

## **Hanukkah!**

Hanukkah, the Jewish Festival of Lights, a celebration of the re-dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem, dates to 165 BCE, and came as a result of the success of the Maccabean Rebellion. Jerusalem, as a cross-roads of the Middle East was conquered several times under Persian, Assyrian, Hellenic and eventually Roman Emperors and Kings. Sometimes conquerors were invited into the battle between traditional and Hellenistic factions among the Jewish people. In 167 BCE, Antiochus IV Epiphanes of Syria, who had invaded Judea in 175 BCE, ordered an altar to Zeus dedicated in the temple with pigs to be slaughtered at the altar of the temple. Referred to as the Desolating Sacrilege, this abomination probably helped to unite as well as infuriate traditional Jews who supported the Maccabean Revolt which managed to reclaim Jerusalem and the temple by 165 BCE. Before re-dedicating the Temple, the desecrated altar was removed and a new one built along with other restorations, cleanings, and renovations within the Temple. An 8-day celebration followed.

The favorite Hanukkah miracle story of a one day supply of consecrated oil lasting 8 days was not written into the Inter-Testamental books of First and Second Maccabees along with the description of the festival, but was described in the Talmud some 600 years later. Another source of the story is the Megillat Antiochus scroll which may date from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. It is possible the story was so well-known as to require little documentation in earlier writings.

Hanukkah, also known as the Festival of Lights, has never been a major holiday in Judaism since it is not mentioned in the Torah, but has become one of the best-known Jewish holidays in the United States in recent decades. Hanukkah's gift-giving parallels with Christmas, though spread over 8 days, have helped to balance the consumer possibilities between Jewish and Christian families.

Unitarian Universalists are more likely to celebrate Hanukkah and perhaps hold a Passover Seder than to celebrate the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah, the Days of Awe, and Yom Kippur; the Jewish New Year and Days of Repentance. Probably this is due to the usual seasonal connections between Hanukkah with Christmas and Passover with Easter, and the relative lack of complexity and minimal religious and psychological demands of Hanukkah and Passover compared with the High Holy Days. It would be much harder to translate the High Holy Days into Unitarian Universalism and we would be even more likely to be guilty of religious and cultural misappropriation if we tried. The historical origins of Hanukkah and Passover are pretty clear, as are the celebrations with which they are observed.

As we think about Hanukkah this year, many of us are particularly mindful of the recent massacre at the Tree of Life Temple in Pittsburgh. The Anti-Defamation League and others have called to mind the origins of Hanukkah in one of many stories of survival of the Jewish people over against other peoples that would have gladly wiped them out. The Seleucid King from Persia had again oppressed the Jewish people until the Jews behind the Maccabees revolted to push the Persians out of Jerusalem and Israel in a campaign that stirred the hearts of the Jewish people. Judas Maccabeus was compared to David and thought by many to be the Messiah. This was a major happening, a really big deal!

In modern times, it is really not that many years past the Holocaust, in which Hitler and the Nazis killed 6 million Jews between about 1938-1945. My direct ancestors were already in America late in the 19<sup>th</sup> or early in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, but I will likely never discover what Jewish relatives I may have lost in the Holocaust. The recent growth of Neo-Nazi and White Aryan groups has been very disturbing to the Jews who remember the holocaust as well as to their children and progressive students of 20<sup>th</sup> Century history.

Hanukkah has always been a celebration of one triumph of the Jewish people, not solely a religious holiday. There are however more religious overtones than in many cultural holidays, as it is aimed at thanking God for deliverance.

Like Christmas with Santa far removed from his origins as St. Nicholas, the cultural story of Hanukkah, even with the miracle of the oil lasting 8 days could be celebrated without any religious component. Like the 4<sup>th</sup> of July as Independence Day in the United States, Hanukkah celebrates the triumph of the Maccabean revolt and a freedom for Israel, that while relatively short-lived, plays prominently in Jewish history. Israel enjoyed a freedom like it had under the Davidic and Solomonic kingdom, to which time it was compared. Once conquered by Rome, then falling under the political divisions of many kingdoms and later the blowing winds of multiple Crusades after Jerusalem fell under Islamic control, Israel would not again see such lasting freedom until 1948.

As one of our most important religious sources, Judaism only gets occasional mention here and in most Unitarian Universalist Congregations. Other than recovering Catholics and Methodists, Jews constitute one of our largest component groups! Many Jewish families have found UUism to be quite compatible with their values, traditions, and beliefs and have especially found our congregations to be welcoming in the case of mixed marriages among Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, and Atheists. It is good for us to remember that our acceptance of many different beliefs can help meet the needs for a variety of people with compatible humanistic values.

As we think about the challenges faced by Jews in many parts of the world, it is good to remember that we can both welcome and learn from our Jewish neighbors. It is also important to remember that when persecution comes to the Jews in this nation, we will not be far behind. It is both compassionate and wise for us to stand in solidarity with the Jews here and around the world!

In most years, we include Hanukkah in our celebration of the Winter Festivals of Light, and I usually will mention Hanukkah near the time that it begins each year. This year, I wanted to put at least a little more emphasis on Hanukkah by sharing a bit more of the tradition and meaning. Hanukkah starts at Sundown today and will be celebrated over the course of the next 8 days. To share a bit more of the religious component, I invite you to hear the following:

This material is from a recently updated article in Wikipedia about Hanukkah:

### **Blessing for lighting the candles**

<sup>[91]</sup> בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', אֱ-לֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ לְהַדְלִיק נֵר חֲנֻכָּה.

Transliteration: *Barukh ata Adonai Eloheinu, melekh ha'olam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu l'hadlik ner shel Hanukkah.*

Translation: "Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the universe, Who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to kindle the Hanukkah light[s]."

### **Blessing for the miracles of Hanukkah**

<sup>[91]</sup> בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱ-לֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שְׁעָשָׂה נִסִּים לְאַבוֹתֵינוּ בְּיָמֵים הָהֵם בְּיָמֵינוּ הַזֶּה.

Transliteration: *Barukh ata Adonai Eloheinu, melekh ha'olam, she'asa nisim la'avoteinu ba'yamim ha'heim ba'z'man ha'ze.*

Translation: "Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the universe, Who performed miracles for our ancestors in those days at this time..."

### ***Hanerot Halalu***

After the lights are kindled the hymn *Hanerot Halalu* is recited. There are several different versions; the version presented here is recited in many Ashkenazic communities:

We kindle these lights for the miracles and the wonders, for the redemption and the battles that you made for our forefathers, in those days at this season, through your [holy priests](#). During all eight days of Hanukkah these lights are [sacred](#), and we are not permitted to make ordinary use of them except for to look at them in order to express thanks and praise to Your great Name for Your miracles, Your wonders and Your salvations.

### **Special additions to daily prayers**

"We thank You also for the miraculous deeds and for the redemption and for the mighty deeds and the saving acts wrought by You, as well as for the wars which You waged for our ancestors in ancient days at this season. In the days of the Hasmonean Mattathias, son of Johanan the high priest, and his sons, when the iniquitous Greco-Syrian kingdom rose up against Your people Israel, to make them forget Your Torah and to turn them away from the ordinances of Your will, then You in your abundant mercy rose up for them in the time of their trouble, pled their cause, executed judgment, avenged their wrong, and delivered the strong into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of few, the impure into the hands of the pure, the wicked into the hands of the righteous, and insolent ones into the hands of those occupied with Your Torah. Both unto Yourself did you make a great and holy name in Thy world, and unto Your people did You achieve a great deliverance and redemption. Whereupon your children entered the sanctuary of Your house, cleansed Your temple, purified Your sanctuary, kindled lights in Your holy courts, and appointed these eight days of Hanukkah in order to give thanks and praises unto Your holy name."

Also associated with Hanukkah are special songs, games with the Dreidel, Chocolate Hanukkah Gelt, and foods such as Latkes and Strawberry filled fried doughnuts. Gifts are given each night of Hanukkah which allows a fair equivalence with Christmas extravagance!

In the category of similarities to the origins of Hanukkah and many moments in Jewish history, we have a national leader who has made and broken many promises. We have a rising group of leaders who are anti-black, anti-Muslim, anti-Mexican, anti-ethnic, anti-liberal, anti-immigrant, anti-LGBTQ, anti-women, and anti-Jew. The group of White Nationalists that now controls much of the country poses great risks to each of those communities and is far from representative of our nation as it has developed over at least the last half-century. What we do in response to this new White Nationalism matters a whole lot. We took a big step back toward progress in the recent election, but there is still a lot of damage that Trump and his cronies can do in the next two years. Our faith calls us to work for justice, equity, compassion, world community, and progress in human relationships.

Just as Hanukkah is a triumph for a people disempowered if not fully enslaved, this moment in time calls for organizing to prevent hatred and injustice to triumph over any minority group in this era. In recent decades we have seen the mountain of possibility when all people have equal opportunities. We have dreamed the dream of a world or at least a nation that is inclusive and accepting as well as multi-culturally diverse. We have modeled a community that is accepting of all persons, male and female, gay and straight and trans. We know how to include everyone and we know that the world will be better when all are treated equally, when there is healthcare for all, when there is a safety net for those who are still struggling. This is why we must not stop until all people are treated fairly, until all people are included and accepted, and until science is restored to a place of respect far above corporate persons!

Just a moment ago, we thought we were almost to the top of the mountain, and here we find ourselves once again starting the climb from the base, knocked off by an orange hurricane. But start again we must, and we will climb far more quickly since we know the way ahead. Like Judas Maccabeus, we must rise to the occasion, to fight for justice and freedom, to work for the better world that will meet the needs of all persons. Our faith calls us forward to make a difference. So, as we light the Hanukkah candles, let us stand for justice, equality, compassion, truth, and a better world! Happy Hanukkah!