

**SERMON Dec 20, 2020 22 Kislev 5780**  
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## **HANUKKAH: WHY THESE LIGHTS ARE HOLY**

Since next week is the Great Brisket Bakeoff, I thought I'd do a sermon on Hanukkah tonight as we get ready for the holiday.

As you know, Hanukkah is not a holiday found in the *TaNakh*, the Hebrew Bible. The *Mishnah*, the first collection of Jewish law after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, barely mentions Hanukkah, and then in oblique ways. The early rabbis that preserved and transformed Judaism in this period, especially those living under Roman occupation, might not have thought celebrating a holiday of violent rebellion was a good strategy. And yet the holiday persisted and grew, and over time gained special prayers in the *Amidah*, and the holiday prayers called *Hallel* are recited.

But it is these words from the Talmud Tractate *Sofrim*, that I find particularly interesting:

***Hanerot Halalu***. a hymn that is often recited after lighting the candles,

הנרות הללו אנו מדליקין על הניסים ועל הנפלאות  
ועל התשועות ועל המלחמות שעשית לאבותינו, שעשית לאבותינו  
בימים ההם, בזמן הזה

We light these lights for the miracles and the wonders,  
For the redemption and the battles

That you lead for our ancestors  
In those days at this season,

It goes on: הנרות הללו קודש הן – ***haneirot halalu kodesh hem***

For the eight days of Hanukkah, these candles are holy.  
And we are not permitted to make practical use of them,  
But only to look at them; In order to express thanks

Even more than Shabbat candles, the lights of Hanukkah are set apart, sacred, holy, and given that it was an unpopular holiday, I wonder why the rabbis went from suppressing the holiday to granting it this level of *kavod*, respect.

Of course, the reason the rabbis highlighted was not the rebellion, but the miracle of the oil that burned for eight nights. But I suspect there is something much more profound here that speaks to our times as well as theirs.

Many of the rabbis knew first-hand that revolutions have a tendency to go awry, and that the leaders of the revolution, the leaders that people were so willing to follow, the leaders they wanted, can betray both their people and their faith.

They also knew that revolutions that begin with the highest of ideals can easily and quickly move from ideals to dogma, and in order to stay part of the revolution, dogma can turn to fanaticism, intolerance, and terror. The rabbis were great innovators, and many of their ideas were radical, but they were very wary of the ways revolution and human nature interacted.

Of course, in recent history we've seen popular revolutions around the world turn autocratic, repressive, and at even genocidal. We need only to think of China, Russia, Cuba, Cambodia, or Venezuela to get a sense of where revolutions can go and why the rabbis were against focusing on that aspect of Hanukkah.

They were also afraid of mobs, and the divisions and chaos very harsh speech can cause in a society. They did not believe in freedom of speech as much as they did the responsibility of speech, of having the power of words.

And they had also seen the very zealots and true believers turn into the very thing they preached against. Within a generation of two, the Maccabees had become the very Hellenistic cosmopolitan Hasmonean dynasty, the included Salome and Herod.

The most effective protections against going in those directions are; to have a society that functions fairly in its courts; offers support for its poor and vulnerable; holds onto some core values such as, "that which is hateful to you, do not do to another." Or that, "you shall treat the stranger as yourselves, for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt and you know the heart of the oppressed." Or, "all human beings are made in the image of God."

It is in holding to those core values that we can best keep moving in the direction of justice and kindness. We can easily think it is not we but "those people" who have gone off the rails, who have become dogmatic, but we are all vulnerable to the pull of certainty because we are human beings.

***Hanerot halalu kodesh hem.*** The Hanukkah candles are holy, because they remind us of the light within that we each carry, but also to remind us to stay true to our core values, and not to let passion and the desire for freedom turn us into intolerant all-or-nothing followers.

***Hanerot halalu kodesh hem.*** The Hanukkah candles are holy because they remind us not to become like the people we fought against. They remind us to be true to our best selves, the people we know we can be and if you are religious, the person that God wants you to be.

***Hanerot halalu kodesh hem.*** But I don't want to brush over the reason the rabbis gave, the **miracle** of the oil. The Hanukkah candles remind us that sometimes, however rarely, the impossible happens; that sometimes when we least expect it, something unimaginable suddenly is right in front of us, like the ram in the thicket, or a well of water in a dry, dry land. These Hanukkah candles remind us that we must act for our own freedom as the Maccabees did, but that we must also remember that miracles happen, and that hopefulness is superior to despair. There is great power in choosing to hope, in choosing to remain engaged, especially in times like these, but also in taking time to stare at candles and be grateful.

***Hanerot halalu kodesh hem.***

These candles are holy, and we are not permitted to make practical use of them, but only to look at them in order to express thanks and praise to Your great Name for Your miracles, Your wonders and Your liberating spirit.

And let us say: ***Amen***