

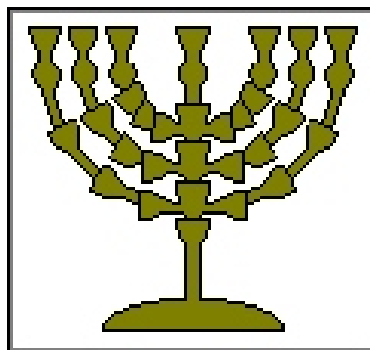
Chanukah Reflections

This month we will be celebrating the holiday of Chanukah. If you were to ask most Jews living in the United States about the significance of Chanukah, you might be shocked and surprised by many of the responses you would most probably receive. Many Jews don't attach a great religious significance and view Chanukah as a holiday for gift-giving. Many non-Jews (and even many assimilated Jews!) think of this holiday as the "Jewish Christmas," adopting many of the Christmas customs, such as elaborate gift-giving and decoration.

Chanukah is in my opinion, is undervalued, and is misunderstood. This is in part to the spirit of commercialism that has blinded us from appreciating this holiday's timeless message: the triumph of light over darkness. To honor the memory of our ancestor's victory, we must hold true to the values that make us and keep us Jewish.

Here are a couple anecdotes adapted from the E. Yaffe's wonderful book, *Hassidic Tales of the Holocaust*.

The pious Jewish inmates in Bergen-Belsen were determined to kindle Chanukah lights and chant the appropriate Hebrew blessings. They were abject slaves, temporarily permitted to live and toil until their strength gave out. Death lurked on all sides. Even if they could manage to avoid detection by their taskmasters, they lacked the essential materials: Chanukah candles and a Menorah.



Yet, a seemingly impossible celebration came about on the first night of Chanukah 1943 in Bergen-Belsen. One of eleven fortunate survivors, Rabbi Israel Shapiro, better known among his Chasidim as the Bluzhever Rebbe, was the central figure of that macabre Chanukah celebration.

Living in the shadow of death, and not knowing when their own turn would come, the Jewish inmates were determined to celebrate Chanukah in the traditional manner and draw whatever spiritual strength they could from the story of the Maccabees.

From their meager food portions, the men saved up some bits of fat. The women, for their part, pulled threads from their tattered garments and twisted them into a makeshift wick. For want of a real Menorah, a candle-holder was fashioned out of raw potato. Even Chanukah dreidels for the dozen children in the camp were carved out of wooden shoes that the inmates wore.

LIGHTING THE MENORAH

At great risk to their lives, many of the inmates made their way unnoticed to Barrack 10, where the Bluzhever Rebbe was to conduct the Chanukah ceremony.

He inserted the improvised candle into the improvised Menorah and in a soft voice began to chant the three blessings. On the third blessing, in which God is thanked for having "kept us in life and preserved us and enabled us to reach this time," the Rebbe's voice broke into sobs, for he had already lost his wife, his only daughter, his son-in-law, and his only grandchild.

The assembled inmates joined him in a chorus of weeping, for all of them had also lost their own

families. In low voices, choked by irrepressible sobs – they struggled to chant the traditional hymn, Ma'oz Tzur, which proclaims steadfast faith in God, the Rock of their strength.

On regaining some composure, the Rebbe tried to comfort them and instill new courage and hope. Referring to the words of the second blessing ("that He wrought miracles for our fathers in days of old"), the Rebbe asked, "Is it not anomalous to thank God for miracles that he had wrought for our ancestors long ago, while He seemingly performs none for us in our tragic plight?"

In answer to his own question, the Rebbe said, "By kindling this Chanukah candle we are symbolically identifying ourselves with the Jewish people everywhere. Our long history records many bloody horrors our people have endured and survived. We may be certain that no matter what may befall us as individuals, the Jews as a people will – with the help of God – outlive their cruel foes and emerge triumphant in the end."

Like the Maccabees of old, we are confronted by a society whose pluralistic values must force us to reexamine the meaning of our faith and destiny as a people. We must ask ourselves, whether we can still be a light unto the nations? Is such a thing possible, if we cannot be a light even unto ourselves?

It is not enough to be born as a Jew, one must live as one. Chanukah comes from the word Chinuch which means three different words: education, dedication, and sanctification. Each nuance defines the meaning of Chanukah for moderns. We need to firstly educate ourselves, then we must dedicate ourselves, and with that comes sanctification. .

I am proud to say that at our Shul, we have done considerably better than many other congregations around the country. Obviously, there is plenty of

room for improvement. In a free and open society, we often put a greater emphasis on money and other secular values than we do on religious values.

As your Rabbi, I challenge you to take a leap of faith and come to our many programs we have to offer you and will continue to offer you at our Shul. Whether you're interested in a minyan for a Yahrzeit, or a workshop focusing on Jewish Spirituality, Talmud, Yiddish, or just an old-fashioned Shabbat Service with you and your children, we have plenty to offer virtually ever age.

It is sad and even tragic, that so many of us never discover Judaism as a faith until we get bruised by life's curve balls, without ever thinking that our tradition and faith can imbue us with so much inner strength and courage. Judaism has a faith teaches us about making our lives holy. Our existence in this world is no accident. Chanukah teaches us that one candle, just one little candle can dispel the darkness that so often engulfs our lives.

Have a happy Chanukah,

Yours,

Rabbi Michael Samuel