

Hanukkah: Dedication of the Temple

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Hanukkah, one of the best-known Jewish holidays in the United States, is considered a minor religious holiday. While Jews all over the world mark the Passover and the High Holydays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, observance of Hanukkah varies quite a bit, and its pre-eminence in the United States is partially due to the desires of Jewish parents to give their children a December holiday so they don't feel too left out of Christmas. Hanukkah has also gained publicity as menorahs have been used as political and legal coverage for schools that wish to display creches without being sued.

Yet the growth in Hanukkah observance has religious as well as cultural reasons and influence. The temple I worked for in San Francisco as an administrative assistant represented itself with a menorah on its letterhead and on the front of its building. The stories and the messages of Hanukkah have become quite meaningful to American Judaism, and I believe they have much to say to our congregation today.

In Hanukkah we may find a celebration of human triumph over religious persecution; a rejoicing over the presence of the divine light found even at the darkest time of the year; and, most of all, we may find **a reminder of our partnership with the divine in the creation of sacred space in our own time.**

Hanukkah is a holiday based on historical events that took place over two thousand years ago. About one hundred years following the rule of Alexander the Great, the land of Israel came under the governance of the Seleucid dynasty,

which controlled the region of Syria. In the year 167 BC, the king Antiochus IV tried to force all residents of his territory to observe Greek customs. Jewish practice was prohibited, and the Jewish temple in Jerusalem was defiled. The sons of a Jewish priest, Mattathias, banded together to rebel against the Syrian regime. Led by Judah the Maccabee, they were able to liberate Jerusalem and regain control of the Holy Temple. This portion of the story is detailed in 1 and 2 Maccabees, Hebrew works located in the Apocrypha, a collection of sacred works not included in the Hebrew Bible.

Following their victory, the Jews cleaned and rededicated the Temple, as described in the reading Laura shared earlier. Note that the cleansing began before the fighting had ended, Judah himself managing it. Who knows, he may have even hung up the curtains himself.

The details of this cleansing and reconstruction may seem a bit tedious at first – reminiscent of Leviticus and other books of the Bible that people often struggle through.

But consider contemporary clean-up operations, such as those in Louisiana and coastal Mississippi following Hurricane Katrina: if you lived in such a place following a natural disaster, and were fortunate enough to return to a home with its basic structure intact, wouldn't you pay close attention to every detail of your home, even setting aside for a moment any unfinished battles you were fighting, with your insurance company or others?

When our home is destroyed or defaced, we may not tear our garments, put ashes on our heads, and blow solemn blasts upon trumpets, but we may fall with our faces to the ground, or cry out to heaven. We may walk in, stunned, and find ourselves picking up the pieces, forgetting all of the phone calls we were

supposed to make, mending the curtains and washing the furniture. The loss of a home can be as devastating as the loss of a loved one; and if our home may be saved, we may find ourselves dropping everything to restore it, just as we might take the first flight to be with an ailing relative.

Hanukkah is, on one level, a story about a people restoring their ransacked and defaced home: their spiritual home, their Temple.

You may have noticed that in this original version of the Hanukkah story, there is no mention of a lamp burning eight days. Candlesticks are lit, not lamps, and nothing miraculous is implied. Neither Maccabees 1 nor 2 make any mention of oil. Originally the Hanukkah holiday was a late observance of **Sukkot**, the eight-day harvest festival celebrated in the fall, delayed in this case by the war. Observance of this new holiday, the postponed Sukkot, continued in later years to commemorate the military victory.

Hundreds of years later, at the time of the Talmud, a collection of sacred writings during the Babylonian exile, rabbis reinvented Hanukkah. They de-emphasized the military heroics and added a new detail to the story: the miracle of the lamp oil. The rabbis said that the Maccabees entered the decimated Temple and found one small cruse of oil, enough to last only one day. The small amount of oil lasted eight days! A festival was appointed to celebrate this miracle.

Now, it is perhaps conceivable that the rabbis discovered some new evidence of this miracle having taken place, something missed by people for hundreds of years: perhaps a journal of a soldier. But it's much more likely that the Hanukkah miracle story was invented.

I sometimes wonder what it would be like to live at a time when stories like these were being invented or drastically transformed: didn't people at the time of

the Talmud at least know that this new detail about the lamp oil was invented? But if you want to know how it's possible to accept readily a new myth, and project it backwards, as if it had always been part of the story, I can tell you, because I lived for six years near Boston, the heart of Red Sox Nation, when the Red Sox baseball team finally reversed the Curse of the Bambino, winning the World Series for the first time in 86 years.

Everybody in New England knows what the Curse of the Bambino is, but it's possible that some of you might not. The Bambino is Babe Ruth, who the Red Sox infamously sold to The New York Yankees, their arch rival, in 1920. The sale financed theatrical productions in New York. From Wikipedia:

Prior to Ruth leaving Boston, the Red Sox had won five of the first fifteen World Series, with Ruth pitching for the 1916 and 1918 championship teams... The Yankees had not played in any World Series up to that time. In the 84 years after the sale, the Yankees played in 39 World Series, winning 26 of them, twice as many as any other team in Major League Baseball. Meanwhile, over the same time span, the Red Sox played in only four World Series and lost each in seven games.

There are far, far more gruesome details to this Curse than I can share now, but I'm sure Al Landy will be happy to tell you more.

So, when did the Curse of the Bambino originate? Did Babe Ruth curse the Red Sox when they sold him, in 1920? Did he curse them when he retired, in 1935, or on his deathbed, in 1948? No, it turns out that the first written record of a "Curse of the Bambino" was in 1986, in *The New York Times*. While for decades Red Sox fans had agonized over the shift in fortunes since the time Ruth was

traded, nobody called it in print "The Curse of the Bambino" or, I believe, even a curse of Babe Ruth... nobody, that is, until Billy Buckner let an easy grounder go between his legs during the sixth game of the 1986 World Series against the New York Mets, leading to the Red Sox' catastrophic loss of the Series.

Unless the words of a major American celebrity lasted in oral culture without being written down or otherwise recorded for several decades, we can safely conclude that Babe Ruth never heard of the Curse, let alone make it.

But what a great myth! The Curse of the Bambino is not technically true but speaks to a reality: the Red Sox and their fans felt and acted as if they were cursed. Until 2004 that is, when the Red Sox finally won The World Series, the fans rejoiced for a good while, and then didn't know what to feel or what to talk about. Most Red Sox fans (I think) didn't actually believe in the literal reality of The Curse, but we certainly accepted it as a powerful myth that made sense of events that otherwise seemed to defy reason and probability. When the ground ball went through poor Billy Buckner's legs, only a curse seemed sufficient to explain the futility.

The rabbis invented the myth of the miracle of lights and the people accepted the myth in much the same way as the Myth of the Bambino was invented and accepted: because the myth spoke to the reality and the hopes of the people. The restored temple had become a sacred place to the Jewish people, and when in exile, they dearly missed it. The people believed the myth -- whether or not they believed it literally -- because they experienced their own small miracles of sustained light and grace in worship. If they did not, the myth would have died. This is how it is with religious and secular myths: the faithful may or may not believe in the literal story, but the mythical story reflects, validates, frames, and gives deeper meaning to their experiences.

The myth of the long-burning Hanukkah lamp oil has taken hold of our imagination somehow; it speaks to a deeper reality, for non-Jews as well as Jews. It says: have hope. Have faith. It says, when all seems lost, when all is dark, there is still a light that merely needs to be uncovered or rekindled. The Miracle of the Lamp Oil shifts the focus of the Hanukkah story from the heroic struggle of the Maccabees to that which their heroism restored: the Temple, their meeting-place with God. A story celebrating human will and strength in the face of oppression becomes also a story of grace. A story of war becomes also a story of peace. The story of triumph becomes also a story of Hanukkah, of Dedication: the Cleansing and Re-Dedication of a House of God.

Our homes can, or should be, sacred spaces. If we don't appreciate this on an ordinary day, we certainly know when our homes have been violated how sacred they are to us. Or when we consider the plight of someone who is homeless -- this is an emotional and spiritual void as well as a practical one.

When we feel invested in a spiritual home, a sanctuary, a meeting-place with the spiritual dimension of life, it can become just as sacred as our own homes. Part of the reason so many of us will miss this church building, and in particular this octagonal sanctuary with windows onto our woody lot, is its natural beauty. No doubt about that. Yet part of the reason is our relationship with this space. Memories we've formed here. Worship services, baby dedications, weddings, memorial services, celebrations of life, birthday parties, social justice workshops, choir rehearsals, teacher trainings, lectures, movies, potlucks. Quiet conversations in the corner; tears shed, tears wiped, tentative smiles and raucous laughter. We've done a lot of living in this space.

Central to all of it is worship. Regardless of your beliefs -- regardless of

whether Goddess or God or Love or Truth or something else has central meaning to you... whether you like this place being called church or wish it were called fellowship or meeting -- when you come here on Sunday morning, you are doing something similar to what other people do on Sunday morning in places like this, or on Friday night or other times, something similar to what our ancestors did around the fire before any of the religions we know today existed. We gather for a sense of meaning in life, to touch something deep within us that helps us know our true connections to others and to all of life. When we come to the same place time after time, perhaps week after week, for these same purposes, the place takes on great meaning for us.

This sanctuary is a symbol of what we have experienced and what we have hoped for in our spiritual lives.

Many of us will miss this place. Last June we said some thank-yous to this space. Today is part of our grieving process, saying thank-you and beginning to let go. We will continue with this process over several months.

We've explored the myth of Hanukkah lights. Let's recall that Hanukkah is also a reminder of the human effort that precedes the light. Recall that in the original version of the Hanukkah story, which is closest to the historical truth, there was no miraculous light: just people who knew and loved the temple, rolling up their sleeves to repair and renew it. The miraculous light, the experience of grace, was not recorded by them but by those who followed: and they projected the miracle back to the time of the cleansing and re-dedication.

Many of us are now rolling up our sleeves to help prepare a new church, with a new sanctuary. Many have been working on this for months, on the Building Property committees, on the capital campaign, on the Board, on the Staff, and

more -- and let's honor those who have already pledged \$800,000 to it, with much of that already paid. That money represents countless hours of past work and significant personal sacrifices for the present and the future.

Creating a new spiritual home will require more work and sacrifice, generosity and creativity. This place now, and our future church will be, our Temple, our meeting-place with Love, with Truth, with God, with that which re-creates us in community and in solitude. Like the Maccabees, let us roll up our sleeves and dedicate ourselves to our new spiritual home and all that it represents to us.

The task before us is challenging. May we dare to hope, may we dare to do our part and let the spirit that we find here do the rest. While the history we write of this time will likely be filled with mundane details, the history written by our religious descendents may very well project onto our story something of the miraculous, a magical light, a congregation with a big heart that took a leap of faith and bloomed in unexpected, beautiful, life-giving ways. And who's to say their version of the story won't be as true as ours?

In closing, I invite you to join with me in a prayer, a building dedication that makes a fitting responsive prayer, the very last reading in our hymnal: number 733, "A Place of Meeting," written by one of our past interim ministers, Rev. Eileen Karpeles. Let's have members of ten years or more read the plain text and newer members and visitors respond in the italicized text. I invite you to read this a little slower than usual, more prayerfully – and I invite you, as you listen and as you speak, to think of this meeting-place with the sacred – and any other meeting-places in your life, including your home.