



CHANUKAH

CELEBRATING THE WORLD'S FIRST RECORDED NATIONAL LIBERATION STRUGGLE
evening of December 11 to December 19, 2009

The Ritual

Each night of Chanukah we light candles, starting with the *shamash* (used to light the others) and one candle, and then adding one additional candle each night for a total of eight nights. The tradition is to sing, dance, and rejoice in our liberation and our freedom.

THE TRADITIONAL BLESSINGS OVER THE CANDLES

•All nights•

1. Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheynu Melech ha'olam, asher kidshanu bemitzvotav, vetzivanu, lehadleek ner, shel chanukah. *(Blessed are you, the Force that rules all of existence, who sanctifies us by giving us a way of life directed by holy commandments and commanded us to light the lights of Chanukah.)*
2. Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheynu Melech ha'olam, she'asah nisim la'avoteynu, bayamim hahem, bazman hazeh. *(Blessed are you, the Force that rules the universe, who made possible miracles for our ancestors, in those days, and also makes the same possible for us in our own times.)*

•Add on the first night•

Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheynu Melech ha'olam, she-hechyanu, vekee-imanu, veheeg-iyanu, lazman hazeh. *(Blessed are you, the Force that rules the universe, who has kept us in life, made us flourish, and made it possible for us to reach this happy occasion.)*

The Story

(the nonmythologized version you may never have heard)

When King Cyrus of Persia allowed the remnants of the ancient tribes of Judah and Benjamin to return from the exile imposed upon them by Babylonian conquerors in the seventh century BCE, they formed the kingdom of Judea. As part of the Persian Empire, and later as part of the empire of Alexander the Great, Judea had relative autonomy to shape its own internal religious life.

When Alexander died at the end of the fourth century BCE, his empire split into three rival factions, and Judea was caught between two of them: the Seleucids, centered in Syria,

and the Ptolemies, centered in Egypt. For the next 150 years, these two kingdoms warred and each sought to incorporate Judea as part of its empire.

Although the battle was largely military, there was an important ideological dimension. Alexander had introduced the Jews to Hellenistic Greek culture—its philosophy, its literature, and its impressive technology and power. Forcibly dragged into the larger Mediterranean world, many Jews could see that “the real world” was dominated by wealth and power. Some Jews, primarily those who lived in and around the larger cities, saw an opportunity to join this larger world by becoming merchants and traders, or by establishing political and economic relationships with others in the Hellenistic empire. It was apparent to these Jews that their tribal religion would have little meaning to those who had conquered the world. The religion of their fathers seemed irrelevant in a world reshaped by the “modern” realities of science; they were drawn by the allure of a society that worshiped the body and saw reality in terms of what could be tasted, touched, and directly experienced by the senses.

These Jewish Hellenizers saw no point in resisting Greek rule. Their goal was to live in peace with the powers that ran the world. They could benefit from the connection to the expanding trade of the Hellenistic world. On the other hand, the vast majority of the Jewish people were small, independent farmers who lived on the land and brought its produce to Jerusalem three times each year to celebrate their hard-won freedom from slavery. They bore the brunt of the oppressive taxes imposed first by the Greeks, and then, alternately, by Seleucids and Ptolemies. These Jews resented foreign rule and detested the city-dwelling elites, who seemed to be culling favor with the Hellenistic conquerors, imitating their ways, abandoning the religion of the past, and becoming worshippers at the shrine of political and cultural “reality.”

Judea’s plight worsened considerably in the early part of the second century with the ascendance to the throne of the Seleucid Antiochus IV. Claiming that he wanted to “protect” Judea from the Ptolemies, Antiochus invaded Judea and marched toward Egypt, where his armies were defeated. He turned back to Judea and attempted to impose Hellenistic culture by force. He ordered the Temple in Jerusalem to sacrifice to the Greek gods and forbade the practice of circumcision, *kashrut* (kosher laws), and observance of the Sabbath.

To the already assimilated elites of the city, the new rules were insensitive but did not constitute a major

crisis. Perhaps Antiochus was a boor, but the culture he represented was “happening,” while the Jewish religion he forbade was a remnant of the past.

Yet many of the people in the countryside, burdened by Seleucid taxes that expropriated much of their wealth, found the Hellenists’ narcissistic fascination with their own power repugnant. The essence of their now-banned religion was its insistence that there was a single God governing the universe who made possible freedom from oppression. It was in the name of that God that they joined a rebellion against the Seleucids under the leadership of a country priest named Mattathias and his five sons (of whom Judah became the most famous, known as “the hammer” or Maccabee).

These Maccabees, as they came to be known, rejected the notion, shared by their contemporary Jewish establishment, that it would be pointless to fight, that one would do best by appeasing the ruling class, learning its language and ways, and accepting its system of oppression. The Maccabees understood Judaism as teaching that “the spirit of the people was greater than the man’s technology,” or, in traditional Jewish terms, “not by power, and not by might, but by My spirit, says the Lord of Hosts.”

To fight against superior military force was totally illogical and unrealistic from the Hellenizers’ standpoint. But the Maccabees rejected assessments of “realism” that derived from the framework imposed by the imperialists, and drew instead upon the Jewish religion and the stubborn spirit of a people who had come to believe that every human being was created in the divine image, hence had a right to be treated with respect and decency. These were people who could not submit to the rule of the imperialist, and whose religion taught them that they need not do so, because the central Power of the universe was a power that rejected the reality of oppression. Their Torah told the tale of their origins in a slave rebellion against another imperialist power thought to be invincible—Egypt of the Pharaohs.

Armed with these stories, the Maccabees and their followers used guerrilla tactics to win the first national liberation struggle in recorded history. In 165 BCE they retook Jerusalem, purified and rededicated the Temple (*chanukah* means dedication), and rekindled the eternal light that was to glow therein. The fighting continued many years more, but eventually the Maccabees and their descendants (called *Hashmona'im*) set up an independent Jewish state.

Unfortunately, that state degenerated as the

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Hashmona'im tried to become a nation like all other nations, adopting the same perversions of state power that other nations adopted and becoming "realistic" and hence spiritually and morally corrupt.

Depressed at the defeat of Jewish rebellions against Rome, and aware of the moral degeneration of the Hashmona'im, the rabbis who shaped rabbinic Judaism tried to downplay Chanukah's importance and reframe it into a minor "religious" event by focusing on a story about a miracle of a pot of oil that kept the Chanukah lights burning for eight nights. But the Jewish people intuitively recognized that something miraculous had happened. The miracle was this: a critical mass of people had come to recognize that there was a Force in the world that made possible the transformation of what is to what ought to be (the Force that we call God). That recognition, when it takes hold of large numbers of people, becomes a manifestation of God's presence, and in that presence "the power of the people," suffused with divine energy, becomes greater than all the technology and manipulations of the most sophisticated forms of oppression.

Some right-wing Zionists believe in military power as the primary way to create security for Israel, just as some American nationalists believe that we can achieve security without addressing the social injustices that our economic system has generated around the world. They believe that larger social transformations are "unrealistic" and think that our survival depends solely on our strength. Yet this way of thinking is Hellenism—the validation of that which is and the inability to commit to that which ought to be. We affirm a different vision of strength. Our survival and the survival of the entire planet depend on our ability to create a world of love and caring, a world of peace and justice, a world in which every human being is treated as an embodiment of the spirit of God. The possibility of building such a world was precisely what Hellenism denied and precisely what we affirm when we take God seriously.

Making It Real

In the contemporary world, Jews have turned Chanukah into a Christmas clone, trying to give their children and each other gifts to approximate the gift-giving frenzy that has been particularly promoted by the capitalist market. We need to find creative ways

to give of our talents, our love, and creativity—but if we can't resist the pressure of the market to equate love with buying material goods, we undermine the spiritual message of Chanukah: that the world as constituted, with all its distortions, and with all of its incredible power to shape our sense of need and desire, can nevertheless be fundamentally changed, healed, transformed, and rededicated to higher spiritual purpose.

What follows is a spiritual exercise that you can try with your family as a way to give this message more immediacy in your lives.

Try these exercises and you will see how Chanukah can have a focus other than a fixation on who has received the best presents.

Each evening, pick a theme that invites you to imagine how things could be if they were the way they ought to be. Then tell in detail what would have to happen in order for your vision to be made real, and how you might participate in some way in its actualization. Everyone in the family, *Tikkun* discussion group, circle of friends, or any other group observing the ritual will share his or her answer.

For example, imagine changes in:

1. Your world of work
2. Your relationship with your parents
3. Your Jewish community (or other religious community)
4. Your neighborhood and relationships with neighbors
5. Society
6. American politics
7. Social change movements
8. The larger world

Share your vision with others and listen, without criticizing, to theirs. Then rejoice and sing songs of celebration and of struggle—both Chanukah songs and songs from other liberation struggles around the world. ■

Please reproduce this and encourage friends to use it as a guide for constructing their own meaningful Chanukah observance. And urge them to subscribe to Tikkun magazine (go to www.tikkun.org and click "Subscribe/Renew" in the upper righthand corner). This text was written by Michael Lerner, editor of Tikkun, in memory of his beloved mother, Beatrice I. (Hirschman) Lerner.

