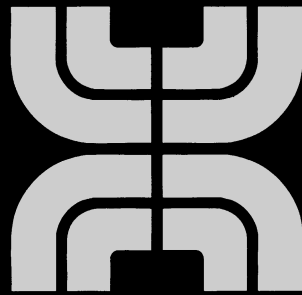
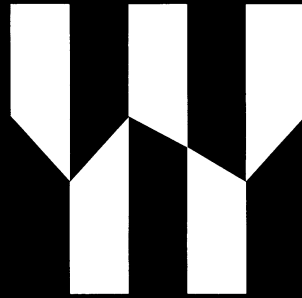


Hanukkah Today: Contemporary Jewish Thinkers Reflect on the Relevance of Hanukkah



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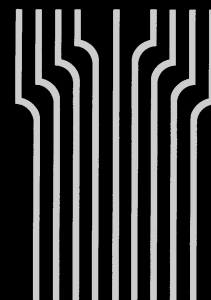
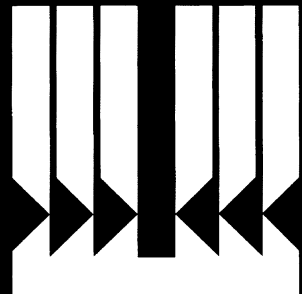
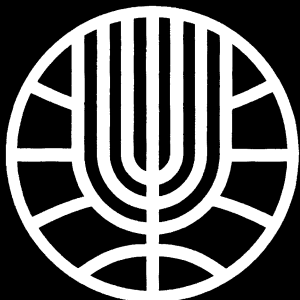


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Introduction

“Text and experience are mutually enlightening,” said the scholar of midrash, Judah Goldin, about the Jewish art of interpretation. When Jews reread the Torah annually, they not only reinterpret the ancient text in the light of contemporary experience, but they also let the text speak to them from other worlds, with perspectives very different than the contemporary one. This two-sided dialogue of past and present is the key to the vitality of Jewish tradition in general.

In the modern era, Jewish thinkers (such as S.R. Hirsch, Franz Rosenzweig, Herman Cohen, Eliezer Schwied, Irving Greenberg, and the editors’ teacher, David Hartman) have identified a “new” Jewish text, a new Torah, to be interpreted every year — the **Jewish holiday cycle**. The customs, laws, and stories of each festival are not merely law or folklore but a Jewish philosophy of life embodied in a people’s pattern of celebration.

In this sense, the Hanukkah candles, for example, are not merely a reminder of the historic restoration of the ancient Temple, but they are also a spiritual message about the perennial struggle between the forces of darkness and of light in our personal, communal and cosmic lives. Putting the candles in our window is a proclamation of faith, the taking of a stand in favor a particular way of life, just as one might put up a political message in a big banner on one’s front yard. It is not sufficient to light the candle at the proper time or to read a summary of the historical event. **One needs to make public a thoughtful message about what this holiday means personally.** Therefore we believe it necessary to add a section on Jewish thinkers who have tried to give Hanukkah such a contemporary spiritual message.

The thinkers collected below represent some of the best of Jewish thought in the last 50 or so years. Each brings his or her own intellectual prism to bear on the Festival of Lights. For some, it is a psychological standpoint, for others it is gender or politics or spirituality or the dynamics of Jewish identity. All of these thinkers, like many of our readers, are Western educated Jews seeking to maintain loyal and yet critical commitment to both Jewish and Western tradition.

Both Rabbis David Hartman and Irving (“Yitz”) Greenberg are students of the great modern Orthodox Talmudist and philosopher, Rabbi Joseph Dov Baer Soloveitchik, and both have created institutions to promote

the pluralist study of Torah for scholars, rabbis, educators and Jewish leaders of all backgrounds. Both Daniel Gordis and Harold Schulweis are leading Conservative rabbis.

David Hartman, in his first essay, reinterprets the supernatural miracle of the long-burning vessel of oil in a psychological way. The “miracle” resides not so much in how long the oil actually burned but in the initial faith of those human beings who lit so little oil yet trusted that somehow it would last. Analogously, the Jews knew “realistically” that they did not have sufficient resources to see through the project of rekindling the menorah and rededicating the Temple since they were confronting powerful Greek aggression. Yet they began the revolt and saw it through to the end. In his second essay Hartman asks what new message the Jews can proclaim in a democratic world in which, for the most part, there is no persecution like that of Antiochus. How does the shift from the closed world of the ghetto to Western pluralism transform the meaning of the holiday?

Daniel Gordis, like David Hartman, attempts to redefine “miracle” in a way acceptable to contemporary, scientifically sophisticated Jews. He takes the miracle of the long-lasting cruse of oil to be a metaphor for the durability of the Jewish people in history, and tries to identify a contemporary Jewish mission worthy of our continuing to survive.

Harold Schulweis, one of the great congregational leaders in the Conservative movement, has done much to transform the synagogue framework into a more personal place for spiritual pursuits in smaller communities, chavurot. His reflections on Hanukkah give priority to the everyday miracles of making “something out of something” rather than the miracles of producing “something from nothing.”

Irving Greenberg focuses on a different issue — the “wars of the Jews” among themselves, then and now. He finds historic analogies to the contemporary struggle of Ultra-Orthodox, Zionist secularists and liberal religious Jews. For him Hanukkah commemorates an ancient civil war between traditionalists, assimilationists and moderates and it teaches us that the current “civil war” can be resolved through pluralist coalition building.

Professor Judith Kates and Rabbi Mordechai Gafni interpret Hanukkah in terms made very popular in the 1990’s. **Judith Kates** takes a feminist perspective and asks why the Rabbis chose to emphasize the role of women heroines in the context of the holiday. She analyzes the story of Judith as an analogue to the Greek threat to penetrate and desecrate the inner sanctum of the Temple. In response the Jewish woman *par excellence*, Judith whose name means “the Jewish woman,” turns the tables on the Greek king and penetrates his bedroom and desecrates his body and thereby becomes a female savior of her people. **Mordechai Gafni** treats Hanukkah as a repository of personal wisdom for spiritual growth. In an intentional analogy to the eight ways of spiritual illumination in the Far Eastern Tao tradition of wisdom, he constructs eight ways to Jewish spiritual enlightenment derived chiefly from Hasidic sources.

Herman Wouk (1959), the Orthodox novelist, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan (1937), the founder of Reconstructionism, and Professor Theodore Gaster (1950), the secularist academic historian of religion, all use the Hanukkah story to address the dilemma of the American-born Jews of the mid-century who wanted desperately to be accepted by the WASP majority culture of that period. None of these three reject the positive values of America or call for a withdrawal from the corrupting influence of modernity on Judaism. Yet each sought to counterbalance, in different ways, the sociological pressure on Jews to conform.

Herman Wouk describes in sympathetic ways the prominence of the “December dilemma” during the 1950’s, in which the subtle “pressure to emulate one’s neighbors” proves more effective than any political or physical coercion has been in undermining Jewish identification. He uses gentle irony to describe the exaggeration of the celebration of the minor observance of Hanukkah due to its competition with the Christmas spirit of gift giving. Yet he calls for a stubborn response of non-conformism by the Jewish minority. Like the Maccabees who defied the all-

conquering Greek Empire and its culture, the Jewish people can preserve its identity both when faced by Soviet-style coercion and by American-style conformism.

Mordecai Kaplan was the son of an Eastern European rabbi who became a leading Conservative rabbi and helped found the Reconstructionist Movement. He set himself a more difficult and controversial task than Gaster or Wouk. Gaster and Wouk spoke to the fast-assimilating American Jews of the 1950’s about the spirit of non-conformism embodied in the Maccabees and about the mistaken tendency to ape anything Western. Yet Kaplan understood that the Jews, both in the eras of Hellenism and of Americanism, were attracted to assimilation by truly positive values which they found lacking in traditional Judaism. Therefore he believed that the ability to positively assimilate Western American values into Judaism was essential for Jewish survival. He distinguished between **passive** and **active assimilation**, between mindless imitation and thoughtful borrowing. Judaism needs to “reconstruct” itself in the light of modern science, ethics and aesthetics. That is the unexpected message that he discovers in the holiday of the reconstruction, cleansing and rededication of the Temple.

Theodore Herzl Gaster, whose father was an early supporter of secular Zionism, is himself an early promoter of multi-culturalism. In an era when the ideal of the American melting pot was the catechism of the children of Jewish immigrants seeking entrance into suburban life, Gaster argued that the message of Hanukkah is ethnic particularity. As a historian of religion he retells the political history of the Maccabees to show that they were fighting not merely for religious freedom but for the right to their own national culture. While many 20th century Jews were seeking to overcome the barriers of social anti-semitism by acting like everyone else, Gaster claimed that “the real issue at stake was not the right of Jews to be like everyone else but rather the right to be different.”

TRUSTING IN A NEW BEGINNING

LIGHTING THE SURVIVING CRUSE OF OIL

The primary reason offered by the Talmud for the celebration of Hanukkah is the miraculous burning of the single remaining pure cruse of oil which enabled Jews to rededicate the Temple and to commence rebuilding the community's spiritual life. Contrary to normal expectations, the flame continued to burn for eight days. The Talmud explains the holiday of Hanukkah as follows:

What is (the reason for) Hanukkah?

Our Rabbis taught:

On the twenty-fifth of Kislev commence the days of Hanukkah, — eight days on which lamentation for the dead and fasting are forbidden. For when the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oils therein, and when the Hasmonean dynasty prevailed against and defeated them, they searched and found only one cruse of oil with the seal of the High Priest, but it contained sufficient oil for one day's lighting only. Yet a miracle occurred and they lit the lamp that burned for eight days.²

Although there may have been sufficient oil in the cruses of oil, which had been ritually defiled, **Jews insisted on using only pure oil even though the quantity found appeared to be insufficient. The willingness to rely on one small but pure cruse of oil symbolized the reluctance to compromise their standards of excellence and moral ideals.**

Uncompromising commitment to purity and trust in the eternal regenerative power of personal integrity were concretely expressed in the symbol of the cruse of oil chosen to light the first Hanukkah lamp.

Jews throughout history loved to retell the story of the tiny cruse of oil, which refused to burn out. In recounting this tale, they indicated their deep hope that the small community of Israel could survive and

generate light irrespective of its size and power. Israel's fervent commitment to and trust in its way of life were sufficient reasons to retain hope in the community's future regardless of the empirical conditions of history.

In considering the miracle of the cruse of oil, our Rabbis asked why the holiday of Hanukkah was celebrated for eight days rather than for seven days. Since there was, by all accounts, sufficient oil for one day, only seven of the eight days of burning may be designated as miraculous days. Though several ingenious explanations were offered, what strikes me as being the miraculous feature of the initial day was the community's willingness to light the lamp in spite of the fact that its anticipated period of burning was short-lived. **The miracle of the first day was expressed in the community's willingness to light a small cruse of oil without reasonable assurance that their efforts would be sufficient to complete the rededication of the Temple.**

Hanukkah celebrates the miracle expressed by those who lit the lamp and not only the miracle of the lamp's continued burning for eight days.

The "miracle" of Jewish spiritual survival throughout its history of

1. Rabbi David Hartman is a liberal orthodox Jewish philosopher who moved from North America to Jerusalem where he built a pluralist center for advanced Jewish study, the Shalom Hartman Institute.
2. *T.B. Shabbat 21*

The willingness to rely on one small but pure cruse of oil symbolized the reluctance to compromise their standards of excellence and moral ideals.

wandering and oppression may best be described by our people's strength to live without guarantees of success and to focus on how to begin a process without knowledge of how it would end.

Uncertainty of success often paralyzes one's initiative to act. It is not uncommon for people to refuse to study Torah because of their belief that they lack sufficient time and will power to become accomplished scholars. Human initiative is undermined by the rationalization that since completion of the task in question is not assured, there is no point making the required effort to begin.

The 'miracle' of Jewish spiritual survival may best be described by our people's strength to live without guarantees of success.

The Hanukkah lights encourage one to trust human beginnings and to focus one's passions and efforts on whatever opportunities are available at the present moment. One ought to pour infinite yearnings even into small vessels. The strength to continue and to persevere grows by virtue of the courage to initiate a process by lighting the first flame. Only lamps which are lit may continue to burn beyond their anticipated life span. Only he who devotes even fifteen minutes a day to learning will discover his latent powers to study and concentrate. Only he who breaks the chains of moral complacency by giving a minimal amount of *tzedakah* (charity) will discover greater capacities to respond to those in need.

One brings children into the world without knowing whether one will be able to love and provide for their needs throughout a lifetime. Only in actually caring for one's children does one discover and expand one's capacity for love and concern. Human capacities and achievements grow as a result of action and not as a result of noble ideals and well-meaning intentions. The Hanukkah lamp burned for eight days because of those who were

prepared to have it burn for only one day.

The eight days of Hanukkah incorporate the miracle of the first day, which signifies the miracle of human courage to begin to build within imperfect human situations. There were undoubtedly many people who were skeptical of the decision to light the Temple lamp with a single cruse of oil. "Why light a flame which is bound to burn out before the Temple is completely rededicated? Let the Temple remain ritually defiled until we are certain that we have enough oil to light the lamp for a long period. Why initiate a process which we cannot complete? Wait until the conditions are ripe!" Those who went ahead and kindled the lamp ignored such "voices of reason" and they availed themselves of the precious opportunities at hand. And the miracle of Hanukkah occurred.

Those who decided to proclaim the establishment of the State of Israel in the twentieth century were Jews who had learnt the message of Hanukkah as well. There were many "reasonable" voices that counseled cautious waiting for the right moment. "Be cautious! Wait until your army is stronger. Wait until the vast majority of world Jewry will actively support the Zionist ideal and will choose to participate in the national-political rebirth of the Jewish people." Despite its detractors, a minority of the Jewish people went ahead and proclaimed the rebirth of the State of Israel.

The powerful flame of Israel was ignited in 1948 by a small component of the Jewish people. Today few would deny that history has shown that those who had the courage to light the flame were correct. World Jewry realizes that the Jewish soul must be kindled by the flame whose source is in Jerusalem. It is no accident that the symbol of the State of Israel is the menorah. The flame, which burns in the hearts of Jews throughout the world, was initially kindled by a small flame, ignited by those who heroically proclaimed: "We are reborn!"

THE COURAGE TO PUT OUR JEWISH LIGHTS IN THE FRONT WINDOW

On Hanukkah the Jew demonstrates his love for his particular tradition without fear and hesitation. In order to publicly demonstrate the Jew's loyalty to his particular tradition and to openly affirm the miracle of Hanukkah, the Jew is required to place the Hanukkah lamp where it will best be noticed from outside.

Our Rabbis taught: It is incumbent to place the Hanukkah lamp by the door of one's house on the outside. If one dwells in an upper chamber, one places it at the window closest to the public domain. However, in time of danger, one places it on the table in the privacy of one's home and that is adequate.³

In lighting the Hanukkah lamp, the Jew announces to the outside world: "This is my flame. Gaze on this light and know that from this home a Jewish light burns. If you accept me in these terms, I am prepared to share my light with you and to be an active member within a shared universe of experience. If, however, you seek to extinguish my flame, then I shall remove my lamp from the windowsill and place it on my private table to be viewed by my family alone."

The challenge facing Judaism today is not only whether we can withstand our enemies but also whether the light visible in the marketplace radiates a profound and compelling message.

In times of danger and persecution, the Jew may withdraw into the privacy of his particular framework of experience. He must not succumb to the standards of the marketplace, which denigrate the value of his unique identity and particular way of life. In the face of hostility and oppression, the Jew lit the menorah for the members of his family so that the flame of Judaism would be internalized in their souls. The marketplaces of his-

tory led one to believe that Judaism had died and had become a lifeless fossil. Yet in the private corners of Jewish homes families gathered together, told the story of Hanukkah, recited the blessings over the kindling of the candles and sang a song in celebration of their people's courage to remain loyal to Torah despite oppression and public derision. Although for Jews the streets of Western civilization were often dark and bleak, the soul of the Jew was aflame.

Today, because of the rebirth of the State of Israel, Jews can place their menorahs on the windowsills of history. We need not speak among ourselves only; we may share our flame with the outside world. Judaism is visible in the marketplace of history because of the courage of those modern Maccabees who set into motion the process of rebuilding our people in its ancient homeland.

The challenge facing Judaism today is not only whether we can withstand our enemies but also whether the light visible in the marketplace radiates a profound and compelling message. Now that the menorah has been taken off our private tables and placed in the window for all to see, we must examine whether the light itself is beautiful and inspiring.

Many traditional Jews believe that Jewish particularity is incompatible with modern mass culture and that the Judaic bonds holding together the community cannot bear the stress caused by exposure to the cultural rhythms of the larger non-Jewish society. According to this school of thought, Hanukkah celebrates the Maccabees' courageous repudiation of the world culture of their time, Hellenism. "Hellenistic" and "Hellenization" have become derisive terms,

3. *Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 21b*

which connote the assimilating Jew, the cultural opportunist without deep roots in his community's value system. Those who accept this assessment of Judaism in the modern world turn to social and cultural separa-

Jewish self-enlightenment is a prerequisite for opening our windows to the marketplace. Then we can absorb as well as propagate light.

tion in order to secure Judaism's survival.

There are others who are skeptical as to whether this ghettoization can succeed. Modern communication makes it impossible to escape acculturation to modern "Hellenism." It is, in their opinion, futile to resist. We should accept our fate and accommodate ourselves to the inevitability of our eventual assimilation.

A third option rejects the defeatism of the latter point of view and also the separatism of the former. We question the belief that Judaism has always survived because of its radical separation from the surrounding culture. Hanukkah does not commemorate a total rejection of Hellenism but, as the historian Elias Bickerman shows in *From Ezra to the*

Last of the Maccabees, the revolt focused specifically on those aspects of foreign rule, which expressly aimed at weakening loyalty to the God of Israel.

The major question, which we must ponder on Hanukkah, is whether the Jewish people can develop an identity that will enable it to meet the outside world without feeling threatened or intimidated. The choice, hopefully, need not be ghettoization or assimilation.

We can absorb from others without being smothered. We can appreciate and assimilate that which derives from "foreign" sources and at the same time feel firmly anchored to our particular frame of reference. That, however, requires that we gain an intelligent appreciation of the basic values of our tradition. Learning was not essential for our grandfathers because they were insulated by their cultural and physical Jewish ghetto. In order for the Jew to leave the protective framework of that ghetto it is necessary for him to have a personal sense of Jewish self-worth and dignity.

Jewish self-enlightenment is a prerequisite for opening our windows to the marketplace. Then we can absorb as well as propagate light.

2. DANIEL GORDIS

THE MIRACLE OF JEWISH SURVIVAL⁴

Hanukkah candles have to be situated in a place where they can be seen from the outside. Jewish tradition calls this dimension of the ritual *pirsuma de-nissa*, "the proclamation of the miracle." [But what's the miracle and is it one we still wish to proclaim? To whom is this message directed?]

It is ironic: at times, the non-Jewish world

seems to understand this message better than the Jews themselves. **Blaise Pascal** (1623-1662), a Catholic Frenchman, both physicist and theologian, said of the Jews:

This people is not eminent solely by its antiquity, but is also singular by its **duration**, which has always continued from its origin till now. For whereas the nations of Greece and of . . . Rome and others who came long after, have

4. Daniel Gordis, *Does the World Need the Jews?* (Simon and Schuster/Scribner, 1997, by permission from pages 110-111, 119, 122, 129-132). Gordis, the founder of the California Conservative Seminary, is now Director of the Jerusalem Fellows for prominent Jewish educators.

long since perished, [the Jewish people] ever remains — in spite of the endeavors of many powerful kings who have a hundred times tried to destroy it.

Similarly, when the eighteenth-century French writer — and notorious anti-Semite — **Voltaire** (1694-1778) discussed the possibility of miracles with the Prussian king Fredrick the Great, the king challenged him to point to one authentic example of a miracle. “Sire,” Voltaire is reputed to have replied, “the Jews.”

Jews have often said the same of themselves. When the biblical prophet Malachi, speaking several hundred years before the Common Era, seeks to remind the Jews of God’s power, he points to the fact that they had not disappeared in the face of adversity. In the midst of chastising them for their

made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?

Hyperbolic, to be sure. But as Jews search for an authentic and compelling identity in modernity, as we seek our authentic voice once again, Twain reminds us of an obvious but forgotten truth: **our very survival is part of our message**. Hanukkah is about the tenacity of the Jews, but more broadly, it is about the persistence of good, the endurance of the weak. Hanukkah thus urges modern Jews to reflect on their survival, to wonder how we have persevered beyond all expectation, how it is that in spite of all the obstacles thrown our way, our history still inspired Voltaire — who hated Jews — to speak of us as a miracle.

For the rabbis, Hanukkah was not just a celebration of military victory. Nor was it simply about the miracle of the cruse of oil, as important as that was to their conception of the festival. Rather, Hanukkah became a holiday about survival, about the spirit overpowering the sword, about goodness overcoming evil, and about the few — if their cause is just — ultimately vanquishing the many.

[The way the Rabbis, Hillel in particular, shaped the candle lighting ceremony involves an ever increasing number of lights each night.] As they increase in number each evening, the flames are meant to reassure other peoples who worry that their own blazes will die out. The ritual responds by assuring them that the power of their community, their people, their culture and their tradition will not decrease, but will actually increase. The growing number of

Hanukkah became a holiday about survival, about the spirit overpowering the sword, about good overcoming evil, and about the few — if their cause is just — ultimately vanquishing the many.

lapsed faith, he reminds them of miracles they do not appreciate: “*For I am the Lord — I have not changed; and you are the children of Jacob — you have not ceased to be.*”⁵ The mere fact that the Jews have not “ceased to be” strikes both Voltaire and the prophet Malachi as virtually miraculous.

Mark Twain was also impressed by the **Jews’ secret of immortality**. He wrote in his article “*Concerning the Jews*”:

[The Jew] has made a marvelous fight in this world, in all the ages; and has done it with his hands tied behind him. He could be vain of himself, and be excused for it. The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away. The Greek and the Roman followed, and

5. *Malachi* 3:6

To be a Jew
is a matter of
making a
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of survival for
those who
would seem to
have no hope.

candles is the ritual's way of saying, "you will not dwindle, but rather, you will grow."

As each evening of Hanukkah comes, Jews around their Hanukkiot (the plural of Hanukkiyah) are treated to a sort of ritual dance. It is not a dance of people, but a dance of flames and wicks. As the candles burn low, or as the oil in the Hanukkiyah gradually runs out, the fires do not simply disappear. For the last few moments of their burning, they flicker, seemingly ready to be extinguished, when suddenly they leap back to life. Just when it seems that the flame is gone, it suddenly revives. One moment there is darkness, and next, light is reborn and renewed. There is a beauty, an almost magical quality, to this display. It is a quasi-desperate exhibition, a suggestion that the fire does not want to die. It struggles desperately to live. Though the flame will eventually die out, our response is to light the flames again the next evening, adding an additional candle or wick to the collection, making our point that we simply will not allow the lights to go out.

That is the point of Hanukkah. It is about lights, but not only the lights of the candles. Hanukkah proclaims and insists that the downtrodden, the powerless, the dispossessed and the all but vanquished are these flames.

"We have survived, apparently against all odds," we say to the world, "and we believe that you can — and will — as well."

By making the Hanukkah lights a public ritual, noticeable by all, Jewish tradition reminds us that Hanukkah is not about us alone, but about peoples and nations everywhere. That is why we do not allow the lights to go out; and that is why we place them in a public place. The ritualized dance of the frail and fragile flames is a tenacious struggle the entire world needs to witness.

To be a Jew thus becomes a matter of making a statement, of reminding the world of the possibility of survival for those who would seem to have no hope, of speaking with an authentic and distinct historical voice that has something of value to say to human beings wherever they may languish. That is a dimension of Judaism that is unique; it is authentically Jewish. And it does not make Jews out to be better or innately superior. It is a distinctly Jewish role, for it emerges out of an engagement with Jewish tradition and Jewish texts. And today more than ever, it is a role that matters, that can make a difference. That is the point of *pirsuma de-nissa*, "the proclamation of the miracle."

Harold M. Schulweis

LIGHTING THAT FIRST CANDLE

TO MAKE A SOMETHING OUT OF SOMETHING

The second blessing over the Hanukkah lights praises God for performing miracles "in those days at this season." A rabbinic observation questions the propriety of this benediction for the *first* evening. For if the miracle refers to the small amount of oil in the sanctuary lamp that lasted seven days beyond its normal capacity, why speak of miracles on the first night? After all, on the first night there was sufficient oil present, and its burning was natural enough. That part of the blessing on the first evening appears superfluous. The benediction for miracles, then, should only be recited on the second night.

One commentator explains that the reason we recite the blessing for miracles even on the first night is because there are all kinds of miracles in the world. Creation, for example, is a miracle in which something is created out of nothing. Theologians call such an act "*creatio ex nihilo*" or in Hebrew *yesh me-ayin*. But there are other miracles that refer to acts that create something out of something (*yesh*

me-yesh). The first night's blessing over the oil that was present illustrates the second type of miracle, one that makes something out of something; something sacred out of some ordinary material already existing. Those kinds of miracles require human initiative and activity. Humans do not create the world out of nothing. The world is given to us. But humans can change the world, shape it according to whatever image is in our heart and mind. And when the transformation is done for the sake of God and goodness it is miraculous.

On the first evening of Hanukkah, before the match is struck to light the candle, we are literally in the dark. We cannot make out faces or things in the unlit room. There are obstacles all about us, partitions, walls, pieces

Miracles are experienced through the capacity of human beings to turn the real into the ideal. Miracles create something out of something, something transcendent out of something ordinary.

of furniture. When the candle is lit we see that nothing in the room has changed. Things are as they were in the dark. But with that instant illumination we experience a revelation. In the flash of that momentary light we know where things are, what obstacles are to be avoided. In that moment we are oriented to the world about us. Nothing new had been created except our awareness of the environment that gives us greater opportunity to choose, to know where to stand and where to move. We can make something out of something. Our capacity to discover wonders and signs is a gift for which we offer thanks thrice daily, evening, morn, and noon: "You grace the human being with knowledge and give him the power to understand."

In many cultures miracles signify strange, mysterious, unnatural events like a man walking on water or flying in the air. But in

the language of our tradition, Hebrew, the word for miracle is *nes*. It means "sign," from whose root the term "significance" is derived. To witness the miraculous is to observe in an ordinary event extraordinary significance, an event so important that it cries to be raised up and celebrated. The victory in the second century over the Greek-Syrian forces that sought to extinguish Jewish freedom is a *nes*, a signpost in our history that points to the direction of our lives. Hanukkah is the celebrated significance of the Jewish ideal of religious freedom.

The world in which we live is real. The swords and spears and elephants of the Greek-Syrians were real, as were the strengths of the Maccabees. Miracles are experienced through the capacity of human beings to turn the real into the ideal. Miracles create something out of something, something transcendent out of something ordinary. The paragraph added to the *Amidah* and to the grace after meals during the eight days of Hanukkah celebrates the significance of transformation, "for You have delivered the strong into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few."

The sense of sign-significance applies to our daily lives. We cannot often create or alter the given, change the diseases, accidents, misfortunes dealt out to us. We can, more often than we expect, make something out of them, create something out of something. Negative experiences can be converted into affirmations of life. Adversity may be used to refine the human spirit, to bring forth courage and compassion never suspected. The triumph of the human spirit over tragedy is a divine-human encounter, a creation of something of transcendent meaning formed out of something common.

What happened on the fifth day of Iyar in our time — the day of Israel's independence — reaffirms the miracle, *nes*, that took place on the twenty-fifth of Kislev over two thousand years ago. The Hanukkah lights remind us that miracles are as real as the transforming power of ideals.

3. IRVING GREENBERG

TWO KINDS OF HERO FROM THE MACCABEAN ERA THE HASIDIC MARTYR VERSUS THE INNOVATIVE ZEALOT⁶

The battle against the Syrian Greeks and their representatives, the radical Jewish Hellenizers was fought by a coalition of traditionalists and moderates. The traditionalists were called Pietists (*Hasidim*) and they constituted the first religious group in history to voluntarily choose martyrdom over religious assimilation. Later, the Hasmonean family of Mattathias the priest and Judah the Maccabee his son began the activist military revolt against Hellenist tyranny. The success of the revolt depended on the ability to enlist both the Pietists and the moderate Jews who had found ways to accommodate Judaism and Hellenism. This model of coalition building has important implications for a contemporary strategy for Jewish survival in the West.

Rabbi Irving (Yitz) Greenberg reviews the historic “political” parties of the Maccabean revolt and draws out the implications of this model. Rabbi Greenberg, a liberal Orthodox rabbi, created CLAL — an organization dedicated to intrafaith dialogue, coalition building and Torah study for Jewish leaders of all denominations.

The Pietists (*Hasidim*) — The First Martyrs in History.

Throughout Judea there were groups of pious Jews — called Pietists (*Hasidim*) — who were most unhappy with the Hellenizing pressures of the Greek King Antiochus and of the followers of Jason and Menelaus [radical Hellenizers who bought the office of High Priest-cum-Governor of Judea by bribing Antiochus IV]. The *Hasidim* believed, however, that they were bound by the Torah not to revolt against any foreign king who ruled over them. The foreign king was the “rod of God’s anger,” and Jews must accept their fate. If they repented, God would redeem them. If the king exceeded his role and harmed Jews excessively, God alone could and would punish him.

[Then a money-starved Antiochus sent his army to plunder the gold utensils of the Temple]. The sack of the Temple stunned the *Hasidim*. The First Temple was

destroyed at God’s will because of Jewish sinfulness. This second sack could only mean that the Lord was angered at Jewish Hellenizing apostasy and at the failure of pious Jews to do something about it. Some of the Pietists began to attack and harass the “wicked Antiochenes” (Jewish Hellenists) in Jerusalem.

To Antiochus, the turmoil in Jerusalem brought a long-standing concern to a head. He was seeking to unify the world. Yet here were the stubborn, rebellious Jews refusing to worship with the citizens of the empire and harassing those Jews who were responsive to the new universal dispensation. Antiochus decided that the obstreperous fanatics must go; Judaism must be “purified” to be a conforming citizen religion of the great Greek Syrian Seleucid Empire. And so he issued a series of edicts. On penalty of death, all Jews must cease observing the Torah; instead they must follow an imposed, “purified” Judaism. An Athenian expert was sent in to direct the practices of the “purified,” that is, universalized Judaism. Monthly sacrifices to the gods were begun. Sacred prostitution was set up in the Temple. A statue of Zeus was erected, and Zeus’ name was associated with the Temple. The offering included the sacrifice of pigs on the altar. The laws of purity of the Temple were systematically violated.

It should be noted that Antiochus was not imposing his own faith in these decrees. He seems to have concluded that this is what pure Judaism would have been, had it been truly a religion with decent respect for the opinion of mankind. It was neither the first nor the last time in Jewish history that a “universalist,” determined to straighten out the Jews and/or

6. Irving Greenberg, *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays*, pp. 260-265, 278-280, reprinted by permission of Simon and Schuster, copyright 1988 by Irving Greenberg.

Judaism, showed gross ignorance of the faith, condition, and integrity of the Jews.

Had these “recalcitrant” traditional Jews been prone to philosophize, they might have argued that it was important for Judaism not to disappear, but since they were untutored city folk and farmers, they could not articulate a philosophic defense of their position. They only knew the old ways and clung to them passionately, outragedly, doggedly. The Hellenists smiled condescendingly.

Backed by the power of the king and the growing religious indifference of the elite, the rituals of Zeus worship and pig sacrifice were extended widely and successfully throughout Judea. Hellenization seemed unstoppable. The few who resisted were arrested, punished, and slain. The king’s order proscribing the Torah was enforced with a vengeance. Sabbath observers and those who practiced circumcision were condemned to death.

In their simple faith, the Pietists believed that as long as Jews were faithful to God they were under divine protection, yet obedience to God’s commandments had become a crime punishable by extreme severity. They also

Yet martyrdom alone could not have stopped the massed power of the Seleucids and Hellenizers. In Hasidic reasoning, apocalypse was the only hope left.

believed that it was sinful to revolt against the king. As more and more innocents were put to death, a significant fraction of the Hasidim concluded that the only resistance possible was to remain faithful and die for God’s commandments. And so the concept of **martyrdom** developed into an ideal. The stature of the prophet and the martyr became merged into one: the highest stage of serving God.

The willingness to make this greatest of sacrifices, to die rather than to deny the Lord, became central in Jewish (and later Christian)

testimony in the following centuries.

Immortality and resurrection — ideas that heretofore had hardly played a role in Judaism — became central in Hasidic thinking. The promise of eternal life and rebirth undergirded the strength of Hasidic faith. This devotion should have warned the Syrians and their Hellenizing collaborators of stiffening resistance.

Yet martyrdom alone could not have stopped the massed power of the Seleucids and Hellenizers. In Hasidic reasoning, **apocalypse** was the only hope left. Indeed, had the Hasidism survived the persecution and won out within the Jewish community, the religion would have been decisively turned onto a path of pacifism, apocalyptic expectation, and denigration of secular life and human activity. The classic dialectic that moored Judaism in daily life would have been decisively broken.

The Maccabees — From Martyrdom to Revolt

In 167 BCE, in the town of Modiin, the new sacrificial cult was introduced. The resentment at the forced paganization and the desecration of the altar with the unclean pig boiled over in an act of rebellion. Mattathias, a priest of Modiin, stabbed a Jew who sacrificed in the new cult, killed the king’s agent, and pulled down the sacrilegious altar.

Mattathias’ social position made him the natural person to lead a revolt. He was a priest of a small town — not Jerusalem. He combined in himself enough aristocratic status and exposure to Hellenism to be a leader. At the same time he was a “country” man who shared the conservative party’s position and was detached enough and rival enough to fight the Jerusalem priests and their policies.

Elias Bickerman, a noted scholar, has pointed out that Mattathias did not demand the right of freedom of religion, nor did he fight for individual conscience. **This was “a conflict between earthly power and the**

law of the state of God — opposition to a King's order that was at variance with the commandments of God.

Mattathias shared the Pietists' faithfulness to Judaism. Where, then, did he find sanction to revolt against the king in defiance of what appeared to be the prophets' repeated strictures that the children of Israel not revolt against kings "whom the Lord had placed over them." Mattathias justified his act by analogy with the **act of zealotry** of the Biblical priest Pinchas in the desert, striking down Zimri, [for his attempt to lead Jews to pagan worship]. That act — unjustified by law and in contradiction to the priestly role — was validated after the fact by God's blessing.⁷ Mattathias dared to assert that a king who commanded the violation of the Torah could not rule Jews by divine right. In effect, Mattathias was operating out of a covenantal model in which humans could not "leave it all to God" but had to initiate some action to save the Torah and the Jews. In some

Hasidim's conception, God did everything; humans only observed, repented, persisted, and waited on the Lord for deliverance. Significant numbers of Hasidim were highly critical of Mattathias' action as impious.

This split is not a simple case of **Maccabees versus Hasidim**. The controversy between Mattathias and the main wing of the Pietists was over how to properly apply their shared values. Mattathias and his men were saying that God had given a significant role to humans, including the authority to apply the principles of the tradition creatively. As for the passive, passionate Pietists, theirs was not to question why, theirs was but to do or die.

Mattathias and his five sons fled to the mountains to escape the government's punishment for their act of political terrorism. They were joined by other Jews, among whom were militant Hasidim who came over to Mattathias' view of the right to fight.

7. *Numbers* 25:6-13

Irving Greenberg

COALITION BUILDING IN THE DAYS OF THE MACCABEES AND TODAY:

IN PRAISE OF ZEALOUS TRADITIONALISTS AND MODERATE MODERNISTS

In Praise of Stubborn Pietists (the Hasidic Martyrs)

Those stubborn Hasidim raised a subtle issue of political existence and religious truth that is only coming into its own in the twentieth century. Ultimately, the touchstone of human survival will be the ability of people with passionately held beliefs and absolute commitments to allow for pluralism. National peace will turn on the capacity of groups organized around values to allow the inherent dignity of the other into their own structures. How to achieve this respect without surrendering to indifference or group selfishness is the great challenge. On

Hanukkah, Jews celebrate that challenge and affirm the Jewish determination never again to let universal rhetoric ("to make the world safe for . . .") cripple the Jews' right to defend themselves. On Hanukkah, Jews urge humankind to take responsibility for the varieties and multiforms of human life. Hanukkah is also a profoundly Zionist holiday, for it asserts the right of politically self-determined existence for each group.

Hanukkah is a paradigm of the relationship

How do we apply Maccabean strategies to the contemporary clash of universalism and particularism?

What model of Hanukkah can speak to our generation? [Hanukkah is about] the clash of the universal with the particular. Hellenism saw itself as the universal human culture, open to all. [Maccabean Judaism saw itself as a defense of a particular religious way of life.] Mattathias, Judah Maccabee, and the brave people who saved Judaism were not fighting for a pluralist Judea. They were fighting against the state's enforcement of Hellenist worship because they believed it was a betrayal of Israel's covenant with God. When, after decades of fighting, they liberated Jerusalem and purified the Temple, they established a state in which Jews could worship God in the right way — not in just any way. Hanukkah is not a model for total separation of church and state.

The Maccabee victory saved particularist Judaism. It preserved the stubborn **Jewish insistence on “doing their own thing” religiously**; never mind the claims of universalism that only if all are citizens of one world and one faith will there truly be one humanity. By not disappearing, Jews have continued to force the world — down to this day — to accept the limits of centralization. Jewish existence has been a continued stumbling block to whatever political philosophy, religion, or economic system has claimed the right to abolish all distinctions for “the higher good of humanity.” Since the centralizing forces often turned oppressive or obliterated local cultures and dignity, **this Jewish resistance to homogenization has been a blessing to humanity and a continuing source of religious pluralism for everybody, not just the Jews.**

In this time, too, many universal cultures — Marxism and Communism, triumphalist Christianity, certain forms of liberalism and radicalism, fascism, even monolithic Americanism — have demanded that Jews dissolve and become part of humankind. All these philosophies have claimed that Jews can depend on their principles and structures to provide for Jewish rights. The Maccabee revolution made clear that a universalism that denies the rights of the particular to exist is inherently totalitarian and will end up oppressing people in the name of one humanity. Universalism must surrender its overweening demands and accept the **universalism of pluralism**. Only when the world admits that oneness comes out of particular existences, linked through overarching unities, will it escape the inner dynamics of conformity that lead to repression and cruelty.

between acculturation and assimilation. The final victory of Hanukkah was set in motion by the resistance of the most traditional

elements — many of them “square” country folk — to the growing encroachment of Hellenistic values. In many ways, the rebels were in greater conflict with their fellow Hellenizing Jews than with the Hellenes. The arrogant universalism in Hellenism demanded that Jews give up their distinctive religious ways for the greater good. Many Jews agreed, but the Pietists did not.

Hanukkah dramatizes the positive strength of Pietism, of Hasidism's unquestioning loyalty to Judaism. It challenges modern Jews to review their own easy acceptance of cosmopolitanism and sophisticated culture as superior to the sentiment and tribal feeling of being Jews. It asks whether, consciously or unconsciously, modern Jews share part of the Hellenizing, assimilating majority. Like the crisis of the Holocaust and threats to Israel, it forces people to face up to the issues: Are they ultimately Jews? In an ultimate crisis of loyalties, would one choose Jewish survival?

People who would never consider a Hebrew day school for their child, because what is American comes first, are making Judaism a secondary loyalty. People who would be more upset if their child married an Orthodox Jew than if their child married a Gentile have really made a determination of primary loyalty. The lesson of Hanukkah is that a strong priority to being Jewish is the key to right choices in Jewish history. Sometimes one should not reason. There has to be a primordial will to Jewishness first or to Israel's survival first. The reasoning and the willingness to negotiate some issues come second.

In Praise of Dynamic Moderates (the Maccabean Rebels) and Coalition Building

At the same time, it is not enough to be stubborn or to ignore the surrounding culture. This tactic works only when Jews are isolated. It was not working in the big cities of Judea in the second century BCE, and it will not likely work well in the highly

magnetic culture/society of today.

The Hasidim of those days could not have won the battle alone. In the conflict, many Hellenizing Jews decided to stand by their fellow Jews rather than by the Greeks. **A coalition won the victory of Hanukkah — the traditionalists united with acculturating Jews who decided to come down on the Jewish side.**

The entire process [of resisting Hellenist religious coercion] forced a choice on many Jews who had been drifting into Hellenism. In the crunch, seeing their Jewish brothers defending their home soil, seeing the destruction of local Jewish populations to advance the interests of Syrians, made many people decide that they were primordial Jews, not Hellenists. Judah and his band might never have succeeded but for the shift of moderate Hellenizers to the side of the revolt. Thus, what started as a revolt of the fundamentalists became a viable coalition of simple traditionalism and moderate Hellenization.

The Hasidim's simple faith was their great strength, but their non-analytic obedience to the law made them vulnerable. The *First*

Without fundamentalism there would have been no Maccabean revolt. Without moderate Hellenization the revolt would not have succeeded.

Book of Maccabees tells how a band of Hasidim was trapped in a cave on the Sabbath by a Syrian/Hellenizer army. The Jews, refusing to fight or even to wall up the caves on the holy day, were killed without offering resistance.

Mattathias and his band, however, resolved to defend themselves if attacked on the Sabbath. The Rabbis formulated this principle. “*You shall observe my statutes and laws that a man shall do and live by them* — and not die by them . . . From this we learn that life saving overrides the Sabbath.” Ultimately,

this principle was generalized in the ruling that every commandment of Torah except three — idolatry, murder, and certain sexual immoralities — can be overridden to save life.

Unlike the Hasidim, who left everything to God, the Maccabees drew upon the covenantal model in which humans were called to take action and to make judgments about the appropriateness of that action. It is not that the Hasmoneans did not believe in the divinity of the commandments; it is that they were able to ask different questions of the Torah: Is there a goal to be reached? Is there a priority when principles conflict? Is there a role for human judgment and action in executing the covenant?

The development by the Maccabees of a hierarchy of value — which in this case expressed itself in priority for life — reflects a philosophical influence. The concept of a fundamental principle that expresses itself in all commandments, and that guides the resolution of conflicts of values, draws upon philosophic, literary, and rhetorical analysis of texts and their relationships. Exposure to Hellenist modes of thinking and philosophy evoked greater depth and sensitivity to such thinking in the Maccabean and later leadership — just as contact with more developed literary and philosophic models enriched traditional rabbis' capacity for halachic and narrative thinking in the past two centuries. Such thinking became a hallmark of the Maccabees and the later rabbis. They responded respectfully to Hellenism's ideas and methods, but only where they could enrich and be assimilated compatibly with the tradition.

In short, **without fundamentalism there would have been no Maccabean revolt; without moderate Hellenization the revolt would not have succeeded.** The differences between these allies led to significant splits later on and to errors on both sides. Yet, without the coalition, the Maccabean Jews very likely would have been destroyed.⁸

8. *The Jewish Way*, p. 264-265.

Finding the Middle Way: Acculturation without Assimilation.

The Rabbis deepened Judaism to cope with a dynamic civilization, one with more highly developed cultural models. In that response, Judaism rose to new heights of competence and developed the ability to swim in the sea of Hellenism. The present host culture of Jewry is even more developed, magnetic, and challenging. Jews and Judaism will have to master the field. **Properly done, acculturation (modernizing) is an alternative to assimilation.** Since no one group can offer all the answers for all the life situations or cope with all the options in society, it becomes very important to form coalitions to

cover the field, to correct one another, to give Jewry the strength of variety and numbers.

The further lesson of Hanukkah is not to write off assimilating Jews. In a showdown (as in 1967 and 1973), many more Jews will be with the cause of Jewish survival than appears on the surface. A coalition of traditional, acculturating, and assimilating Jews pulled off the Maccabee miracle. What is needed is a coalition and symbiosis of traditional Jews, modernizing Jews, and those assimilating Jews who can still be reached. The real task is to begin the “guerrilla warfare” that weans people from their excessive absorption in the status quo and liberates them for authentic Jewish existence.

4. JUDITH A. KATES

JUDITH, THE HIDDEN HEROINE OF HANUKKAH FROM VIRGIN VICTIM TO SEDUCTIVE SAVIOR

Judith Kates, a professor of Jewish literature,⁹ stands in the forefront of Jewish women reclaiming and reshaping their Jewish literary heritage. She finds an interpretative key to understanding the invasion and desecration of the Temple by the Greeks in the ancient historical romance about her namesake Judith. Though this story has no explicit connection to the Maccabees, Jewish tradition has always associated it with Hanukkah and Judith Kates offers a deeper reading of Judith that shows why.¹⁰

The Sacred Enclosure Threatened

The *Book of Judith* presents us with a stark, yet stirring, image of the land and people of Israel under threat. At its narrative core, an enormous battering ram of an invading army, significantly numbered as 120,000 infantry and 12,000 cavalry, is arrayed against the mere “12” — the symbolic total of the tribes of Israel, reduced further in this story to two individuals — and women at that! With this vast force poised to invade the literal and figurative central space of the Jewish people, the text draws our attention to Jerusalem and the Temple at its center. “*When the Israelites who lived in Judea heard of all that had been done to the nations by Holofernes . . . and how he had plundered and totally destroyed all their temples, they were terrified at his approach. They were in great*

9. Dr. Judith A. Kates is Professor of Jewish Women’s Studies at Hebrew College, Brookline, MA and co-editor, with Gail Twersky Reimer, of *Beginning Anew: A Woman’s Companion to the High Holy Days* (1997) and *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story* (1994).

10. Quotations from *Judith* are based on *The New English Bible*; quotations from the Hebrew Bible are from *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh* (Jewish Publication Society, 1999). My translation-paraphrase of the midrash is based on a text in A. Jellinek, *Beit HaMidrash*, vol. 1. My thinking on the Temple as inner space analogous to the female body has been influenced by Bonna Devora Haberman, “The Yom Kippur Avoda within the Female Enclosure” in *Beginning Anew: A Woman’s Companion to the High Holy Days* and on Judith as representative of the Jewish community by Amy-Jill Levine, “Sacrifice and Salvation: Otherness and Domestication in the Book of Judith” in *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*.

alarm for Jerusalem and for the Temple of the Lord their God.” The geographical setting of our story, the town of Bethulia, is chosen because its inhabitants can “occupy the passes into the hill-country, because they controlled access to Judea, and it was easy to hold up an advancing army, for the approach was only wide enough for two men.”¹¹ The “high priest in Jerusalem at that time” looks to the men to hold tight, like the Greek heroes at Thermopylae, to this narrow entrance to the open, vulnerable and infinitely precious space occupied by the Temple.

As in later rabbinic texts in which the word “*bayit*” (house or home) is understood to refer to the woman whose place it is, here the *bayit* of the Jewish people is personified as a virgin threatened with violent penetration.

Throughout the narrative, we are reminded of this **sacred enclosure** as the symbolic goal and motivation for action. The heroine and chief actor in this story initiates her action with prayer, “at the time when the evening incense was being offered in the Temple in Jerusalem,”¹² and as her final deed, leads her people to Jerusalem where they engage in the quintessential rituals of Temple worship — “As soon as the people were purified, they offered their burnt-offerings, freewill offerings and gifts.” Judith herself dedicates to God “all Holofernes’ possessions” including the bed net, symbol of the sexually charged strategy of her triumph, which she transforms into “a votive offering.”

The Temple, *Beit Hamikdash*, (literally “house” or “home of the holy place”) figures as both symbol and microcosm of the homeland, the household of the people. It creates a tangible place where human connection to God, the source of physical and spiritual life, is made manifest and secured. Its spatial configuration draws our awareness inward toward increasingly private spaces of intensifying divine energy and presence,

spaces both precious and dangerous. In the symbolic field of the Temple, moving inside means going both higher and deeper, closer to the divine and to the source of all energy, all life. Penetration of this sacred enclosure requires awe, careful preparation, respect for boundaries, and is limited to legitimate “members of the household.” Yet this very space, in the *Book of Judith*, is the goal of an invading force which has already violated the outer circle surrounding it, the homeland, Eretz Yisrael. In telling its story of an “Assyrian” general who seeks to destroy the Temple and to require that “Nebuchadnezzar alone should be worshipped by every nation,”¹³ this text parallels the Hanukkah narrative of Antiochus. The story of Hanukkah becomes, through this parallel, the trauma of the invaded sacred enclosure, the *Beit Hamikdash* and the larger *bayit*, the homeland that surrounds it.

The language of the *Book of Judith* invites us to perceive this sacred inner space not only as geographical location, but also as the human core of the Jewish people. As in later rabbinic texts in which the word “*bayit*” (house or home) is understood to refer to the woman whose place it is, here **the *bayit* of the Jewish people is personified as a virgin threatened with violent penetration.** Invasion of the land, destruction of the Temple, is a rape. The town on the hill passes, chosen to defend the narrow, tightly closed access to that vulnerable inner space, is called Bethulia, which resonates with the Hebrew “*betulah*” — virgin. The land overrun by a huge invading army, the besieged city whose people are so tormented that they are on the verge of opening their gates to penetration, and most especially the Temple, a place whose innermost space is its most lifegiving, are the precious and beautiful woman, the “*enclosed garden*”¹⁴ violated. Land, people and Temple, the heart of both, figure here as the infinitely vulnerable, virginal female body, with its fragile, narrow opening guarded by increasingly feeble defenses against the overwhelming thrust of the aggressor.

11. *Judith* 4 12. *Judith* 9 13. *Judith* 3 14. *Song of Songs* 4:12

“The Jewish Woman” as Rescued or as Rescuer?

What astonishes us in *Judith* is the persona of the rescuer. Salvation for the threatened virgin in this narrative comes not through a Maccabee-like warrior, but through a woman. Even more surprisingly, her tools of rescue are not only her faith, brilliant intellect and eloquent speech, but also the femaleness of her body, that very sexuality apparently mobilized in the text to represent vulnerability and victimization. The text, with consummate literary artistry, weaves a

The Zionist “Judith:” The Victim Turned Avenger¹⁵

In 1965 “Judith” in Daniel Mann’s movie is played by Sophia Loren who portrays a Jewish Holocaust survivor who had been married to a Nazi officer now hidden in Syria (the original home of the Biblical Holofernes the Assyrian). He is helping the Arab armies with the tactics necessary to exterminate the new Jewish state. Judith/Sophia Loren joins forces with the Israeli Mossad to assassinate her husband.

The movie echoes both the murder of the Assyrian General Holofernes by his bedmate, the enemy Jewess, and the contemporary struggle of post Holocaust Israel to create a self-reliant militarily independent nation by overcoming its previous passivity during the Holocaust. The movie rests on the factual basis that German scientists did work for the Arabs and that Adolph Eichmann, the Nazi arch-exterminator, who fled to Argentina, was eventually hunted down by the Israeli Mossad with the help of his discarded mistress who “betrayed” him. But equally it builds on the romantic image of the Israeli woman soldier who fought “like a man” in the War of Independence in 1948. In a sense the Jewish people’s former passivity was identified with “feminine weakness” but now the woman had turned the table on the nation that had raped her.

The psychologist and concentration camp inmate Bruno Bettelheim recalls that in the camps most people were deprived of the ability to regard themselves as autonomous beings. The capacity to resist was the sure way to restore their self-image as human beings. Once a woman prisoner, who may have been sexually abused, grabbed the gun of a Nazi officer and shot him to death [as Judith had taken Holofernes’ sword to decapitate him].

15. Editor’s summary based on Margarita Stocker, *Judith: The Sexual Warrior*, p.200-203.

tapestry out of allusions to earlier narratives found in the Hebrew Bible to create a character who will both echo and transform representations of women as saviors of the Jewish people.

Her name itself, Judith, as many scholars have suggested, seems designed to point to her role as epitome of the nation — *Yehudit* in Hebrew and *ioudeit* in Greek — meaning “the Jewish woman.” But this representative function is complicated by apparent contradictions from our first introduction to her. Later Biblical, as well as much Second Temple period literature, frequently personifies the community, *knesset yisrael*, as a woman, either powerless, suffering victim in need of protection and rescue or faithless wife, straying after other loves. Conventional connotations would suggest that Judith, who is not only woman but widow, constantly in mourning, represents the community through the figure commonly invoked in the Torah for the most vulnerable and needy of humans. In the context of this narrative, we might perceive widowhood at its most extreme, the woman/community bereft and abandoned, about to fall before a ruthless predator.

But this widow is given an enormously long genealogy, connecting her back through names associated with the tribe of Shimon (Salamiel-Shelumiel, Sarasadae, Zurishaddai) all the way to Israel-Jacob. She is described as wealthy, beautiful (using the same Greek phrases that are used for the beauty of Rachel and Esther in the Greek translation of the Bible), extraordinarily pious and respected. She is introduced at a moment of communal crisis, when the city has been under siege for 34 days and its leaders have given God 5 more days to “show his mercy” before surrendering on what would be the 40th day of the siege. She herself has lived secluded as a widow for 3 years and 4 months — that is for 40 months, the confluence of communal and personal units of 40 suggesting the significant spans of time in which crucial leaders have transformed the history of the people of Israel

Portraits of Judith: Expensive, Pious Pornography and Sado-Masochism¹⁶

Under the watchful censorship of the church, wealthy Renaissance patrons' desire for sexually alluring pin-up girls for their mistresses' bedroom or bathroom could be satisfied best by painting the chaste but seductive Biblical Judith with Holofernes her lover. Sometimes these Biblical heroines decorated the anterooms of a high class brothel in which local prostitutes served as models for the artists who specialized in this field of commercial portraiture, especially in Rembrandt's Netherlands.

Even the darker side of the painting of Judith who betrayed her would-be male lover and slit his throat

without remorse could appeal to masculine fantasies of sado-masochistic sex. In fact, the inventor of this term and this genre, the Polish anti-semitic Leopold Sacher-Masoch (1870) portrays his novel's hero as idolizing Holofernes: "I envied the hero Holofernes because of the regal woman who cut off his head with a sword and because of his beautiful sanguinary end." Thus one could "love" Judith knowing and desiring to be dominated and emasculated by her betrayal.

16. Editor's summary based on Margarita Stocker, *Judith: The Sexual Warrior*, p. 28-30, 38, 176-177).

(Moses, Joshua, Deborah). We see her summoning the leaders of Bethulia (including the chief magistrate, also from the tribe of Shimon but the antithesis of his ancestor in activism) to teach them the deficiencies in their theology and to re-interpret the meaning of this historical crisis. Most crucially, she declares that her action on behalf of the community will not simply be prayer, as conventional expectations of the role of pious widow (and the male leader) suggest, but that she herself will take on the role of protector — rescuer and "go out" to save the people.¹⁷

The constant reiteration of Judith (and her female servant) going out (from Bethulia and then, back and forth from the enemy camp), highlights the pattern of reversals through the entire second half of the book. In Tanach the phrase that designates a military leader is one who "goes out before the people." Here male warriors wait helplessly inside the walls, while the "weak" woman goes outside the walls to the open space of danger. The enemy "lord" who expects to "achieve his ends" is defeated by another "lord," the God he has held in contempt.¹⁸ The "head" of the vast army literally and figuratively loses his head to a mere woman. Judith may, like Yael,¹⁹ kill the enemy general in a tent, but in this story it is

his tent, his "inside," while she comes from "outside." **She invades the space of the invaders.**

Judith Redeems the Good Name of Dinah; The Victor Replaces the Victim

The leitmotif of "going out" not only initiates a narrative pattern of ironic reversals that recalls the similar structures of reversal in the *Book of Esther*. It also deliberately evokes a narrative that occupies the background of our consciousness as soon as we hear the name Shimon, and is explicitly brought into the foreground in Judith's prayer: "*O Lord, the God of my ancestor Shimon! You took in hand a sword to take vengeance on those foreigners who had stripped off a virgin's veil to defile her, uncovered her thighs to shame her, and polluted her womb to dishonor her. You said, 'It shall not be done'; yet they did it. So You handed over their rulers to be slain, and their bed, which blushed due to their treachery, to be stained with blood.*"²⁰ Judith evokes the story of Dinah²¹ who "went out" and was violated by the "foreign" ruler, interpreting the revenge of her ancestor Shimon as, in reality, the instrument of God's

17. *Judith* 8 18. *Judith* 11:6 19. *Judges* 4-5

20. *Judith* 9:2-3 21. *Genesis* 34

vengeance on the polluters of the inner space of the virgin's womb. But **Judith stands the Dinah story on its head.** The one who goes out may look like the unprotected female about to be raped. She is, in fact, the rescuer and avenger. While the foreign rulers see her as juicy prey for their lust (*"Go to the Hebrew woman and persuade her to join us . . . It would be a disgrace if we let such a woman go without enjoying her company — literally, 'without having her'"*),²² she uses Holofernes' predatory desires as the fulcrum in her strategy. The image of the bed polluted by Dinah's violated nakedness becomes the focus of Judith's aggression and its coverings the symbol of her victory, turned into a "votive offering" in the pristine, unviolated Temple, protected by "a woman's hand."

Most strikingly, the devastating silence of Dinah's voice in the *Genesis* narrative is transformed into Judith's masterful action and the rhetorical fullness of her voice. *"O God, You are my God, hear now a widow's prayer. . . they have planned to desecrate your sanctuary, to pollute the dwelling-place of your glorious name, and to strike down the horns of your altar with the sword. Mark their arrogance, pour out your wrath on their heads, and give to me, widow as I am, the strength to achieve my end. Use the deceit upon my lips to strike them dead . . . shatter their pride by a*

Most strikingly, the devastating silence of Dinah's voice in the *Genesis* narrative is transformed into Judith's masterful action and the rhetorical fullness of her voice.

woman's hand. For your might lies not in numbers nor your sovereign power in strong men; but You are the God of the humble, the help of the poor, the support of the weak, the protector of the desperate, the deliverer of the hopeless . . . You and You alone are Israel's shield."²³ In her language, Judith fuses the purity of the woman and the sanctuary.

To protect it, she designates herself as the new Shimon.²⁴

Judith also expresses a prophetic humility, an awareness of human action as mere

instrument of the God who protects the desperate, very much in the mode of the chapter from Zechariah chosen by the Rabbis as a Hanukkah reading (*"Not by might, nor by power, but by My spirit — said the Lord of Hosts"*).²⁵ We may see her as another Esther, taking off her clothes of mourning and dressing *"so as to catch the eye of any man who might see her,"*²⁶ just as Esther puts on *"malchut"* — royal garments or "royalty"²⁷ to stand up to Ahasuerus. But Judith is even more like the young David, so boyish and beautiful (feminine) that he arouses the scorn of the enormous enemy, Goliath. Yet he confidently declares himself the instrument of the Lord of Hosts: *"For the battle is the Lord's and He will deliver you into our hands."*²⁸

The Primal Crime: Violating the Inner Sanctum

The ambiguities created by these subversions of conventional gender expectations pervade later midrashim more explicitly connected to the Maccabees' struggle, some of which include pieces of the story of Judith. In one medieval midrashic tradition, [reprinted in abbreviated form above under the title *Hannah, Daughter of Mattathias*, page 42] the rebellion against the "Greek" oppressors is precipitated by the foreigners' violation of the privacy of Jewish homes and the sexual integrity of Jewish women. They make a decree that anyone who affixes a door bolt to his house will be killed. The ability to close one's door, to make an inviolate private space, becomes a symbol of autonomy (integrity of self) and identity. Because of this attempt to destroy Israel's honor (*kavod*) and internal integrity (*tzni'ut*), the Jews get rid of their doors altogether, leaving their houses open and eliminating the space of their eating, drinking, conjugal relations and even sleep, the

22. *Judith* 12:12 23. *Judith* 9

24. "The deceit upon my lips" is like the *mirmah*, the "deceit" of Dinah's brothers in *Genesis* 34:13.

25. *Zech.* 4:6 26. *Judith* 10:4

27. *Esther* 5 28. *I Samuel* 17

necessities of daily life. The next decree forbids women to immerse themselves in the ritual bath on pain of death, causing the men to give up sexual relations with their wives. The third and climactic oppression comes in the form of *ius primae noctis* (first night privileges) — every young bride must go from her chuppah to a night of sexual submission to the governor (*hegemon*). The Jews suffered this decree for 3 years and 8 months until **Hannah, the daughter of Mattathias the high priest**, married a Hasmonean named Elazar. At her wedding feast, she tore her clothing and stood exposed to all. When her father and brothers wanted to kill her for shaming them, she called them to account — “*Do you consider yourselves shamed because I stand naked in front of these righteous ones, but not when you deliver me to the uncircumcised one to violate me? Learn from Shimon and Levi, the brothers of Dinah, who were only two. You are five brothers, besides more than two hundred of the flower of the priesthood.*” This, according

to the midrash, roused up the men of the Hasmonean family to begin the great rebellion that culminated in the victory we celebrate at Hanukkah.

In this and similar midrashim, the themes of sexual violation and integrity provide the fundamental imagery for the struggle between Jews and “Greeks.” Here too **violation of women and invasion of inner space express the emotional, as well as the conceptual meanings inherent in pollution of the sacred enclosure of the Temple.** The female protagonist, as in Judith, displays more clarity of mind and firmness of purpose than the men of the story, and provides the impetus for courageous action. But the woman remains “inside,” while the men, the true activists, “go out” to defend the faith.

What remains unique in the literary masterpiece, the *Book of Judith*, is the extraordinary transformation of the expectations aroused by conventional notions of gender, as well as by the texture of allusions to Biblical narratives. The use of a female character as both symbol and literal embodiment of the community of Israel has a long history in Jewish texts by the time of the *Book of Judith*. But **the transformation of that female body from victim to rescuer** suggests a more radical message. The female body, for centuries the symbol of the community as victim of oppression, becomes the means of rescue. Judith prays that God’s power (*yad chazakah* — literally strong hand) manifest itself through “a woman’s hand” (“*shatter their pride by a woman’s hand*”).²⁹ Standing “outside” holding the enemy’s head in her distinctively female hand, she symbolizes a human community, which can mold its vulnerability and apparent powerlessness, its “femininity,” into resources of strength. Perhaps her presence, in particular, brightens the Hanukkah lamp we place in our homes at the meeting point of inside and outside.

The Reformation’s Judith: The Freedom Fighting Femmes Fortes³⁰

“**S**trong women” fit the ideal of the Protestants of France, Germany, Britain and the Netherlands who fought for religious and political liberty from Pope and Catholic tyrants alike. Judith was both religiously and politically motivated to be violent in the name of God. Her revolt against Holofernes the corrupt boastful general and against the capitulation to Assyria of the weak king of Judea, Uzziah, served to justify Protestant political rebellion against “rightful” yet not religiously righteous Catholic rulers. German potters supplied the Calvinists in the war-torn Netherlands with both expensive and simple cups and dishes ornamented by Judith’s figure, the patron of religious resistance against corrupt rulers. In particular, embattled Protestant queens identified explicitly with Judith. Jeanne, Queen of Navarre in France, led the French Protestants, the Huguenots, in a bloody civil war and so she naturally commissioned the great poet Du Bartas to write an epic poem entitled “*Judit*” (1574) that praises, dangerously, the heroism of a tyrannicide.

30. Editor’s summary based on Margarita Stocker, *Judith: The Sexual Warrior*, p. 54-57, 61.

29. *Judith* 9:10

THE EIGHT-FOLD PATH TO SPIRITUAL ILLUMINATION

Hanukkah is a spiritual Journey. It is a quest for illumination and enlightenment — what the mystics referred to as “*ha’arah*” deriving from the Hebrew word “*or*” — light. The eight-fold path of Jewish consciousness is unfolded in each of the lights of Hanukkah. Each light captures in its glow a particular understanding of the spiritual path that we all must walk in our quest for higher ways of being in the world.

☪ The First Illumination: The Path of Soul Print³¹

We begin at the beginning with the source of the light. Zohar teaches that the source of Hanukkah light is from the *Or HaGanuz* — “the hidden light.” In the Hasidic unpacking of this mystical tradition, the hidden light refers to an interior place in every human being. The beginning of spiritual work is to acknowledge the existence of such a place. The essence of who I am is, in mystical terms, my *Or HaGanuz*, my hidden light. Every person has a public persona and a more internal, psychological profile. The hidden light, however, refers to neither. It is deeper, infinitely more complex, grand,

beautiful and mysterious. It is what drives me to greatness and to pathology, it is what moves me to choose one partner or a particular life path over another. **It is the DNA of my soul. It is my soul print.** The infinite value and dignity of every human being comes from the radical uniqueness of every person on the face of the earth. No two fingerprints and no two soul prints are ever the same. I begin my spiritual journey by attempting to make first contact with my soul print — my hidden light.

There is a Hasidic tradition to gaze into the flame of the candles for as long as they continue to burn. Mystically the meditation on the hidden light of the candles has within it the power to open a window to the hidden light of my own unique soul. Thus we begin

our eight-fold journey on Hanukkah with a trip inward to our own unique source of illumination. It is only after we have come to identify our spiritual signature, our soul print, that we can begin to wend our very special way towards increasing illumination and joy.

☪ The Second Illumination: The Path of Receiving

Real spiritual work is always about connection to the other as well as to the highest part of my self. The inability to form that connection is what the mystical masters refer to as “exile,” what we moderns would call loneliness and alienation. Not to be connected to other and self is to be lonely. Loneliness is not a social ill or a psychological issue, it is a malaise of the soul.

In biblical consciousness the goal of living is the good. The entire first chapter of Genesis proclaims grandly after each stage of creation unfolds, “*God saw that it was good.*” “Good,” explains the Italian kabbalist Luzatto, is the fundamental goal of the world. But goodness resides not only in aesthetic order but in human connectedness. God declares, “*It is not good for the human to be alone.*”³² All the good of creation, “*God saw that it was good,*” is undermined by the experience of loneliness.

Loneliness is the inability to share the essence of who I am with an other. There are two major causes for the experience of loneliness. The first stems from my failure to acknowledge that I am unique and special — that I have a soul print. What I have not found in myself I cannot share with other. The second cause stems — even after having claimed my uniqueness — from not having found a person to receive my soul print.

31. This selection is derived from *Soul Print*, a forthcoming book by Mordechai Gafni (Curtis Brown Publisher). Gafni, an Orthodox rabbi, uses his rabbinic and academic training to teach a personal, spiritual Torah to the seeker generation in Israel both via television and in popular lectures and books.

32. *Genesis* 2:18

Loneliness is Not to be Seen as I Am

A story: My son was eight years old. I was on my way to the United States for a lecture tour. My son gave me a shoe box of his things to take with me. I was saying goodbye to him when he gave it to me and didn't pay much attention. When I returned to Israel the first thing he said to me was — "Abba, what did you think of my box?" Now truth be told, I had not really looked at it carefully — it had been an intense trip with enormous physical and emotional demands and the box had somehow slipped my mind. Although I did not say any of this to my son — instead offering some lame comment on his box, he understood. He took the box from my suitcase and very quietly took his things out and put them on the bed: a rock of strange dimensions, a spoon, a picture of me, a particularly rare baseball card and the like. He looked at me, a tear rolling down his cheek, and said, "Abba, I gave you my box. In it were all the things I love. These are my things and you didn't receive them." At that moment I felt his pain and understood what loneliness really means. Loneliness is when I feel like I am not being seen for who I am. Loneliness is not to be received — not in my public or psychological self — but in my secret self.

The Hasidic Rebbe Tzaddok Hacoen from Lublin writes that the ultimate esoteric knowledge is the knowing of another human's soul. It is secret knowledge not because it is forbidden to transmit it to others, but because it is so difficult to share it with others. Paradoxically — as long as I have not received myself, I am unable to fully receive the other. This is so because I need other to fill my emptiness — to provide me with the self-definition and identity that I have not claimed for myself. To receive others is to be fully focused on listening to their music, to their soul print, without trying to rewrite it in the image of my hidden needs. It is only then that the dance of giving and receiving — which are really one — can begin. Kabbalah, the name for Jewish mysticism, means to receive. **To be a Kabbalist, an illuminated one, is to know and practice the art of receiving.**

The ultimate esoteric knowledge is the knowing of another human's soul.

The Third Illumination: The Path of Shadows

As the Hanukkah candle sheds light, it also reveals shadows beyond its reach. To touch our soul print we must first enter and embrace our shadow. Here is a story by the mystical master, Rebbe Nachman of Bratzlav, which we tell after the lighting of candles:

A son leaves his home and travels for many years in distant lands. Upon his return he tells his father that he has become a master craftsman. In particular he has learned the art of making a menorah, a candelabrum, which is essential to being a spiritual teacher. His proud father, wanting to demonstrate his wisdom and craft to the community, invited all the master craftsmen to see his son's menorah. The craftsmen however all quietly told his father that they thought his son's work to be lacking; indeed each pointed out a different deficiency in the menorah. His father being both hurt and disturbed confronted his son with the poor reviews of his work. To which his son replied; "You will notice, father, that each of the criticisms addresses a different part of the menorah. In fact, the deficiency that each person saw was a reflection not of the menorah but of themselves, of their own particular emptiness. **Identifying one's unique deficiency,**" said the son, **"is the gate to the true illumination that the menorah can provide."**

To see the light shed by one's own peculiar deficiencies is to undergo spiritual transformation, what classic sources call *teshuva* — repentance or return. Ironically, sin begins with our longing to be ourselves fully. Pathology is the distorted expression of the soul reaching for itself. The self, the soul, is at the same time divine and includes our human darkness, our shadow. The shadow, in both Hasidic teachings and modern psychology, represents the rages, anxieties and jealousies that lurk beneath the thin veneer of our consciousness. Those dimensions of our

Jacob Reclaims his Shadow Self

To return from sin, according to contemporary Talmudist and philosopher Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, is to “engage in self-creation.” This requires us not to deny our existing self, but to reclaim it and give it new form. The biblical figure of Jacob is the model for this idea. All his life he denies his shadow. His name, Jacob, comes from the Hebrew word *akov* — “crooked” or “tricky” — a shadow quality. When young Jacob goes to his father for a blessing, Isaac asks: “What is your name?” Jacob lies and gives his brother’s name. His deceit comes from his unwillingness to own his Jacob-ness, his true self.

Only when he reaches middle age is Jacob willing to face the traumas of his youth and meet Esau, the brother he had cheated; he is finally able to confront his own darkness. When the angel that Jacob wrestled asks him: “What is your name?” the reader hears the echo of the same question put to him by his father years before. But by now Jacob has faced his shadow, has embraced his whole self — including the deceit and the lies and their meaning — and has emerged stronger. “My name is Jacob,” he responds. The angel then blesses him with the name *Yisra-el* — which poetically plays on the word *Yashar*, meaning straightness or integrity. Jacob the crooked becomes Yisrael, the Straight One of God. We can only rise to integrity by tracing internal crookedness to its root and reshaping it.

soul that we deny, will express themselves, nonetheless, in pathology and darkness. As Carl Jung wrote: “The psychological rule says that when an inner situation is not made conscious it happens on the outside, as fate.” For example, a wealthy person shoplifts, seemingly without need. One’s peculiar style of sin expresses an unclaimed part of the self. It will not be silenced; it will act in the world to heal its pain.

Mordechai Lanier, the Hasidic Rebbe of Ishbitz, taught that **every person reaches God through one’s “hisaron,” his “deficiency,” through one’s own shadow.** Our uniqueness, our creative power, our potential point of intersection with the Divine is concealed within the shadow. The archetype of artistic creativity in Jewish tradition is Bezalel, who built the Tabernacle in the desert, where humans meet the Divine. The literal meaning of the name “*Bezal-el*” is no less than “in the shadow is God.”

The Robber-turned-Rabbi and the Energy of Sin

While the classic image for evaluating human beings is the scale (sins on the one side, merits on the other), the story of the Talmudic robber-turned-rabbi, Reish Lakish, offers us a new way of seeing one’s self. By working through our darkness to its source we are able to transform sins into merits. The scale becomes irrelevant. We become new, unified, with only merits to our name. The Talmud says, “Repentance is so great that through its power, intentional sins become merits.” This is, however, a troubling statement. We understand that divine grace allows repentance to erase our sins, but how can sin become its antithesis?

Reish Lakish led a band of highway robbers; he was moved to return to Judaism by an encounter with Rabbi Yochanan. “Your strength should be for Torah,” Rabbi Yochanan told him. From this Reish Lakish understood that precisely through his unique passion and energy — which until then had been expressed destructively — would he find his way to God.

Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of the Habad Hasidic dynasty, explains that Reish Lakish’s statement refers to the inner force/impulse of the sin. By acting altruistically, using the very passion that propelled the vice, the sin is transformed, it becomes a merit. Nietzsche expressed this point provocatively, the good can never gain the upper hand unless it is “infused with energy generated by murder.” He writes in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*: “Of all evil I deem you capable: therefore I want the good from you; verily I have often laughed at the weaklings who thought themselves good because they had no claws.”

We can go further, and understand Reish Lakish’s words as referring not only to the energy of the sin, but to the story behind it, the reason the sin came about. This is the secret of spiritual growth which flickers in the light and the shadow thrown by the Hanukkah candles.

☪ The Fourth Illumination: The Path of Rock-Climbing

The decision needed to be made. As the Maccabees prepared to rededicate the Temple, so recently desecrated by the Greeks, they discovered only one flask of oil — enough to burn in the Temple menorah for one day. Why start the project if we cannot finish, they thought. We might raise the people's hopes and then dash them again. Better to wait till we have enough oil. Others argued against these wise words of caution. They felt this was an opportunity that may not repeat itself. Who knows what the future holds? *Carpe Diem* — we need to risk, to seize the day.

Candles cannot be lit and enlightenment cannot be attained without risk. The menorah is supposed to be lit on the “*petach*” — at the gateway of the house or at least at the window, at the border of the inside and the outside — a place of risk and opening.

R. Nachman of Bratzlav used to tell a mystical Kafkaesque tale before lighting the Hanukkah candles. Here is a small extract.

“There was a man who was visited by a guest. They began to talk until by and by the talk turned to the deep matters of the soul. ‘I want to study with you,’ said the man to the guest. ‘But I cannot study with you now,’ replied the guest, ‘but follow me beyond the *petach* and I will teach you.’ Suddenly the man was not sure who the guest was — human or demon — from the good side or the other side. ‘If I wanted to harm you,’ said the guest, ‘I could have done so while in your house.’ And so the man followed him beyond the *petach*, and immediately they were flying . . . and then once again he was in his house engaged in normal conversation . . . and then again he was flying . . . and then again in his house . . . and then again flying.”

This is a story about risk, the constant need to move beyond the *petach*, the doorway, in order to fly, while always returning to the

house, to the stable roots of normalcy before flying again.

This willingness to go beyond one's limited world can be understood in terms of Rabbi Nachman's idea that there are two kinds of knowledge: *makkif* and *penimi*. Knowledge I have not yet acquired, literally “that which surrounds,” is *makkif*. *Penimi* is the internal knowledge that is already mine, “that which is inside.” According to Rabbi Nachman, learning is a process of transforming *makkif* into *penimi*. How do I bring that which is beyond, to the inside of me? How do I transform *makkif* into *penimi*? I must let go of what I already know. Herein lies the risk. Nachman teaches, I must let go of my comfortable certainty, in order to open myself up to a new, higher level of knowledge.

Two applications of this idea come readily to mind. In the realm of belief I often need to give up a primitive belief in order to come to a deeper understanding. If I tended to view God as only a kindly old grandfather in heaven and then I read a profound work of mysticism or philosophy that challenged that belief in God what am I to do? The answer is: **if I am committed to growth and truth, I need to let go of my old conception in order to be open to a new and higher understanding.** However, there is that moment when I am dangling over the abyss with no belief. I have advanced sufficiently not to be able to retain my old picture but am not yet able to truly understand the picture that is offered in its stead. This is the most dangerous place of all.

Organized religion has historically hidden teachings which would challenge our standard, if somewhat primitive, understandings, preferring them to the risk of getting caught dangling over the abyss, not for a moment but a lifetime. This is why mystical teaching was esoteric. Organized religion preferred a

All growth entails an element of risk. Learning is not a gradual, safe ascent, like climbing a ladder or a flight of stairs.

dogmatist to a skeptic. And all too often the attempt to move from a dogmatist to a mystic failed, with the person stalled for life in the place of the skeptic. Today however we have no choice — the call of the climb echoing from our souls is too powerful to mute. Today, without reaching for our mystical self, the skeptic will surely take over. The old dogmas can no longer hold us.

The second application that comes to mind is in relation to my own self-understanding. If I have always understood myself in a particular way — and that understanding has been my navigational compass in the world

While ultimate learning may take place through rock climbing, sidewalks are generally safer modes of mobility in daily life.

and it is not easy to challenge. Often when our self-understanding is challenged in therapy or in a consciousness-raising weekend, we succeed in destroying our old sense of self; however, we have not had time to build anything new in its place. Again we are left dangling over the abyss without the lifeline of a clear identity — a dangerous place indeed. And yet grow we must, for stagnation is impurity and death.

Rabbi Nachman's lesson is plain: **all growth entails an element of risk.** Learning is not a gradual, safe ascent, like climbing a ladder or a flight of stairs. Rabbi Nachman believes in **rock climbing**. Any rock climber will tell you that one does not climb rock faces like Spiderman. Human hands are not suckers, which provide a certain grip while you reach for the next rock. Quite often in order to reach the next hold I must let go of all my previous holds. I see above me a hold for my right hand. If I push up with my right leg, if I give a 'spring,' I will be able to reach the hold for my right hand. But to do so I must let go of my left hand and remove my left foot from where it is resting. In making the 'spring,' pushing up with my right foot, there is a split-second when that

right foot is the only thing connecting me to the rock face. My left foot, my left hand, and my right hand, are in the air. If I catch the hold with my right hand a split-second later, I am safe. But if I miss — I fall. It is the brief heart-catching moment of the 'spring,' the leap into *makkif*, having let go of *penimi*, that R. Nachman sees as the ultimate learning: **learning through uncertainty.**

It is important to point out here that while ultimate learning may take place through rock climbing, sidewalks are generally safer modes of mobility in daily life. Rock climbing is an expedition we plan for from the sidewalks of our lives. But once on the face of the cliff, some novice rock-climbers freeze, paralyzed by the fear of uncertainty. Others deny they have further to climb, making a house on the side of the rock. The great enemy of the seeker of truth, according to Reb Nachman, is smugness and self-satisfaction. It is crucial that I do not fool myself into thinking that I have "arrived." This will only result in stagnation. We need to be especially discerning to know the difference between stagnation and core certainty. They can look remarkably similar on the outside.

The fourth path of illumination, rock climbing, requires that we follow the light of the candle out the window, across the doorway, out into a world not yet our own but waiting to be illuminated and to illuminate us in return, if we are willing to take risks.³³

The Fifth Illumination: The Dancing Path of the Dreidel

The fifth movement in the spiritual Journey of Hanukkah is imaged in the dance of the flickering candle and in the whirl of the dreidel. The dreidel dances gracefully on the table before us, transfixing our gaze, awing us with its elegant and choreographed

33. See Mordechai Gafni's forthcoming book, *The Dance of Uncertainty*, especially the chapters on "R. Nachman and the Void" and "Rock-climbing" (published by Jason Aronson).

movements. The goal of the spiritual novice in watching the dreidel is no less than to become the dreidel, to learn to live in dance.

In dance, I allow myself to be carried by the essential rhythms of the music. Dance is at its core an act of trust. I trust the music. I trust my body. I trust that though I will always fall,

The Faith to Fall — into God's Arms

Faith, says the Rebbe of Ishbitz, is the belief that whenever I fall, I fall into God's hands. How many of us can fall back into the arms of a friend without trying to desperately break the fall at the last second? Faith is to know that God is my dance partner whom I can trust.

A friend of mine, a prominent scholar in medieval philosophy and mystical thought, once traveled from New York to visit Reb Menashe, a Jerusalem mystic. I accompanied him. "What does *emunah*, faith, mean to you?" Reb Menashe asked the scholar.

The scholar reviewed various positions on the matter of faith, from medieval to Hasidic. Reb Menashe listened patiently and then responded: "It is so much simpler than that," he said, "*Emunah* is the feeling that the baby has that its mother will not drop him."

A child wrapped in the cradling arms of his or her mother conveys the most powerful yet gentle image of certainty. The mother, merely by being present, confers unconditional love to the child. The nursing mother, in Hebrew called the *omen*, gives the child a sense of safety and clarity. As Reb Menashe was aware, the word *emunah* — *faith* — plays on the word *omen* — *nursing mother*.

When we get older, we can achieve a higher level of faith — one that incorporates yet moves beyond our beginnings. When we learn how to walk and then to run on our own, we understand that God is not only our mother, but God is also our lover and dance partner. Beyond the autonomy of walking on our own two feet is the trust achieved in dancing now on one foot and now on the other with our partner. God as our dance partner needs to anticipate our falls. "Seven times does the spiritually developed person fall," says the Talmud, "and seven times does he rise again." Similarly the mystical notion of "descending in order to rise" captures most beautifully the dances of our lives that allows us to trust enough to descend, to fall, to lose our balance, in order to spin and whirl through existence.

I will always land in the right position. Without the trust that the universe is such that I can land on my feet, I could never live and certainly never dance. I dance only when I hear the music and let it guide me. I live my highest story only when I trust my music and let it guide me. Often, I will fall in ways that I never dreamt possible. Dance teaches me how to transform the fall into dance.

Anyone who has ever seen Greek folk dancing can associate the idea to a visual image. When Zorba the Greek dances, first he dips very low. To the untrained observer he appears to be falling. However the downward fall motion is transformed into a dance step. In Hasidism the verse, "*you transformed my mourning into dance*,"³⁴ is understood in precisely this way. **The art of living is to know how to transform the inevitable falls into the dance of life.** The dreidel spins beautifully and yet every spin, no matter how exquisite, ends in a fall. We pick up the dreidel and spin again and again. To dance is an act of trust that the world has rhythm. To dance is to connect with the energy flow of the universe in the most primal way.

The Hebrew word for dance is "*Mechol*." Literally the word includes among its meanings both dance and forgiveness. For we may transform our falls into glorious dance movements, if we are but willing to forgive ourselves. That essential flexibility of dance is essential for any and all spiritual growth.

From the dance of subatomic particles in the Tao of physics to the dance of the reed gently bending in the wind, the structures and free forms of dance are, according to Tzadok Hacoheh from Lublin, the core stuff of the universe. As we spin the dreidel and ponder the flickering flame we discover the illumination of the dance of life.

34. *Psalm 30*

❁ The Sixth Illumination: The Path of Conversation

The candles partake, the mystics teach, in the **Light of the Messiah**. Rebbe Nachum of Chernobyl, mystic and philosopher, points out that the Hebrew word for messiah, “*Mashiach*,” can be understood as the Hebrew word *Ma-siach* — meaning dialogue or conversation. The radical implication of his assertion is that the messiah is potentially present in every human conversation. In a word, sacred conversation is the vessel which receives the Light of the Messiah.

As one Rabbinic midrash suggests, to bring the redemption we need only respond to the voice of God calling us to sanctity from Sinai. A voice goes forth every day from Sinai saying, “I am the Lord your God.” We heard the voice originally that day at Sinai not merely because God spoke to us but because we listened. Not only we human beings but the whole world. On the day of revelation a bird did not chirp, the angels did not sing, an ox did not bellow, and the sea did not rage — the entire world fell silent and therefore the voice that came out of Sinai could be heard. The voice can be heard only from the silence. In the prophetic account of the descent of the Divine chariot so beloved of Jewish mystics, the biblical prophet Ezekiel envisions

The word “vocation” derives from the Latin *vocare*, voice. We are called by the God-voice within us.

something he calls *chashmal*, a unique word, explained by the mystics as the “color of speaking silence.” *Chash* means silence and *mal* means speech, hence *chashmal* is speaking silence. Our silence enables the opening revelation of Divine speech. This is the secret of the *Chashmal*.

That revelation was heard long ago when God spoke to human beings, a once in the life of the universe event, says the book of Deuteronomy, “*a great voice which was never repeated.*” But the Rabbis and mystics insist that the voice of Sinai is accessible even after the echoes of the original revelation are long

since lost in the wind. It is, as understood by an alternate understanding of the same biblical phrase, “*a great voice which does not cease.*” Where, however, is that voice to be found?

Perhaps in the voice of the human being. When we listen on the deepest level, we are really uncovering the God voice within us. To have a voice is to be called. The word “vocation” derives from the Latin *vocare*, voice. We are called by the God-voice within us. The third book of the Torah begins with the words, “*God called to Moses.*” The Zohar in a different context writes, “when Moses came, the Voice came.” It was the voice of Moses which allowed the voice of Sinai to become audible. The human voice and the divine voice are not identical, however God speaks through human beings. The messiah will come, suggests the Talmud, “when you listen to his voice,” which requires listening both to the voice from within and the voice of fellow human beings. When human beings live a life of vocation, they are giving voice to the image of God within. Our deepest voice — that which emerges out of recesses of our soul when we are able to get truly quiet and listen to our self and that of the other — is an echo of God’s voice.

The Hasidic master Kalonymous Kalman Epstein in his seminal work *Meor VaShemesh*, The Light of the Sun, explains that the demarcating characteristic of messianic times is that every person will be their own spiritual master. This is his radical reading of the prophetic vision “and no man will anymore learn from his fellow to know God, for everyone will know from the wise to the simple.” Every person will find voice and that voice will be their spiritual guide. When we discover the light of the messiah conversing with us from within, then we have discovered another path to illumination.

☪ The Seventh Illumination: The Path of Finitude

If I hold onto an image of perfection too closely then no partner can ever satisfy me. Perfection becomes my greatest enemy. It is only when I let go of my need to realize my fantasy of infinity that I can create relationship with a real person. Herein lies the beauty and the paradox. By letting go of infinity and embracing the finite I open up the window of return to infinity. It is only through a complex imperfect relationship with a particular person that I can touch the infinite beauty of love. The universal is always mediated by the particular.

Two spiritual assumptions underlie this path:

- 1) In every person is a touch of divinity, through feeling that touch I can grasp the all. For, like a holograph, the all inheres in every part. The moment of divinity, which resides in the frail vulnerable human being, is no less than the portal to eternity.
- 2) I can only hold what I am able to give up. By giving up the image of the ultimate, I am able to find the ultimate, the sublime, in the imperfection of one limited person or moment.

This perspective, the ability to find the whole within the partial, intimations of the infinite in the finite, may help us appreciate the spiritual path of the Maccabees. When the Maccabees reclaimed the Temple from Greek Syrian domination only three years after the hostilities began, they wanted to re-light the menorah, the symbol of religious renewal. But all of the oil had been defiled by the Greeks, except for one pure cruse with only enough oil for one day of light. Yet they began the Hanukkah, the Rededication, and celebrated for eight days during which the oil in the Temple menorah never gave out.

The ability to be so joyous for eight days was an act of hope, not acknowledgement of a new reality of victory. The Maccabees knew their battle for independence was far from over. The Greeks had not yet sent their professional armies. In fact, the Hanukkah holiday was but a lull in a long protracted war that took 25 years. In the ensuing battles after the first Hanukkah, Judah and all his brothers

except Simon are killed. On that first Hanukkah, the brothers knew when they entered the Temple that they were still in the middle of the story. They realized that they may not survive future battles. Their victory was partial at best. Moreover, the symbol of the incompleteness of their victory was the fact that they had only one cruse of oil. It would take time to produce sufficient oil to keep the menorah lit and of course to reach the strength necessary to withstand the Greek Empire's counterattack. Why then should they light the menorah? Why celebrate a mere fragile beginning to their revolt?

Despite it all they decided to light the menorah. In doing so **the Maccabees affirmed their ability to rejoice in a partial fulfillment, to experience blessing even as the contingency and fragility of reality threatens at every moment to undermine the Joy. That then is the miracle of the first day; that despite it all, they had the wisdom and courage to light the menorah, in a world where fulfillment is at best tenuous.**

Philosopher David Hartman in his book, *A Living Covenant*, beautifully unpacks this idea. He writes that the ability of the Jew to recite a blessing of thanksgiving applies even after eating merely an olive's worth of food, even though the biblical requirement for blessing is only when one eats sufficient food to be fully satiated. We understand however that if we wait to be "ful-filled" entirely we will never experience blessings. Therefore, we affirm the surfeit of blessing contained even in an olive's worth of food. This is the defining characteristic of Rabbinic spirituality, in every partial fulfillment, there is a taste of the whole.

Now we see why each night of Hanukkah has its own illumination to be cherished. There is no need, nor is it possible to light all eight candles every night. Rather we need to experience the whole in the light of each individual candle and to bless it and the light it brings into our lives.

Mother Teresa: Every Moment is a Holograph

Every fleeting moment in which I experience fulfillment or meaning is indeed all of fulfillment and all of meaning. Every moment is a holograph, meaning the all is present in every part. Any moment of the divine contains the entire divine, even if experienced in the depths of despair.

A reporter is finally given the opportunity to interview Mother Teresa. Ushered into her simple room the reporter bursts out, “Don’t you think it is terrible, Mother Teresa, there are ten thousand refugees pouring into Calcutta every day from besieged Bangladesh and there is no food or housing for them!”

“No,” replied Mother Teresa, “It is wonderful. See, this starving little boy just took food . . .” The reporter’s attention is drawn to the shriveled youngster on her arm who has just taken a spoonful of milk.

It is the mark of spiritual depth to be able to live fully in the miracle of that isolated moment of beauty. Mother Teresa understood that in one moment of human value and human meaning I can experience the love of God and the core certainty of the cosmos.

Mother Teresa’s words echo the *Dayyenu* song of the Passover Haggadah. “If God had only done this one thing for us, it would have been enough for us — *dayyenu!* If God had only split the sea and done nothing else for us, it would have been enough!” Even more

startling — “If God had brought us to Mount Sinai and not given us the Torah, it would have been enough!”

These are surely a series of highly questionable statements. What good is standing at Mount Sinai without receiving the Torah? What is the point of traveling to the mountain at which the Biblical text says the divine revelation took place — if the revelation does not take place? How could this have been enough for us? How could we have sung *dayyenu* if we had never received the Torah?

The song is teaching us that any moment of divinity contains within it all of divinity. I can come to all of God, truth, beauty or goodness, through any one moment of encounter with them. This is the profound human implication of the metaphysical teaching that divinity is indivisible and infinite. The core of this attitude is the interconnectedness of the all. Every particle is an expression of the one. Every moment, place and person is full and thus offers fulfillment. Further, every particle connects us to and contains within it the whole. This means that through one moment of core certainty — in which the world was for a few moments fully real and meaningful — I can connect to all the meaning, certainty, truth, beauty and goodness in the cosmos. That means that in every present encounter all of the past and future is folded into the moment. All of the person’s memories and dreams are at play in the encounter which takes place in the now. That is holiness — ‘*Kadosh.*’

Rabbi Nachman’s “Fractals”: Within Every Part Dwells the Whole

Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav suggests that I can find core certainty of being through locating any one act, moment or character trait of goodness in my life. For mystical master Rabbi Nachman this is not only a psychological exercise to hold certainty amidst the confusion. It is an essential cosmic principle, and corresponds to the popular modern scientific theory of “fractals” which posits that within every part exists the whole. Therefore, if I can experience my core certainty of being in any part, then in that part I can experience the whole. R. Nachman teaches that if I can only touch a fleeting moment of my goodness and nothing

more, if there is only one point in my life story where I experienced certainty about my value and dignity, that is enough — *dayyenu*. For in that singular moment of certainty, all of the value, dignity and core certainty of my essential worth sings to the skies. In this sense the ten sefirot, which collectively and singly each contain the entirety of God’s presence, are not simply numbers or even jewels: they are our life stories. In all the beauty and the pain, the laughter and the tears of our life’s story, we need find only one quiet moment of goodness, however fleeting, to fill our souls with the music of eternity.

☉ The Eighth Illumination: The Path of Eros

The lighting of the candles is, in essence, a re-enactment of the rededication of the Temple by the Maccabees. In the re-enactment we are trying to re-connect with Temple energy. Why is it so vital to us that we longingly mourn the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple and yearn for its rebuilding?

What is it that we are meant to yearn for? Surely another building on the bitterly contested Temple mount holds no inherent redemptive promise. Further, would it not seem that mystic, vegetarian Chief Rabbi of Eretz Yisrael, Abraham Kook, was right, when he said that the animal sacrifices, which characterized the ancient Temple, hold little attraction for spiritually evolved moderns? Without answering this question a large portion of Jewish ritual and consciousness is rendered at best unintelligible.

Three Talmudic texts and an ancient esoteric mystical tradition need to guide us in our search for understanding. The first text, by its very strangeness, jolts us to the realization that our intuitive impressions of the holy may need fundamental re-orienting. Said R. Isaac, "From the day the Temple was

What is this strange and holy tale trying to teach us? That the seat of Eros and the seat of holiness are one.

destroyed, the taste of sex was taken away, and given to the sinners i.e. those engaged in illicit sex . . . as the verse says in Proverbs, '*Stolen waters are sweet.*'" In the context of this passage illicit sex refers specifically to adultery; while the taste of sex is an idiom meant to refer to the ultimate sexual experience. According to this eyebrow-raising passage, the difference between Temple and post-Temple spirituality is that after the destruction, the fullest erotic joy of sex was very difficult to access with our lawful partners. The yearning for the Temple is in effect understood as a yearning for Eros of the most intense kind.

The second rather shocking text is a

description of the innermost sanctum of the Temple. **In the Holy of Holies, relates the Talmud, were two angelic cherubs locked in embrace, erotically intertwined.** Furthermore, according to the first book of Kings, the walls of the first Temple were covered with erotic pictures of these sexually intertwined cherubs. This is our first indication of a close association between holiness and Eros. **The primary image in the Holy of Holies, the innermost precinct of holiness in the Temple, is a symbol of Eros.**

The final source to examine is the Talmud's description of a mythic dialogue between the Rabbis and God attributed to the Second Temple era. The Rabbis are concerned lest Jews be tempted to engage in pagan worship as they did in the era of the First Temple and thus bring about the destruction of the Second Temple as well. The Rabbis entreat God to nullify the power of the drive towards idolatry. God grants their wish allowing them to slay the inclination for idolatry. But where might they find this unholy drive? Immediately a fiery lion emerges from . . . the holy of holies, the innermost sanctum of the Temple. This lion who resides in the innermost sanctum of the Temple is identified by the prophet as the primal urge toward idolatry and slain.

The Rabbis, apparently feeling that it was a moment of grace, entreat again. Allow us, they say, to slay the drive for sexuality as well. God grants their wish and again a fiery lion emerges from the Holy of Holies, this second lion is understood to be the primal sexual drive. When they attempt to slay this lion however the world simply stops functioning. Chickens don't lay eggs, people don't go to work, the desire to get married is suspended and all productivity and, according to the Hasidic reading of the text, all spiritual work, grinds to a standstill. The Rabbis understand that they have gone too far and retract their request. At most they can blind and weaken this instinctual drive but it may not be eradicated.

What is this strange and holy mythic tale trying to teach us? The underlying teaching would seem to be that the seat of Eros and the seat of holiness are one. The first lion to emerge from the Holy of Holies personifies the drive for idolatry, the second the sexual drive. Both however are but expressions of common underlying reality — that of Eros. The seat of Eros is none other than the Holy of Holies in the Temple

Idolatry at its core is not primitive fetishism. It is rather a burning lust for the holy. Under every tree, in every brook, courses primal divinity. The idolater, like the prophet, experiences the world as an erotic manifestation of the God force. It is therefore only the prophet who is able to identify the lion as the drive for idolatry. One nineteenth-century kabbalistic writer suggests that this passage is about the end of the prophetic period and that the idolater and prophet were in fact flip sides of the same coin. True, the Rabbis of the Second Temple eliminated the Jewish attraction to paganism but it also crippled the spiritual ecstasy necessary for prophecy and the Second Temple no longer knew prophetic visions. The symbolism of the lions emerging from the Holy of Holies is

the Rabbis' way of teaching that Eros is Holiness.

Eros in this understanding includes sexuality as a primary manifestation but it is clearly not limited to sex. It rather refers to the primal energy of the universe. Eros is where essence and existence meet. Eros is to taste essence in every moment of existence. As this third passage indicates, the drive to uncover the divine sensuality of the world is not without its dangers. The erotic may overwhelm us to the point that our ethical sensitivities are swept away and our sacred boundaries overrun. And yet the need to experience the world in all of its divine Eros remains a primal human need and according to this text the Temple of Jerusalem was organized in response to that need.

The Talmud relates that at the time of the destruction, fruits lost their taste. Laughter vanished in the life of the polis, and the vitality of sexuality, teaches R. Isaac, was reserved for those seeking illicit adulterous thrill. When fruits lose their full erotic taste, when laughter becomes mechanical and only in response to sexual humor, then true Eros, the Temple, has been destroyed. It is therefore not surprising to experience love's displacement into the illicit sexuality.

The passionate yearning for rebuilding the Temple is the longing to redeem Eros from its distortions. We need to move from the Eros of longing, which symbolized the exile, to an Eros of fulfillment. We need to experience the full intensity of erotic relationship with partners to whom we are committed. Put succinctly, rebuilding the Temple requires the channeling of our corrupted passion for illicit sexuality back into the holy and ethical context of my relationship with my spouse. Reclaiming the sacredness of Eros is the path to the restoration of the Temple experience in our lives.

Rabbi Akiva:

The Holy of Holies is a Love Song

After the destruction of the Temple, Rabbi Akiva, the mystic Rabbi and the subject of the most romantic love story of the Talmud, taught that “all the Biblical books are holy but **the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.**” Akiva is doing more than extolling the virtue of the God-Israel relationship allegorized in King Solomon's Song of Songs in terms of passion and sensuality. Akiva is elevating **the experience of passion and sensuality to the guiding force in all of our relationships with the world, with our partners and with the divine. In a post-Temple reality, the primary site of Divine revelation is in Eros.**

The passionate yearning for rebuilding the Temple is the longing to redeem Eros from its distortions.

6. Herman Wouk

HANUKKAH TODAY (1959)³⁵

In a thousand years of national existence on the soil of Palestine the Holy land, the Jews over and over drove out oppressors and regained independence, but the Maccabean war, a battle for religious liberty, alone found a place in the rites of our faith. It stood out. It was the Jews' first full-scale encounter with the question that was to haunt them in the next two thousand years: namely, can a small

people, dwelling in a triumphant major culture, take part in the general life and yet hold to its identity, or must it be absorbed into the ranks and the ways of the majority? In the two great worlds of current affairs — the Communist empire, which so much resembles an ancient military dictatorship, and the tolerant, skeptical free West — they face the question again.

35. Herman Wouk, the American novelist, describes his view of Hanukkah in *This is My God*, p. 81-85, copyright 1988 by the Abe Wouk Foundation.

Hanukkah:

The Last and the Least of the Minor Holidays

A casual question about Hanukkah occasioned the writing of my book, [*This is My God*]. Yet there is nothing really accidental, in the United States in 1959, in starting an inquiry into Judaism with a question about Hanukkah, the last and least of the minor holidays; last in time or origin, least in prescribed observances.

It is the one holy day not rooted in Bible narrative; the one day that celebrates a military event; the day, in short, that comes closest to being a bridge between ancient Judaism and our modern world, and that lies farthest from the Mosaic revelation. Adventuring back in time toward Sinai, we encounter Hanukkah first among the calendar milestones. The observance is nearest to us not only in time, but in the nature of the crisis that gave rise to it.

Hanukkah celebrates the successful revolt of the Jews, in the days of the Second Temple, against the Seleucid Greeks, inheritors of the Syrian chunk of Alexander the Great's collapsed empire. The eighth in the line of Seleucid kings, Antiochus Epiphanes, undertook to force the Greek religion on Judea, on the old but evergreen theory that religious non-conformists were a threat to the state. He so far succeeded that in 168 B.C. his armed forces installed an idol in the Temple in Jerusalem and appointed Jewish apostate priests to sacrifice swine to the Greek god in the courts of Solomon.

Antiochus made it a capital crime throughout Palestine to teach the Bible or to circumcise boys. His army went through the country, installing idols and apostate priests in every village, unopposed at first by the stunned and cowed populace. The break came when one old man, Mattathias of the priestly Hasmonean family, refused to sacrifice to the fetish set up in his town of Modiin, and killed with his own hand the man who stepped up to slaughter the swine in his place. His five sons rescued him from the army, took to the hills, and organized a rebellion, which in three years swept the Greeks from all Judea. Thus the act of one resolute old man changed an evil tide of events. The entire future of Judaism may well have turned on the blow Mattathias struck.

On the twenty-fifth of Kislev, 165 B.C., the loyalists led by Judah Maccabee, the warrior son of Mattathias, recaptured the Temple and began eight days of purifying and rededicating ceremonies. Hanukkah means Dedication. The festival marks these eight days when the Temple was restored to the worship of God. The service continued thereafter for over two centuries, until the Romans overthrew Jerusalem in the year 70 and destroyed the House of the Lord, which has yet to be rebuilt.

I have here summarized the Hanukkah story because it is not, like the Bible narratives, part of common Western culture.

The Communist position on the Jews is generally, though with less crudity, that of Antiochus. Our religion the Soviets consider a barbarous relic, superseded in wisdom and soundness by Marxism. The training of children in this exploded Semitic superstition goes against good sense and the interests of the state. So the police discourage such teaching, in ways sometimes oblique and sometimes forcible. For Greek religion substitute Marxism, and the Russian Jews are back where their fathers were in 168 B.C. — with whatever differences one may find in the relative truth and beauty of the Greek and Communist cultures.

The challenge of the West is different, though just as serious. The proposition is the old one: that the Jews are confronted with a better way of life and should give up their religion for it. Forces that are not coercive, and therefore do not call forth the human impulse to fight them, urge Jews along this path. The position of the government, and indeed the deep conviction of most American leaders, is that the Jewish community has the right to hold fast to the faith of its fathers and ought to do so. What contradicts them is the

Can a small people, dwelling in a triumphant major culture, take part in the general life and yet hold to its identity, or must it be absorbed into the ranks and the ways of the majority?

tidal force that Tocqueville long ago marked as the great weakness of a democracy in his unforgettable phrase, “the tyranny of the majority.” The pressure to emulate neighbors, the urge to conform to popular views and manners, the deep fear of being different — these, in the United States, are the forces of Antiochus. Where the power of the sword long ago failed, the power of suggestion has recently been doing rather better.

It would be pleasant to believe that the stabbing relevance of Hanukkah to Jewish life

in America has occasioned the swell of interest in the holiday. But a different and perfectly obvious cause is at work. By a total accident of timing, this minor Hebrew celebration falls close in the calendar year to a great holy day of the Christian faith. This coincidence has all but created a new Hanukkah.

The old Hanukkah was a shadowy half-holiday of midwinter, a time of early night and late morning, of snow and slush, of days filled with blue-gray gloom only half dispersed by feeble yellow street lamps. It hardly seemed a holiday at all. Fathers left for business in the morning in work clothes. Children trudged off to school by day and scrawled homework at night. There was no celebration in the synagogue, no scroll to read, no colorful customs, no Bible story. For eight nights running one’s father, when he came home from work, gathered the family, chanted a melody heard only at this time — so that it came for ever to recall the sadness of winter twilight, the feel of cold wet wind on chapped hands, the hiss of steam radiators, and the smell of falling snow — and he lit candles in an eight-branched menorah on the window sill: one the first night, two the second, and so forth, until on the last night eight candles flared in a row. But even then the menorah made but a quiet little blaze. The candles, like the holiday, were slender and unpretentious; pale orange, inclined to bend and wilt, and quickly burned out; not at all like the stout Sabbath candles that flamed half the night.

The first evening of Hanukkah had the most life, because then the parents and grandparents gave the children Hanukkah money, a quarter or a half dollar; riches indeed, if a careful mother did not at once produce the steel savings bank and force the children to feed the coins into that horrible thin black maw which consumed half the joy of childhood. And on that night there was a novelty of the latkas, the cakes of potato batter fried in deep fat, which only the calorie-thirsty engine of a child could properly digest

and be thankful for.

At Hebrew school there was a sort of temperate quasi-Purim; perhaps the acting out of battles between Jews and Greeks, with cardboard helmets, shields, and swords. The teachers told the Maccabean tale and added a legend of a lamp miraculously burning eight days in the Temple. It all seemed of small account because it wasn't in the Bible and because nothing was made of it in the synagogue beyond a few added prayers.

The colossal jamboree of the department-store Christmas, of course, overwhelmed Hanukkah like a tidal wave.

Sometimes the children were given nuts, raisins, and hard candies; and also strange little gambling tops, dreidls, with which one could quickly triple one's hoard of sweets or lose it all. That, more or less, was the old Hanukkah; vivid and recognizable enough, from year to year, but frail compared to Sukkos and Passover or the weekly Sabbath. The colossal jamboree of the department-store Christmas, of course, overwhelmed it like a tidal wave

It was entirely natural for a new Jewish generation growing up in the United States to feel each December like children in the dark outside a house where there was a gay party, pressing their noses wistfully against the windows. That Judaism had its own rich and varied occasions of gaiety (as perhaps we have seen) was beside the point. Most second-generation Jews were but poorly trained in their own faith; and anyway the Christians had a brilliant mid-winter feast, and the Jews did not. Some families solved the problem in the simplest way by introducing Christmas trees, Christmas presents, and Christmas carols into their homes. They argued that it was harmful for their children to feel underprivileged, and that the Christmas tree was a mere pleasant ornament of the season without religious content.

Meantime in schools where there were

large numbers of Jewish children a dual celebration of Christmas and Hanukkah sprang up, as an official symbol of mutual courtesy and tolerance. This in turn generated a new Jewish interest in Hanukkah. Even those Jews who were celebrating Christmas in their homes — tree, holly, “Born is the King of Israel,” and all — began to find it seemly to add an electric menorah for their windows, and perhaps even to light the candles. This apparently solved the problem by giving the children the best of both worlds.

Of course all rabbis, even of the most extreme Reform tendency, inveighed against this institutional hodge-podge, on the grounds that it could do nothing in the long run but muddle the children. But pulpit words in such a situation are handfuls of sand against a rising river. I once knew a gifted and most liberal-minded Reform rabbi in the suburbs who preached against Christmas trees in Jewish homes. He was called on the carpet by his board of trustees and sternly warned to confine his remarks to religion and leave people's private lives alone.

The interesting point here, and the only one worth making, is the way the pressure of the majority can persuade one that its demands are one's own spontaneous desires. A Jew who feels large chunks of his heritage slipping away from him, and observes himself behaving more and more like the massive majority, should make very sure that this is a result he truly wants, and that he is not being stamped willy-nilly by the die-press into a standard exchangeable part.

The aggrandizement of Hanukkah itself is a fortunate accident. The level of knowledge of all Judaism must rise when any part of it happens, for whatever reason, to gain attention. The son of my skeptical friend is not likely to stop after learning about Hanukkah. A lack of clear and satisfying religious identity hurts American Jews most in December. That is why the apparently trifling issue of the Christmas tree generates such obduracy and such resentment. It rasps

an exposed nerve. It is a good thing that Hanukkah is then at hand. If the old custom of Hanukkah money has become the new custom of Hanukkah gifts, that is a minor shift in manners. The tale of the Feast of Lights, with its all-too-sharp comment on our life nowadays, is very colorful. It is of the greatest use in giving the young a quick grasp of the Jewish historic situation. The gifts win their attention. The little candles stimulate their questions. The observance seems tooled to the needs of self-discovery.

The Hanukkah candles by law burn in the window so that the passer-by can see them. The sages called this “proclaiming the miracle.” The legend runs that the Maccabees found in the recaptured Temple only one flask of oil still intact under the high priest’s seal, and therefore usable in the golden candelabra. It was a single day’s supply. They knew that it would require at

least eight days to get more ritually pure oil, but they went ahead anyway and lit the great Temple menorah. The oil burned, the legend says, for eight days.

This Midrash is an epitome of the story of the Jews. Our whole history is a fantastic legend of a single day’s supply of oil lasting eight days; of a flaming bush that is not consumed; of a national life that in the logic of events should have flickered and gone out long ago, still burning on. That is the tale we tell our children in the long nights of December when we kindle the little lights, while the great Christian feast blazes around us with its jewelled trees and familiar music.

The two festivals have one real point of contact. Had Antiochus succeeded in obliterating Jewry a century and a half before the birth of Jesus, there would have been no Christmas. The feast of the Nativity rests on the victory of Hanukkah.

7. Mordecai Kaplan

IN PRAISE OF ACTIVE ASSIMILATION

“CLEANSING” THE “TEMPLE OF OUR FAITH”³⁶

Two Kinds of Assimilation: Egypt and Judea

When the conquests of Alexander the Great brought the Jewish people under Greek domination, they came for the first time into contact with a civilization which, like their own, had created human values of universal significance. Judaism was faced with the challenge of Hellenism on two fronts, as it were, the one in **Egypt**, the other in **Palestine**. The reaction of the Jews to the impact of Hellenism on these two fronts differed, but their experience on both fronts is of great significance to us.

A process of assimilation was inevitable. But “assimilation” is an ambiguous term. It may be used in an active sense and in a passive sense; it may mean assimilating, and it may mean being assimilated. A minority group may appropriate elements of the culture of the majority and so relate them to its own sancta that they stimulate the creativity and will to live of the minority. That is **active assimilation**. On the other hand, it may be so overawed by the achievements and prestige of the majority civilization as to accept the standards of the latter uncritically, lose its own self-respect and abandon its national sancta altogether. In that

36. *Reconstructionism Today*, (Winter, 1996, p. 4-7) excerpted these selections from *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion* by Mordecai Kaplan, 1937. Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, born into an Orthodox rabbinic family, became a seminal thinker in the Conservative Movement and ultimately founded the Reconstructionist Movement. These excerpts are reprinted by permission of the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation.

case, it is doomed to extinction.

For several hundred years the dominant reaction of the Jews of **Egypt** was that of active rather than passive assimilation. The Neo-Platonic philosophy which was then current impressed the Jews profoundly and set them to studying anew their own national writings to convince themselves that the Torah had anticipated the wisdom of the Greek philosophers. Their contact with Greek thought did not therefore result in an abject subservience to Greek standards, but led them to seek new meanings in the traditional culture and institutions of Judaism. In Alexandria their interest in Jewish scriptures was such that it led to the first translation of the Bible into a foreign tongue, the Septuagint, and the first Jewish philosopher, Philo.

conquered, and not of the “sweetness and light” of Greek culture.

The peasants and artisans who constituted the bulk of the Jewish population only learned to associate Hellenism with the oppressive regime and the social arrogance of the politically favored. If that was Grecian civilization, their own tradition stood on a much higher ethical plane. They therefore resented with vehement protest any expression of irreverence on the part of the Hellenists for the Temple, the priesthood, or other *sancta* of Jewish religion. When the Hellenists fell back upon the intervention in their behalf of the Grecian king, Antiochus, a revolutionary situation was created, and the Hasmoneans became the champions of the revolutionary cause.

What can the Jews learn from their past experience with challenging civilizations?

In **Judea**, the impact of Hellenism upon Judaism had different consequences. Judea was never a seat of Greek culture at its highest. The superficial qualities of a civilization are much more communicable than its deeper and loftier values. The Hellenistic movement in Judea was not inaugurated by a group of idealists. It originated with a little clique of Jews who acted as tax farmers. Serving as intermediaries between the main body of the Jews and the foreign rulers, they found it to their advantage to flatter their masters and play the seditious ape. This imitation fortified their economic position, and enabled them to maintain authority over the rest of the Jews. The Jewish Hellenists believed that the possession of wealth and power established the superiority of the Greek civilization over the Judaic one. They were enamored of the militarist spirit of the Greek civilization and of the voluptuousness which it had assimilated from the oriental kingdoms it had

Lessons for Survival

What can the Jews learn from their past experience with challenging civilizations? In the first place, it is important that Jews avoid the mistake of those Judean Hellenists who indiscriminately ape everything that was characteristic of the dominant alien civilization, without any regard for the *sancta* of their own Jewish civilization. We have the modern equivalent of these Jewish Hellenists in the Jew who is willing to identify with the worst features of our western civilization, with its deification of mammon, its worship of success, its glorification of mere bigness, its apotheosis of power. Social climbing undermines the entire order of the spiritual values. It places a premium upon success, regardless of the methods whereby that success is attained.

But if an indiscriminate acceptance by Jews of all the elements of the dominant western civilization would be fatal to the survival of Judaism, an indiscriminate rejection of all it stands for, even if possible, would only be ruinous. [Jews must] react to the modern situation as the Jews of Alexandria met the challenge of Hellenism. Jews must discover what there is in western civilization that has

universal import, must relate these aspects of it to the traditional *sancta* of Judaism, and thus integrate them in the very fabric of Jewish civilization. Such a course is bound to stimulate the spiritual creativity of the Jewish

Paradoxical as it may seem, if a nation wishes to survive, it must not make survival itself its supreme objective, but rather aim at the achievement of good. That alone makes national survival important to its individual members.

people and issue in the production of new cultural and social values that are distinctively Jewish because they are born of the collective experience of the Jewish people. Paradoxical as it may seem, if a nation wishes to survive, it must not make survival itself its supreme objective, but rather aim at the achievement of the highest intellectual, aesthetic and social good that alone makes national survival important to its individual members

The advocates of a secular nationalism often err in assuming that by giving emphasis to the content of Jewish civilization, to such component elements as land, language and communal organization, we insure the nation's survival. But this is not enough. Only when these component elements are given **religious significance** of universal import can they be depended upon for survival value. Only by fostering such a religious orientation to life as will issue in the affirmation of the holiness or supreme worth of life, can any nation generate a national will to live adequate to its survival, in the face of challenge or persecution.

Reconstructing Judaism

But if the Jewish religion is to save Jewish life in our day, it must be **reconstructed**. The Jewish religion must be brought into rapport with the best achievements of modern civilization and rendered expressive of the most universal human values. It must

be made rational, ethical, and aesthetically creative.

(1) The Jewish religion must be made to conform to the demands of **rationality**. If Jewish religion should ever be generally identified with superstition, its doom would be sealed.

(2) Jewish religion must be made to harmonize with our highest **ethical** demands. The main significance of the democratic movements of modern times must be sought in the ethical implication of democracy that every person has a share of responsibility, and hence should be given a corresponding measure of power for determining the social order of which he [or she] is a part. The religious tradition of Judaism, like that of other religious civilizations, is still couched in terms of conformity to a revealed law, and still tends to put on a super-natural intervention the responsibility for social change. Jewish religion must identify God as the spirit that, immanent in human nature, urges [people] by means of their **ethical** insights to fulfill the destiny of the human race. It must not justify any social injustices, even if they conform to the traditional law. It dare not, for example, withhold from woman equal status with man as responsible ethical personalities, merely because the traditional codes, which are supposed to be revealed, accord her an inferior status.

(3) Finally, Jewish religion must be reconstructed **aesthetically**.

To produce art is to be creative, to give new meaning to reality. Since the experience of value in life constitutes our knowledge of God, all sincere art is sacred. In the past, religion emphasized "the beauty of holiness"; modern religion must also emphasize the holiness of beauty. If Jewish religion deliberately cultivated the aesthetic powers of the Jewish people, it would bind them to it with ties of gratitude and reverence that would go far to insure every necessary effort on their part to perpetuate Jewish life.

The challenge of our modern Occidental civilization to Judaism could be converted from a menace to Jewish survival into a positive aid to Jewish survival.

These are some of the ways through which the challenge of our modern Occidental civilization to Judaism could be converted from a menace to Jewish survival into a positive aid to Jewish survival. Such a way of meeting the challenge would be utilizing the traditional method through which Judaism

survived the impact of Hellenism. If the observance of Hanukkah can awaken in us the determination to reconstruct Jewish life, by informing it with a religious spirit characterized by absolute intellectual integrity, unqualified acceptance of ethical responsibility and the highest degree of aesthetic creativity, it will indeed be a **Festival of Dedication**. It will mean a **cleansing of the temple of our faith** to render it again fit as a habitat for communion with God. So long as the Jewish people is thus linked in communion with the Eternal, it can look forward to an eternal life for itself.

8. Theodore Herzl Gaster

THE ORIGINAL MESSAGE OF HANUKKAH

THE INALIENABLE RIGHT TO BE DIFFERENT³⁷

Hanukkah, the Jewish Feast of Dedication, ostensibly commemorates a historical event — the rededication of the Temple at Jerusalem in the year 165 BCE. But many of the religious festivals of the world which come to us as commemorations of historical events are really expressions of basic human emotions which those events happen to have evoked and focused.

Back of that narrative, however, and back of the annual festival lies the recognition of something deeper — something, which was indeed expressed in that particular event but which itself transcends it. What **Hanukkah celebrates** is the **inalienable right of human beings to their own character and identity**; and, in commemorating the way in which that right was once defended, the festival reasserts it from year to year. For that

reason, Hanukkah is no mere antiquarian relic, but an occasion of ever-living, contemporary significance.

It is important, however, that the message of Hanukkah be understood correctly. Hanukkah is not — as is so often supposed — a festival of independence; it is a **festival of dedication**. And the difference is crucial. What it asserts is not the right of every man to “be himself” and do as he pleases but to be a servant of God and in that service to defy princes. Moreover, the only God whom a man is required to serve is the God revealed to him in the history and experience of his people, not the idol imposed from without. **The condition of independence is consecration, and its hallmark is devotion.**

Another thing that the festival teaches is the **value of the few against the many**, of the weak against the strong, of passion against

37. Theodore Herzl Gaster (whose first name reflects his father's involvement with the early Zionist congresses headed by Dr. Theodore Herzl) is a famous scholar of ancient religions and their rituals. This selection comes from *Hanukkah and Tradition: Feast of Lights* p. 85ff, (Henry Schuman Publisher, 1950).

indifference, of the single unpopular voice against the thunder of public opinion. The struggle which it commemorates was the struggle of a small band, not of a whole people; and it was a struggle not only against oppression from without but equally against corruption and complacency within. It was a struggle fought in the wilderness and in the hills; and its symbol is appropriately a small light kindled when the shadows fall.

Antiochus — Father of the Melting Pot

In 168 BCE, Rome had managed successfully to block the plans of the Greek Syrian king, Antiochus IV, who was seeking desperately to annex the land of Egypt to the Seleucid empire. To meet the threat, the king needed desperately to rally all of his subjects. But this was an exceptionally difficult task, because those subjects were of disparate races and cultures, and many of them had been

mutual enemies before being bowed beneath the common yoke. The danger of disunity on one hand and of a possible switch to Rome on the other was accordingly ever present; and Antiochus was consequently obliged to accomplish by coercion what he could scarcely hope to do by persuasion or by reliance on any intrinsic loyalty: all of the peoples of his empire were to be welded together by *executive decree* into a solid cultural front.

On a winter's day in 167 BCE, the full force of this policy fell upon the Jews. The king issued a formal edict requiring that the Temple of God in Jerusalem be turned over to the worship of his own national god and ordering the Jews, on pain of death, to abrogate their own laws and ceremonies and to participate in the national cult. This was not — as is too often supposed — a mere act of anti-Semitism, and it was not motivated by any doctrinal opposition to the Jewish religion. Rather was it part and parcel of a

Before there was Separation of Church and State

The separation of church and state is an axiom of modern democracy, and we have become so accustomed to it that it is difficult for us to appreciate the other side of the picture. We think of religion as something concerned with the destiny of man and with his relation to God, and we think of the state as the political organism of society. The province of one, we hold, in no way impinges on that of the other, except insofar as religious doctrines may influence social conduct; and it is accordingly quite intelligible for a man to say that he is a citizen of his country and a Christian or Jew.

In ancient times, however, such a dichotomy would have had no meaning; for religion was not a personal faith or individual persuasion but rather, in a very real sense, the total organization of society. The god was not a theological abstraction or a mere metaphysical concept; he was the actual spirit of the community personified — a symbolic being like Uncle Sam or John Bull. His house was not merely an abode of divinity or a place of worship; it was also a city hall, a

center of the social administration. His ministers were not merely priests or hierophants; they were also civil servants — magistrates, physicians, and sanitary inspectors. The animals presented to him in expiation of sin were the counterpart of fines which might today be paid into court as penalties for breaches of the law; and the seasonal festivals which were held in his honor were primarily functional procedures designed to replenish the communal vitality at regular intervals. There was no distinction between community and congregation; a nation was the people of its god, and its territory was his estate. When it was attacked, it was its god that was being attacked; and when it went to war, it was as the army of its god, under his banner and command, that it sallied forth to battle.

It was on this basis that the ancient people of Israel founded its existence. If the whole of the cult were ever to cease, or if all of the statutes of God were to be discarded, Israel automatically would be at an end, inasmuch as it would have lost its distinctiveness and its *raison d'être*.

political program the purpose of which was to break down the divisiveness of separate religious communions by forcing them all into a **single national “church.”** The god of this “church” was to be the Greek Zeus; all local shrines were henceforth to be dedicated to him and to serve exclusively as centers of his cult. In order to emphasize the fact that the “church” was an organ and expression of the state, Antiochus himself assumed the role of god incarnate, arrogating to himself the title of *Epiphanes*, or “[God] Manifest.” The Temple of the Jews in Jerusalem was by no means the only house of worship to be forcibly accommodated to the new order; the sanctuary of the Samaritans on Mount Gerizim was likewise transformed into a shrine of Zeus, and at Daphne even the Greek Apollo was obliged to yield place to the national god.

For the Jews, the new edict was the bitter end; for what was now threatened was not merely their political autonomy but their very identity. Yet Hellenization had by this time penetrated so deeply and made such inroads upon their traditional loyalties that few indeed were alive to the peril or even recognized it as such. The upper classes were “Hellenes of the Mosaic persuasion”³⁸ and had long since surrendered any claims to cultural distinctiveness or national independence. The authorities were quislings³⁹ almost to a man. The resistance (was it ever different?) came from a small, unofficial minority; and it was touched off by a purely local incident.

The First Hanukkah: Defeating Dionysus in December

The Festival which Judah and his followers observed on those memorable December days was *not* as is so often supposed, a *festival of victory and liberation*; for they were not so naive as to imagine that a few successes in guerrilla warfare, however sensational and spectacular they may have been, had automatically restored the independence of the Jews or finally decided the political issues at stake. The purpose of their celebration was simply and solely to rededicate the House of God.

In order to dramatize the occasion and to invest it with a becoming measure of dignity, they made a point of repeating exactly the same ceremonies as had marked its original dedication in the time of Nehemiah [after the rebuilding of the Second Temple three hundred years earlier]. That event had taken place on Sukkot.⁴⁰ Accordingly, although Sukkot actually fell nearly three months earlier in September, its traditional ritual was adopted as a precedent. The ceremonies were made to last eight days, corresponding to the seven days of Sukkot and the succeeding Shemini Atzeret; and, inappropriate though it was to the season of the year, throughout that period a steady stream of “pilgrims” wound its way to the shrine bearing the wreathed wands and palm branches (*lulavs*) characteristic of Sukkot and intoning psalms (*Hallel*) customarily recited on that occasion. So effectively was the parallel drawn that, almost half a century later, when the Jews of Jerusalem exhorted their brethren in Egypt to adopt the annual celebration of Hanukkah, they could find no more suitable way of describing it than as the **December version of Sukkot.**⁴¹ As a matter of fact, the association of the ceremony with the ritual of Sukkot could invoke an even higher and more venerable authority; for Solomon’s Temple, too, had been dedicated at that very same season.⁴²

December was the time of year in which the great **festival of Dionysus** — the so-called “Rural Dionysia” — was celebrated in the countryside; and the ancient chronicler informs us expressly that, by decree of the king, the Jews were compelled to take part in it, “wearing the wreaths of ivy and joining the sacred processions.”⁴³ The festival took the

38. Gaster is punning on the self-designation of assimilated German Reform Jews in the 19th C. who called themselves “Germans of the Mosaic Persuasion” to emphasize that being Jewish was a religious, not a national identity.

39. *Quisling* refers to a traitor to one’s people who collaborates with the enemy occupation. In World War II the Norwegian traitor Vidkun Quisling was the puppet political leader appointed by the Nazis during the occupation.

40. *Nehemiah* 8:13-18

41. *II Maccabees* 1:9

42. cf. *I Kings* 8:2, 65

43. *II Maccabees* 6:7

form of an orgiastic revel. After a preliminary period of “purification,” the participants, now regarded as in a state of holy enthusiasm, clothed themselves in the skins of fawns or foxes, crowned their heads with ivy leaves, carried in their hands wands wreathed with green leaves and topped with pine cones, and repaired to the hills and mountains, where, in the light of torches, they spent the night in wild dances, rending the air with piercing shrieks of excitement and the equivalent of ecstatic hallelujahs to their god. As part of the ceremonies, the torches were dipped again and again into water or wine so that they might sizzle for a moment and flare with a brighter blaze, thus symbolizing the fiery nature of Dionysus and the “new light” which was thought to burst upon the world whenever he made his appearance among men.

When this picture is kept in mind, the full significance of Judah’s ceremony becomes apparent. Although designed first and foremost as a ritual for the rededication of the Temple, it served at the same time as a pointed and *stinging satire* upon the contemporaneous pagan festivities. Every detail of the Dionysian ritual was therein parodied and ridiculed. The preliminary purifications found their counterpart in the cleansing and purifying of the House of God from the contamination of the pagans themselves; in the festal parade, in the procession of pilgrims around the altar; in the carrying of wreathed wands, in the bearing of the lulav; in the wild shouts, in the chanting of psalms; in the blazing torches, in the relumed candelabrum.

Thus, the first Hanukkah stands out in a clear light; it was at once a proud reassertion of the Jewish faith and a ringing protest against the ways of the heathen.⁴⁴

The Message of Hanukkah for the Modern Jew⁴⁵

[In conclusion], Hanukkah commemorates and celebrates the first serious attempt in history to proclaim and champion the **principle of religio-cultural diversity in**

the nation. The primary aim of the Maccabees was to preserve their own Jewish identity and to safeguard for Israel the possibility of continuing its traditional mission. Though inspired, however, by the particular situation of their own people, their struggle was universal implications. For what was really being defended was the principle that in a diversified society the function of the state is to embrace, not subordinate, the various constituent cultures, and that the complexion and character of the state must be determined by a cultural process of fusion on the one hand and selection on the other, and not by the arbitrary imposition of a single pattern on all elements.

Seen from this point of view, therefore, Hanukkah possesses broad human significance and is far more than a mere Jewish national celebration. As a festival of liberty, it celebrates more than the independence of one people — it glorifies the right to freedom of all peoples.

The real issue at stake was not the right of the Jews to be like everyone else, but their right to be different; and victory meant not the attainment of civic equality (which, after all, was what Antiochus was offering!) but the renewal, after its forced suspension, of that particular and distinctive way of life which embodied and exemplified the Jewish mission. The mark of that victory, therefore, was not a triumphal parade but an act of dedication — the cleansing of the defiled temple. Moreover, when the Jews wished to perpetuate the memory of their achievement, what they chose to turn into an annual festival was not the day of some military success but the week in which the house of God had been cleansed and the fire rekindled on the altar. There is an important meaning in this, one feels, for our own day, and especially in connection with the problem of safeguarding civil rights.

44. from *Hanukkah and Tradition: Feast of Lights*, pp 85ff.

45. *Festivals of the Jewish Year* by T.H. Gaster. NY: William Sloane Assoc., 1953, p. 244-246.



A Bukharan mother and daughter from southern Russia celebrate their first Hanukkah in Israel, using a menorah made from glasses with oil and wicks. (December 1949, Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem)