

The Stories of Chanukah

A sermon by William McEvoy

Delivered at the First Unitarian Society of Westchester, November 5, 2017

Shiva-im Panim l'Torah – the Torah has seventy faces.

Now I've been here a few months, and maybe you've noticed this about me, I like to tell a good story. It's one of the things that attracted to ministry, because in a sense, our job up here is to tell stories. I like the flow of a story, listening to my audience fall silent as I tell them something in hushed tones, pausing just long enough before dropping a punch line that makes them laugh. I like to tell a good story. But sometimes. . .

Well, sometimes, there's that guy. Maybe you know that guy. He's the one who when you're trying to tell a story to a group of people, will pipe up with a correction. Maybe you say your story happened when you were a junior in high school, he'll say, actually, we were sophomores. Like it matters. Maybe you'll say you were eating lobster, he'll stop the story, dead in its tracks, just to say it was steak. Like it matters. And this guy, you know, he will even interrupt his own story. Tell me if this sounds familiar, it was a Saturday night, or was it a Thursday? No, no no, I remember clearly it was a Friday because it was my cousin Cedric's son's birthday. We all know that guy. Some of us might actually be that guy.

What he's doing is letting the truth, a small, insignificant truth, get in the way of telling a good story. Now that's annoying. Geez is it annoying, but ultimately, it doesn't do all that much harm.

Shiva-im Panim l'Torah – the Torah has seventy faces. This is from the Midrash, which is made up of early rabbinic commentaries on the Bible. And it means that any part of scripture or, for our purposes here, any part of the story can be interpreted in a number of ways, and that all those ways can be correct. It may be a matter of what part of the story is emphasized, or in what context the story is read or told, but it also about who the audience is. I've talked about this before, the story is not owned by the storyteller. It's not owned by the text. It's not even owned by the audience. It's when those elements come together that the story is created, even the stories we've heard over and over again, with each telling, a new story is created. So let's talk about the Chanukah story. Because the Chanukah story is a great example of a story that has had many faces over the year. Now here's the first face of the story. Around the year 175 BCS, Judea was semi-autonomous, but was firmly under the control of the Seleucid Empire, led by Antiochus IV in Syria. The moneyed elite of Judea had become largely Hellenized, taking up the dominating Greek culture of the day. But not everyone enjoyed the comforts of "modernity." The inequality led Jewish zealots to oppose the sweeping cultural changes in Judea. The alarmed Hellenized Jews called for the Syrian emperor's help; and the emperor sent troops to entrench Hellenization even further. Thus, the war known to history as the Maccabean Revolt began.

After some years of guerrilla warfare under the leadership of Judah Maccabee, Jewish independence was regained. Jerusalem was freed, and the Temple was cleansed and rededicated. And the word went out to the nation that this victory should be celebrated for eight days on the

25th day of Kislev. So this first face of Chanukah is that of a military victory, of a nation claiming its independence again, and restoring its religious tradition. It was especially about the cleansing of the Temple, the center of Jewish religious life.

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Now Chanukah did not get much more mention in Jewish writing for about seven hundred years. We don't learn about the Menorah story and lighting of candles until the Talmud is compiled around the year 500 CE. And even the Talmud does not give a single definitive explanation for why the candles are lit for eight days. Only one of the possible stories is the miracle that we're familiar with today, there were other, less miraculous explanations. However, the miracle story became the one that captured the imagination of its listeners. The story goes that when the Maccabees got to the desecrated Temple, they only had a day's worth of consecrated oil to light the menorah, and that it would take a week to get more. By a miracle, the oil lasted eight nights. In a sense, this is one of the last open miracles of God in Hebrew Scripture, one that reminded the Jewish people to trust in God. This was an important story for the Jews of the Diaspora.

Now, that said, Chanukah was seen as a minor holiday, not an observance commanded by Scripture but one that is nonetheless traditional. We find little mention of its celebration in historical documents, though we know the traditions continued and were expanded upon in the Middle Ages. This is where we got the traditions of the dreidel and latkes, those delicious potato pancakes fried in oil.

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But that obscurity changed in the United States beginning in the late 19th century. Between 1880 and 1920 millions of Jews emigrated to the United States, mostly from Eastern Europe. To give you some sense of the change, between those years the Jewish population of New York City grew from 80,000 to 1.6 million. Leaders of the Reform movement in Cincinnati were concerned about their people. On the one hand, they wanted to help them assimilate in their new home, on the other hand, they wanted them to maintain their connection to the synagogue and their Jewish heritage. So they "invented" a children's celebration of Chanukah, which involved candle lighting, singing songs and doing little skits. And they added one very important aspect – gift giving, at first, in Cincinnati, it was ice cream and oranges.¹ At this time in the United States, Christmas had firmly taken root, thanks to earlier literary efforts of Clement Clarke Moore and Charles Dickens combined with the capitalistic efforts of American business, December had become the primary American season for gift giving. And with the promotion of Chanukah by Jewish religious leaders, those American capitalists were all too eager to lend their "help" at improving on the ice cream and oranges; chocolate makers wrapped their candy in gold colored foil so that children had "gelt" to play with for the dreidel gambling game, Aunt Jemima promoted its flour as the best for latkes, and even Hudson automobiles advertised their cars as "A Hanukkah Present for the Entire Family" in Yiddish newspapers.² I had always thought the car as a holiday present idea was something recent invented by Audi or Infiniti. Who knew?

So this was another face of the Chanukah story. And remember before when I said that the two stories might contradict each other? Think about it – the original story was about the Maccabees fighting assimilation, this one is about making it work. But even in that contradiction, there is a commonality – both were seeking to hold on to their religious identity.

Balancing your religious and cultural identity with the desire to fit in to your new home, your new country. This is a story we see repeated over and over again in American history, and it's a story that we really need only walk the streets of New York or any other large city to see how different groups are grappling with this tension between the two.

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At the close of World War Two, the need for the Chanukah story was strong in two ways. Earlier, we heard the how the Chanukah story sustained some of the prisoners of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. In the shattering aftermath of the Holocaust, a reminder of God's promise to protect his people was perhaps too faint to be heard, at least on its own. However, with the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, the valor and success of Israeli military forces helped rebuild the image of the Jew as fighter. Zionists proudly identified the pre-statehood Zionist militias as Maccabean descendants. To some, the creation of Israel was a sign of God's promise redeemed. So here we are, Some 2300 years later, and we're back to the original face of the story, the independence of the Jewish nation. And now, some 70 years after that, in this week that our president recognized Jerusalem as the capital of that nation, I can't possibly leave unmentioned that the story of the Maccabees is serving another purpose, showing another face, the one where the Maccabees cleared Jerusalem of their enemies.

And that's the problems with truth and stories. They depend on context. They depend on who's hearing them. They depend on who's telling them. The story in the Books of Maccabees can be a stirring telling of revolt and independence, and can be very heartening if you identify with the Jewish zealots who prevailed. But not so much if you're a cosmopolitan, Hellenized Jew. Because another way we can look at the story of the Maccabees is that it's some excellent political propaganda that co-opted religion to serve secular ends. You see, Judah Maccabee was the progenitor of the Hasmonean dynasty, and the Books of Maccabees solidified and defended their claims to kingship. They claimed their revolt was in opposition to the Gentiles and foreigners, and condemned the Hellenized Jews who made covenant with the Gentiles, but after they achieved power, they sought alliances with Rome and Sparta, two Gentile nations. The story of the Maccabees can also be seen as a story of the rise of fundamentalism against the more cosmopolitan ideas and practices of the Greek Seleucid Empire. You could say that Judah Maccabee promised to drain the swamp in his nation's capital.

Yes, our stories have seventy faces. Not all of those faces are pretty.

Ah, now, geez, I did it. I'm sorry. I became that guy. Boy is that annoying. Here I was, going along nicely, telling these stories, and I interrupted myself, letting truth get in the way of a good story. Like it matters. Like it matters. But it does matter. I mean, it may not matter if it was steak or lobster, or whether it was my cousin Cedric's son's birthday, those are small truths, but sometimes, when we're talking about a big truth, the truth matters. Now I like to tell a good story. If my role up here was to be simply a storyteller, I would not want to break the spell of the story, because good storytelling requires the suspension of disbelief. Good storytelling often calls for the story to be tied up in a bow at the end, for a moral to be given, for the answers to be provided. But as much as I like to tell a good story, I'm learning that my job up here isn't just to tell a good story, and it isn't to tie it all up in a bow at the end. Ours is a questioning faith, not so much an answering one. We live in that ambiguity of knowing Shiva-im Panim l'Torah, the Torah has seventy faces. We live knowing that all of the faces are not pretty, and that we may

not like all the faces we see. You aren't here to receive my wisdom, meager as it is. You're here to grow our own wisdom. My job is often just to give you questions to ponder.

So ponder this, we talk often, that negative impact is more important than positive intent. I may have the best of intents, but if my actions hurt someone, no matter how well-intentioned, it's that impact that matters. But what about the reverse? We can see that the story of Chanukah may have had a very negative original intent, but overall, it's had a positive impact. The Israelites celebrated the restoration of their Temple, millions of immigrants found ease in their new homes, the story helped sustain the Jewish people through some of the darkest days of their history, and they found a new story for themselves after the horror of the Holocaust.

Stories need to be flexible, to be free. When we pin a story down to a single meaning, when we say "this is what happened and this is what it means, and nothing else", they stop being stories, they lose their magic, they lose their poetry. So ponder this too, what Chanukah story do you need now? What Chanukah story does our country need now? Do we need the miracle of a night's oil lasting for eight? Do we need the hope of prevailing against oppressive rule? Maybe we need the story of the restoration and rededication of the Temple. A rebuilding of the altar? As I said, ours is a questioning faith, and I leave you with those questions.

¹ From the story "Tracing Hanukkah's U.S. Roots ... To Cincinnati? 12/1/10 at <https://www.npr.org/2010/12/01/131695642/scholar-hanukkah-more-modest-holiday-outside-u-s> (retrieved 11/3/17)

² From the article "How Christmas Transformed Hannukah in America", at <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/hanukkah-american-style/> (retrieved 11/3/17)



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