

## Chanukkah Teaching 12.05.21

I was asked to do a drash for the Chanukkah party. Now usually a drash is a teaching on a Torah Portion. But Chanukkah doesn't appear in Torah, so I don't know if this is a drash or a teaching. Chanukkah, not only doesn't appear in Torah, it doesn't appear anywhere in the Hebrew Bible. It shows up in the Books of the Maccabees in the Apocrypha. And it does show up in Talmud.

The rabbis who put together Talmud, however, were taken by the miracle of the oil lasting eight days instead of one. The dreidel of course commemorates this by its letters, standing for a miracle happened here. Our Menorah, with its eight nights of lighting represents this miracle of the oil as does our inclination to eat foods fried in oil, such as potato latkes and donuts. One might think that another Chanukkah miracle is simply that we survive all the grease and gambling inherent in celebrating Chanukkah!

So I want to dig deep into the Chanukkah miracle of the oil lasting eight days for the eternal light at the temple instead of lasting just a single day. I remember Margaret long ago (as we sing of miracles long ago) taking a wick and putting it into a jar of oil. She showed this to the youth of MCJC which, at that time, included my daughters and said she was trying to get a sense of how much oil was needed for one day, for twenty-four hours. And if that much was needed, what did it look like to have it last eight times as long?

I tried to come up with situations in my mind about the Chanukkah miracle and how much of a miracle was it? Was it definitely, for sure that there was only enough oil for one day? Did someone actually measure it – I mean there was a war going on. Was it perhaps already an eight-day supply, but the person checking on supplies mistakenly thought there was only enough for one day. Perhaps there was another part of the temple where some extra oil was being kept that no one realized until the main supply was almost out. Sort of like finding change in the furniture. Or buying a supply you think you are out of, but when you put the new purchase away, there are already two backups sitting there.

Maybe there was some distraction – I mean there was a war going on. Maybe the flame actually did go out for awhile, but someone relit it when they noticed. Did the eternal light in normal times actually burn 24/7 each day? Don't you think that in prior times there had been at some point a windstorm or a storm storm that had put it out? It would be no big deal for the first person to arrive at the temple to make sure the eternal light was lit, and if it was not, they would light it.

Miracles happen all the time in our Jewish faith, in our sacred texts. Certainly the creation of heaven and Earth was a miracle. Eve coming from Adam's rib was a miracle. A talking serpent was a miracle as was later a talking donkey. A burning bush that didn't decompose the bush. Sarah conceiving at 90. Each plague. The Red Sea Parting.

I think the big Jewish miracle is that our people have survived 6000 years, despite repeated attempts to destroy and annihilate us. Since we have survived and are here, we remember these little and not so little miracles. We are convinced that they occurred when they may not have occurred exactly as we remember or we are told. We give full credit to God for these miracles; that God watches over us, that God provides for us, that God has assured our survival and our prosperity.

So yes, a miracle happened for the Macabees. And miracles have been happening for our people from time immemorial. We have almost come to expect miracles, which, of course, is counter to the very concept of a miracle being completely unexpected.

So now that I have argued that Jewish miracles are almost commonplace, I'm going to now argue that the Chanukkah miracle is something different. As a miracle, I'm not sure it ranks on the Mount Rushmore of miracles, but as a symbolic act, it is really something quite amazing.

In Leviticus Chapter 6, verse 6, it states (see, I told you I'd have to get to Torah to make this a drash), "*A permanent fire shall remain aflame on the Altar; it shall not be extinguished.*"

The Chanukkah miracle is based on the logistics of fulfilling a command given in Leviticus. That is the material view. Those who know my teachings know that we try to always look at Torah not just from the material, but also from the spiritual. So let's look at the eternal light that way.

First of all, God is light. Genesis, Chapter 1, verses 3 and 4 state, "*God said 'Let there be light,' and there was light. God saw that the light was good.*" and we have never been without God's light. When we light the Menorah, we thank God for lighting lights. We say this same prayer when we light Sabbath lights or Festival lights. God gives us light, God shows us light, God asks that we live up to the light. That we are the good, the virtues, the justice, the kindness, the warmth, the illumination of light. We are created in the image of God; we are created to share God's light and God's love throughout this world, this material world that we find ourselves in.

But here's the rub. Sometimes we don't feel like the light. Sometimes we don't act like the light. Sometimes we feel that we only have enough light to last for one day, but we need to get through the full week, the eight days a week as the Beatles put it.

So what do we do at those times? Do we let there be darkness for seven days, hoping that a supply will come in on the eighth day? Do we give in to our base desires or despair or hopelessness knowing that this is antithetical to the world we want to achieve?

Or do we reach inward for strength and outward with great love for God and have faith, have faith that the miracle that happened long ago for our ancestors the Macabees will also happen for us. That we have inner resources to actually be good, or at least to keep our worst, our darkest impulses at bay. That God will provide light, that God will show us to the light, that God will support us in finding the light.

It is a mitzvah to share the lighting of the Chanukkah candles with others. It is a mitzvah to see the good and the light within each other. It is a mitzvah to use your light to support others in the community. We are next going to see an absolutely beautiful symphony of full menorahs lit on this last night of Chanukkah.

The miracle of Chanukkah is not only that the eternal light stayed lit for our ancestors so many years ago; it is that, despite so many incentives to give in to darkness, our light can continue to shine today.