Chanukkah and the Price of Privilege
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When the Maccabees defeated the Greek Empire and retook control of the Jerusalem Temple, they rededicated it to the Jewish faith. This is how Chanukkah got its name. The word "Chanukkah" means "dedication." Dedication is the true meaning and the real spirit of this Festival of Lights.

Our Festival of Lights, Chanukkah, begins this coming Sunday night. I hope you will join us then for the community lighting of the Chanukkah menorah. We will light the first candle here at Temple Sinai on Sunday afternoon at 4:00pm. We will light the second candle on Monday evening at 7:00pm at Faith Lutheran church in New Providence. Bring your Chanukkah menorah and we will light the sixth candle at services next Friday night at 7:30pm.

The origin of Chanukkah is very interesting and it might really surprise you. Unlike Sukkot, Pesach, and Shavuot, the festival of Chanukkah is not ordained by God. Nor is it mentioned in the Torah or in any of the other books of the Hebrew bible.

Chanukkah is a humanly created festival established by the Maccabees in 164 BCE, and most of what we know about the history of Chanukkah derives from the first and second books of Maccabees, neither of which was accepted into the canon of Jewish sacred literature.

Of course, most of us have been taught that Chanukkah was founded by the Maccabees in honor of the miracle of the one cruse of oil that burned for eight nights. Thus it will surprise you to learn that the books of Maccabees do not say anything about the occurrence of such a miracle. Not one word. Instead, the second book of Maccabees explains that during the rebellion against the Greeks, the Maccabees were unable to celebrate the eight-day biblical festival of Sukkot, the Festival of Booths, the pre-eminent Jewish festival of antiquity.

So when the Maccabees finally defeated the Greeks and rededicated the Jerusalem Temple to the Jewish faith, they celebrated the eight-day Sukkot festival. Thus, the eight-day festival of Chanukkah began as a belated celebration of the eight-day festival of Sukkot. Go figure!

Now this is what our ancestors understood the origin of Chanukkah to be for around 600 years until the rabbis began to circulate the legend of the miracle of oil around 500 CE. Why did the rabbis push to give Chanukkah a new explanation? Why did the rabbis say nothing in the Talmud about the Maccabees?

There were two principal reasons. First of all, the rabbis thought the Maccabees were arrogant. The rabbis felt that the Maccabees made Chanukkah too much about them and too little about God. Secondly, the rabbis thought the Maccabees' militarism would be a disastrous way of dealing with the Roman Empire. Having lived through the terrible consequences Rome imposed upon the Jews after the failed Bar Kochba revolt, the rabbis tried, through the legend of the miracle of the oil, to discourage Jews from any further rebellions against the Roman Empire.

What we learn tonight is that different Jewish generations have held different ideas about what constitutes the miracle of Chanukkah. For the Maccabees, the miracle of Chanukkah was the restoration of both Jewish national sovereignty and Jewish religious freedom in the land of Israel. For the rabbis, the miracle of Chanukkah was God's unconditional and never-ending love for the people of Israel.

What is the miracle of Chanukkah for our time?

The miracle of Chanukkah for our time is that the Jewish people still exists Surely no people on earth knows more about the consequences of powerlessness and vulnerability than the Jewish people. Yet the Greek and Roman Empires are gone, and we are still here. We have survived the Babylonians and the Assyrians, the crusades and inquisitions, expulsions and pogroms, the Holocaust. The continued existence of the Jewish faith and the Jewish people makes no rational sense whatsoever. Far greater than the miracle of the cruse of oil is the miracle that the Jewish people still lives. And not only do we live, we flourish!

When the Maccabees defeated the Greek Empire and retook control of the Jerusalem Temple, they rededicated it to the Jewish faith. This is how Chanukkah got its name. The word *chanukkah* means "dedication." "Dedication" is the true meaning and the real spirit of this Festival of Lights.

Chanukkah is a time to rededicate ourselves to our Jewish faith and to our brethren around the world. As the light of the menorah increases every night, so Chanukkah is a time to rededicate ourselves to increase the light of this world by bringing into it more love, compassion, truth, and justice.

Chanukkah is a time to rededicate ourselves to the cause of freedom, to the proposition that might does not make right, that the few can overcome the many.

Chanukkah is a time to rededicate ourselves to giving gifts of the heart, as well as alternative, socially-responsible gifts, and to decrease the role of materialism in this festival and in our lives altogether. Unfortunately, the current economic recession has forced us to learn the wisdom of this lesson the hard way.

Above all, Chanukkah is a time to kindle the candle of our Jewish identity and commitment. To know what a privilege it is to do our part to perpetuate the Jewish faith

and the Jewish people. To know what a privilege it is to welcome into our synagogues so many spouses from other faith traditions who want to spend their lives with us.

May your celebration of Chanukkah be filled with love, with light, with laughter and, above all, with dedication.