

First Unitarian Church

December 13, 2015

Happy Hanukkah!

Last Sunday at sundown, Hanukkah began. And today is the eighth and last day of it. How many of you celebrate Hanukkah at home each year? And how about this: how many of you were raised Jewish?

When I was growing up, my mom taught me about Hanukkah, and I remember singing the dreidel song. Remember that?

Dreidel, dreidel, dreidel, I made it out of clay,
and when it's dried and ready, then dreidel we shall play.

We played with a dreidel, too. We weren't Jewish though. We were Unitarian Universalist. I learned the song at my UU church.

Unitarian Universalism is technically a protestant religion. I don't mean that we are a Christian denomination. Although there are many Christian UUs, most do not identify that way, and some UUs identify with other major world religions, such as Hindu UUs, or Jewish UUs.

When I say we are protestant, I mean it in the sense that if you trace the roots of our tradition back, it goes right to the Reformation in the 1500's. That's when the teachings of the then very dominant Roman Catholic church were challenged, and people started their own churches in protest—hence the name, Protestant.

However, if you can trace it back that far, then you can trace it further back than that, too. You can trace our tradition's roots back to Jesus, and—here's where it gets interesting—while other Protestant religions plant their flag right there, in Jesus, Unitarian Universalism looks back even further—and we embrace our Jewish roots, too. (Some would point out that Jesus also embraced his Jewish roots—he was Jewish, and there is no evidence he ever thought of himself as starting a new religion).

The bylaws of our denomination list six sources, including

- Direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder
- The words and deeds of prophetic women and men
- Humanist teachings that counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science;
- Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature
- And, wisdom from the world's religions,

- Including the Jewish and Christian teachings from which our own Unitarian Universalist tradition developed.

So... it is fitting that we should talk about Hanukkah, and it is lovely that Jewish UUs—of which there are many in the world—should maintain Jewish traditions. We embrace and celebrate the beautiful diversity of our people and our sources of wisdom.

But I'll bet most of us, while we are familiar with it, don't actually know all that much about Hanukkah. Did you know, for example, that there are at least three explanations for how Hanukkah came to be?

Two can be found in scripture, and one arose not in the written tradition, but in culture. Among the people, over time.

The first is a military story that we find in the Books of the Maccabees. Now an interesting thing about the books of Maccabees is that while they tell a story that is part of Jewish tradition, and you can find them in many Christian bibles, you will not find them in the Torah, the sacred canon of Jewish scriptures. They are non-canonical, in Judaism.

The story they tell starts with a familiar scenario from ancient times: the people of Israel are under foreign rule. They had been for hundreds of years, since the Babylonians forced them into exile and destroyed their first temple—the one that had been built by Solomon, the son of King David himself—600 years before the common era. BCE.

Later the Persians defeated the Babylonians, and being more open to religious diversity, they allowed the Jews to rebuild their temple.

Then, along came Alexander the Great, a Greek, and then the Greek dynasty known as the Seleucids ruled over the Israelites. Under the Seleucid empire, for a time the people were still allowed to follow their own religions, as was common Greek practice. But then a Seleucid emperor came into power, Antiochus the 4th, who had different views. And he began to crack down on the Israelites, forcing them to follow Greek religious practices.

The story of the Maccabees takes place in the second century BCE, under Antiochus's oppression.

Antiochus didn't burn down the temple, but maybe what he did was just as bad: he built an altar to Zeus inside it, and ordered the people to make sacrifices to Zeus instead of the God of Israel.

Now, an interesting thing about the ancient near east is that up until the time the Babylonians destroyed the Israelites' first temple, people pretty much always interpreted military victories as acts of gods. There were believed to be many different gods—even Judaism acknowledged this, that is why in the ten

commandments it is written not that there is only one God, but that the people of Israel should not put any other gods ahead of their own.

It was the custom of that part of the world that when one group defeated another, the god of the victors had also defeated the losing side's god. And it was normal for the defeated group to therefore convert to the religion of the winners.

With the people of Israel, it was different. When their temple was defeated and they were exiled from Babylon, they made the incredible change from being a location-based faith, to being a faith that is practiced in people's homes and hearts. A faith that goes with the people.

For this reason, it would have been impossible for Antiochus to truly stamp out the religion of the Israelites. It was not as easy as banning public practices or ruining a temple space. So there was a mixed reaction among the people. Some went along with Antiochus's demands, in public. Others just tried to avoid confrontation on the matter. And some resisted. Furiously.

Among those, the leader of the resistance was a man named Mattathias.

It is said that Mattathias's first rebellion occurred when a group of officers in the temple tried to force the people of Israel to conduct a pagan animal sacrifice to Zeus.ⁱ Mattathias was appalled. He raised his voice, saying "Even if all the nations that live under the rule of the king obey him, and have chosen to obey his commandments, everyone of them abandoning the religion of their ancestors, I and my sons and my brothers will continue to live by the covenant of our ancestors... We will not obey the king's words by turning aside from our religion to the right hand or to the left."

And then... he couldn't believe his eyes. No sooner had he finished than one of his fellow Israelites stepped forward and did as the King's officers had demanded. He made a sacrifice to Zeus! The text says that Mattathias "burned with zeal" and he "gave vent to righteous anger." He ran and killed the man, right there on the altar. He killed one of the king's officers, too. And he tore the altar down.

Mattathias and his followers then fled to the hills where they organized themselves as an insurgency. They observed non-violent Israelites refusing to take up arms, and being killed by the king's soldiers. And in response, they decided that they would fight back with all their might.

But they didn't just fight the king. They continued to fight their fellow Israelites who were not practicing the same level of resistance. Mattathias and his followers killed their neighbors who they felt were not towing the line, and they forcibly circumcised all of the uncircumcised Jewish boys they found.ⁱⁱ (Circumcision was one of the Jewish customs that Antiochus banned).

He grew enough of an army that, although he could not defeat the empire, for the rest of his life Mattathias managed to continue his insurgent campaign, using, essentially, guerrilla tactics.

On his death bed Mattathias compared his actions to those of Israel's venerated ancestors, and he encouraged his sons to continue what he had started, listing numerous examples from scripture of people whose faith was tested, and who persevered and became great leaders. (1 Mac. 2:49) His son Judas followed in his father's footsteps, becoming the next leader. The people called him Judas Maccabee, which means Judas the Hammer. Eventually, in the year 168, Judas succeeded in driving the Seleucids from Jerusalem, a fight which was called the Maccabean revolt.

After that victory, Judas returned to the defiled temple, took down the altar to Zeus, and built a new one according to Jewish law. Then, he declared an eight day celebration. He called it a time of Hanukah, which means a time of dedication.

That is the Hanukah story that is written down in the book of Maccabees. That's story number one this morning.

Now, another source, the rabbinical record of stories called the Talmud, tells us that something more happened during those eight days of dedication: story number two. The Talmud says that during those eight days, the people lamented that they didn't have any consecrated olive oil for the sacred flame that should burn on the altar. And, unlike the Catholic process of making holy water, which is very quick if you've ever seen that, it was not a quick process to properly consecrate the oil. Actually, it was going to take exactly eight days. Exactly too many days to be helpful for the first Hanukah.

Well, the temple was a mess from all those years under Seleucid control. And it turned out that, as they were cleaning it, someone did find one jar of consecrated oil. One jar: enough for one day. And I'm sure you do know what happened next: that one jar lasted not one day, but eight.

It was a miracle of faith. And it is commemorated in the lighting of eight candles on the menorah.

Story number three is the cultural story. It is what happened over time as the people celebrated the holiday. It is the addition of new traditions. Some aren't so new—the dreidel is a tradition that predates Hanukah, but it became associated with the holiday. Others really are new—eating latkes, for example, and giving gifts.

One thing we should remember is that Hanukah is actually a pretty minor holiday in Judaism. Although it happens around the same time as Christmas, which is the mother of all holidays in Christianity, it is not the "Christmas" of Judaism.

My friend and colleague Paul Sawyer points out that we who are not Jewish would “do a better job of honoring our Jewish friends and neighbors... if we remembered to wish them happy New Year at Rosh Hashanah, and honored their fasts on Yom Kippur, or celebrated with them at Passover.”ⁱⁱⁱ

But that isn't to say the holiday is unimportant.

And perhaps in this moment, in this place and time and culture, we should pay extra special attention to it.

I don't know about you, but as I heard the *military* story of Hanukkah, the story of the Maccabees, the extreme tactics of Mattathias and his followers reminded me of other, more modern kinds of extremists. It is clear from the way the story is told in scripture that its author was a champion of the Maccabees. They are presented as heroes.

When I was a student at Harvard Divinity School, the Harper Collins study bible was the version of the bible recommended for classes, due to its scholarly footnotes. In its introduction to 1 Maccabees, it also notes that the author of Maccabees was clearly a fan of the Maccabees, and the intro says that the Maccabees are even portrayed as champions of “religious freedom.”

I suppose it says that because the Maccabees resisted Antiochus's efforts to stifle their religion. But actually, they weren't fighting for everyone to have religious freedom. They were fighting for the religion of the Israelites to be practiced in a very particular way. To the point that they imposed it upon their fellow Israelites, physically assaulting and killing them.

Religious freedom. We've been hearing that phrase a lot in the news lately, haven't we. And all too often, it really is a demand for the kind of religious freedom that imposes something on other people.

Next spring, the US Supreme Court will hear a case that is framed as being about religious freedom. It was brought by a group called the Little Sisters of the Poor, but its implications go much, much further. At stake is the question of whether religious non-profit organizations that are not churches have to comply with the Affordable Care Act, the ACA, or as it is also known, Obamacare. “Religious non-profits” sounds like a quaint phrase, but it includes massive organizations, like Catholic hospital chains, that employ many thousands of people.

The plaintiffs brought the case because they do not want to have anything to do with allowing their employees to access contraception. The ACA says that everyone is entitled to have health insurance coverage for contraception, but it already has provided an out for religious non profits that disagree. They just need to make a phone call or fill out a form to let the government know that they are opposed to providing that coverage through their employee health insurance, and the government will provide it instead, directly to the employee, leaving the religious

non-profit out of it. But these groups are saying that even filling out the form is an infringement on their—the organizations’—religious freedom.

Of course, if they don’t have to let the government know that they are withholding coverage, then the government will not know who to provide it for, making it harder for those employees, and their wives, and their daughters, many many thousands of women, to get contraception.

And if you think that’s not a matter of life and death, consider the enormous health and economic impact of giving birth, and consider the fact that a woman spends, on average, 30 years trying not to get pregnant. And consider the lived reality of a nursing assistant at one of those Catholic hospitals, who barely makes enough to get by. My husband and I were both nursing assistants in the early years of our marriage. We made \$1.50 above minimum wage. We qualified for food stamps.

Consider a nursing assistant at one of those hospitals today, who cannot afford another mouth to feed, and who is one paycheck away from being homeless, and who cannot afford contraception out of pocket—especially the most effective contraception, which costs as much as a full week’s paycheck. And tell me that this claim, of these conservative organizations, for religious freedom, does not have life or death consequences.

Meanwhile, remember the officer who was killed in the Planned Parenthood shooting a few weeks ago? He was an evangelical Christian. His church’s webpage includes anti-abortion links. But he showed up at that call and did his job, and even gave his life for it. He did not claim it was an infringement on his religious freedom.

It makes the religious freedom claims of businesses and non-profits seem down right fanatical.

In the end, that kind of fanaticism is not good for anyone. It does not square with the values of our country, any more than calls to exclude Muslims, or admit only Christians.

In a recent op-ed, the Rabbi Dov Taylor calls the story of the Maccabees a “pyrrhic victory,” which means a victory that inflicts such a devastating toll on the victor that it is tantamount to defeat. It “was short-lived,” he says, “and led to even greater oppression than before.”^{iv}

Taylor credits the movement with later provoking the Romans, bringing about “the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, the sack of the city, the exile to Rome of the rebels and the murder of their families.” Three years later, he writes, “came the fall of Masada and the mass suicide of its zealous defenders. And finally, the Bar Kochba Revolt put an end to what was left of Jewish life in Palestine for 18 centuries.”

He says:

In their wisdom, the rabbis who canonized the Hebrew Bible knew that zealots of whatever stripe invariably succeed in destroying the very things they claim to be defending, so they kept First and Second Maccabees out of the Bible, relegating them to the Apocrypha; they invented instead a legend about a bit of oil sufficient for one day's lighting that lasted for eight; and they made a compromise with Hellenism that created what we know today as Judaism.

In anticipation of the Jewish Festival of Lights, let us remember that zealotry and refusal to compromise... is always and everywhere a recipe for destruction. Let us instead be among those who kindle light in a dark time.

Now, lest you think I am down on Hanukkah, let me point out that there is a grand tradition in Judaism of lively debate over sacred stories. Texts and stories are continuously interpreted, and what I'm suggesting this morning is that we would do well to pay attention to the violence and consequences of extremism in this story. It could not be more relevant. Paul, that friend and colleague of mine, puts it nicely when he says there are some beliefs worth lighting a candle—worth shining a light for, for all to see. And he says we should learn lessons from “both” sides of the Hanukkah story, including,

That in the grand conversation of faith in our world, we do not make progress by imposing one form of belief over another through reactionary caveat or even through fiery righteous preaching of any kind, religious or political.

That the pathway to building the beloved community—or at least a world where we don't spend so much time trying to kill or to subjugate one another for our beliefs, is *a liberal one*.

It is a path of opening minds and hearts, and providing for possibilities.

I couldn't say it any better than that.

Our closing hymn this morning is Light One Candle. It is about the Maccabees, as you will see, and especially about their children, whose lives—like those of children everywhere—depend on the wisdom and the mercy of their elders.

Please rise in body or in spirit and sing it with me, # 221.

ⁱ 1 Mac. 2: 23

ⁱⁱ 1 Mac. 2:44.

ⁱⁱⁱ From “Light the Candles! Tell the Story!—A Hanukkah Homily” by Paul S. Sawyer, First Universalist Society of Hartland Four Corners. 2010 Dec. 5.

iv “Lessons of Chanuka.” Rabbi Dov Taylor. *The Valley News*, December 4, 2015