

D'VAR TORAH - SHABBAT HANUKKAH

Rabbi David Edleson, Temple Sinai, S. Burlington
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I confess I never much liked Hanukkah.

It seemed like a crappy substitute for Christmas trees and presents and Santa. I know my Hindu American friends felt the same way about Divali.

It wasn't until I spent Hanukkah in Jerusalem, with the smell of fresh sofguniyot everywhere, hanukkiot in every window, and the enormous flames of the barrel-torch hanukkah down at the Wall, and the dancing with yeshiva buchers and soldiers -

It seemed to me then that Hanukkah made much more sense in the land that had so recently fought for its own independence and built a nation in the face of such opposition and after one of the greatest tragedies in human history.

I am a Zionist; I believe very strongly in Jewish self-determination, self-rule, and nationhood. Recently my beliefs have come under greater and greater attack, including here in Vermont with the decision of the head of the State Police to withdraw from a training in Israel that happens during Hanukkah. There was something particularly troubling that this decision happened now. I will be writing everyone a report about this in the next few days, but I don't want to spoil our festive Hanukkah evening with that right now.

Yet, just as we know that to light a candle is to cast a shadow, I think that this year we have all seen the shadow of nationalism, of focusing too much on borders and security, of stirring people up using victimhood.

And as we will study tomorrow morning at our Hanukkah study, at 10:30, after services, please come, those same shadows of autonomy and self-determination were part of the original story of Hanukkah when the desire for independence quickly led to dismissal of the rights of dissent.

So tonight I want to share a different story about Hanukkah, one found in the Babylonian Talmud, though I will tweak it a bit to make my point.

The Talmud tells us that when Adam and Eve were having their first year out of the garden, and it was their first winter, and the days began to grow short and the nights

began to grow longer and longer, they began to be afraid. Each day, they would notice the increase of darkness, and during the long nights they would huddle together, holding one another against the sounds of predators and encroaching danger.

As this continued, they began to panic. They feared that God was undoing all of creation, and that soon, the light would disappear forever, and the great dark watery abyss would engulf them and the world.

And so when they thought the nights could get no longer, Adam went and collected bees wax from a tree they slept under, and Eve took long fibers of rushes and weaved a string, and together they created a candle. And so as the longest night fell, Adam and Eve lit that one lone candle, as a protest against the dark, as a refusal to just be passive as creation was undone.

And the next day, they noticed was just a big longer, and so they made another candle and another, and that night they lit two. And it was a miracle- the night was shorter and the day was longer. And so they continued for seven nights, a full Sabbath of days, lighting the first Shabbat candles, and Eve said, "I think we are fine and can stop now, but Adam was still a bit panicked, and insisted they continue one more day, just to make sure – and so they light eight candles and the light gave them joy and comfort in the long night.

I believe many of us have felt the fear of a particular kind of darkness lately- I know I have felt sometimes like the world I knew was unravelling around the edges, that the center was no longer holding. I have felt that values I took for granted are no longer valued by those around me, And the fear of chaos is growing.

And so lighting candles this year has been- can be- an act of refusal to give into despair or passivity.

Lighting the candles is a way to say that our hope, our TIKVAH, is still alive. That though things are dark, we light candles to assert our values in the world. To assert that justice, equity, mercy, humanness, inclusion, and seeing other people are children of God are always needed, are always lights in the darkness of human fear. To assert that it is our duty to make the world more just, to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give toys to children whose homes have been destroyed by war, or by fire.

These are eternal values, and they shine against the darkness that each of carries within us, and we light the candles to say that we refuse to give in to cynicism, passivity, and defeat, no matter the odds.

That is indeed the lesson of Hanukkah, and I hope that in our celebration together tonight, we remember that fun, rock music, great food and community are great lights against the dark.

God said, "Let there be Light," and there was Light.