

A Human-Sized Miracle
December 13, 2015

A reading from *the Babylonian Talmud*:

What is [the reason of] Chanuka? For our Rabbis taught: On the twenty-fifth of Kislev [commence] the days of Chanukah, which are eight on which a 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 made search and found only one cruse of oil which lay with the seal of the High Priest, but which contained sufficient for one day's lighting only; yet a miracle was wrought therein and they lit [the lamp] therewith for eight days. The following year these [days] were appointed a Festival with [the recital of] Hallel and thanksgiving.

This passage is the earliest mention of the meaning of Hanukkah we're familiar with – the story of the miracle of the lamp burning for 8 days when there was only enough oil to burn for one. Did you notice anything missing from its version of the story? Who'd we light one candle for in the song? (The Maccabees) They're not mentioned in this account. Their rebellion against the Greek occupation of Judea took place between 167 and 160 BCE. It's commemorated in the Book of Maccabees which says that the festival of Hanukkah celebrates the victory of a resistance movement led by the priestly family the Maccabees. But there's nothing in that history about the oil or the lamp. It wasn't until the Babylonian Talmud was put together about 500 years later, in the 4th century of the Common Era, that we get that story.

Why did the rabbis who put together the Babylonian Talmud leave out the Maccabees? Well, the Maccabees were the ISIS of their day. Yes, they re-claimed the Temple from the Greeks and re-dedicated it to the God of the Hebrew people, but they also killed many Greeks and many Jews suspected of collaborating with them. When the Maccabees purified the Temple, they didn't just get rid of ritual objects used in the worship of Zeus – they shed a lot of blood. This became problematic over the years as the Jews moved from being concentrated in the land of Israel to spreading into other countries and living with other people. What did it say to your host country if you were celebrating a festival where a small band killed all foreigners and those who associated with the foreigners? So the rabbis developed another meaning for the festival – it wasn't about a military victory so much as about the good news that when we act in faith, God responds and provides. That message also offered hope to people living in a strange land – Hanukkah became the occasion not so much to remember a military victory – a once and done event – but a miracle that shed light into the future, a miracle that encouraged people to continue living according to their faith and trusting that when they did so, a way would be opened through the troubles and persecutions they faced.

And the miracle of Hanukkah still sustains people today. Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter, a 19th century Hasidic rabbi in Poland is still remembered for his writings on Jewish law, ethics, and mysticism. He taught that since people tend to forget the miraculousness of a miracle over time, throughout the biblical period, God would keep performing new miracles when the light of the previous miracle had faded. But there is no record of a miracle after the miracle of Hanukkah. He wrote, "Chanukah is the last miracle that was performed for us. Therefore, we have to find special strength in it" (pp. 1:208-209). And the special strength is that "the light of the Chanukah miracle has the power to keep renewing itself until the final redemption comes."

Why does this minor miracle have the power to keep renewing itself and keep on being miraculous over say the parting of the Red Sea? I think the difference lies not in the way the story imagines the intervention of God but in the people. At the parting of the Red Sea, the people had fled from slavery in Egypt. Though Pharaoh had said they could go, he'd changed his mind and he and his soldiers in chariots were pursuing them. At the shore of the Sea, they'd stopped, unable to go any further, trapped now between the army and the waters. Moses prayed, God told him to strike the waters with his staff, the waters parted, and the people crossed safely, before the waters closed on the Egyptian army killing them.

But in the story of Hanukkah, after the Resistance fighters had triumphed over the Greeks, they were left with a Temple that was a mess. It had been fouled in their eyes by being dedicated to Zeus, but I also imagined it fouled by garbage and structural damage after the long battle and the occupation of it by the Greeks to whom it wasn't really a sacred space. So after their victory, they started cleaning. They swept out the rubble, patched the walls, found the ritual lamp, perhaps battered and stuck way back on a shelf, perhaps at the bottom of the garbage pile. Someone picked it up and cleaned it; someone else found the container of oil. Then they had a meeting to discuss what to do about it. Once the Temple had been re-dedicated and the lamp lit, the lamp was supposed to stay lit. If it went out, they'd have to re-dedicate the Temple all over again – though at least this time they wouldn't have to clean up the garbage. Some must have said it didn't make sense to light the lamp now – that with only enough oil for one day, it was ridiculous to think it wouldn't go out. But others were so excited to be back in the Temple that they couldn't wait to do this final thing to make it their spiritual home again. And these hot-heads prevailed. They re-dedicated the Temple, lit the light, and then sent some scouts off to find more oil. You know the story – it was 7 more days before they came back with a supply of oil, and for those eight nights, the light burned and burned and burned.

The difference between the miracle of the Red Sea and the miracle of Hanukkah is the outlook and work of the people. At the Red Sea the people were terrified, desperate, believing themselves out of options except God. (Like the old joke about the minister on a ship in a big storm. He asks the captain if there's anything he can do to help. "You can pray," the captain says. "Oh no – Is it that bad?" says the minister.)

But at the miracle of Hanukkah, the people didn't understand themselves as desperate. Through the whole story – the small band of fighters retreating to the hills, coming out for skirmishes with the much more powerful army of the occupying force, more and more people joining them, until after 7 years they actually defeat the army; finding the Temple still standing and not torn down by the Greeks, finding the lamp and any oil at all, through the whole story I'm sure there were times when some of the people said, "We can't do this. We should just pray about it and wait for God to come to our rescue." But they didn't stop – they saw openings for action and took them, trusting that their actions would make a difference even when sometimes they couldn't see where they would lead or that they would lead them where they hoped to go. So in some ways there were miracles all along the story, culminating with the one that gets told, the lasting of the oil, the burning of the light.

I am an agnostic about miracles. Did God really intervene and make the oil last in response to the people's faith? Could it have been some kind of Stone Soup-miracle, with people pouring in little bits of cooking oil they'd saved? Was there always enough oil and this story didn't happen at all, but later tellings had to incorporate some way of making clear the awe they felt at what had happened? I don't know. But does it matter? Because what matters now is the power of the story still to shed light and hope, to move us to action and justice still today. The Hanukkah miracle does indeed keep renewing its light.

And this year especially it seems we need that light. With more mass shootings and an average of 36 people killed daily in gun violence, with the backlash against Muslims, and the threat even to our Constitution, it can seem that this is a good time to stay safe and pray in our own little corner in Scituate. Because what else can we do? But the Hanukkah story tells us that it is up to us not to let the light go out. For the miracle to happen, for God, the power of Light and Life, to flow in the world, we must act, even if it's just to clear away some garbage.

Rabbi Michael Lerner, the editor of Tikkun Magazine, wrote, "Recognize that Chanukah is about understanding that when we connect with the transformative power of the universe, the Force of Healing and Transformation, YHVH, we become aware that the powerless can become powerful, that oppression of any sort is in contradiction to the fundamental nature of human beings as loving, kind, generous, free, creative, intelligent, attuned to beauty, caring for and needing each other beings created in the image of God. When that energy and awareness permeates our consciousness, no ruling elite and no system of exploitation can possibly last for very long."

And we do have signs of light in our darkness. With temperatures in the 50's on this December day in New England, it is heartening to know that 195 nations have come to a consensus on a plan to begin the healing of our planet. Though the agreement won't solve the problems, it begins a turning. And it wouldn't have happened if ordinary people from all over the world hadn't believed they had the power to make a difference. If people hadn't come together in schools and town

halls, living rooms and church parlors, to talk about their concerns, educate themselves, educate others, march, write, sing, and most of all tell a new story of the future. The work isn't over, but it shows us that "group[s] of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world," as Margaret Mead said.

So what can we do to offer other stories in a new light? How can we re-cast the stories of guns, the stories of our welcome of refugees, the story of our understanding of Islam and those who practice it? Those are big questions which stretch far beyond the walls of this church, but even from this corner of Scituate we can begin – we can join with the work of UU Mass Action on gun violence; we can join with other churches who are talking about sponsoring a Syrian refugee family, and we will bring in a Muslim guest preacher or speaker who can help us learn more about that tradition and what we can do to counter the misrepresentations and fear too often offered.

Our task as people of faith is to remind ourselves to look up at the stars, to gain a perspective beyond our fears, and to offer that story of love, and hope, and justice to the world. That is the miracle of Hanukkah. That is the healing its story can offer to us whether we light a menorah in our homes or not. In the spirit of Hanukkah, let us re-dedicate ourselves to that call, trusting that the oil we need is here.

- Pamela M. Barz

