

Miketz 5778 - Shabbat Hanukkah Miracles Yet To Be

Every year I take my hanukkiah out of the closet and stare at it for a while. I'm trying to remember which way around to place it, how to put the candles in and in which order to light them.

To be fair, this has become easier for me since the Shlomones' Hanukkah parody of the Time Warp from the Rocky Horror Picture Show. Now, as I gaze at my Hanukkiah, I sing to myself:

You light them all from the LEFT

You put them in from the RI-I-I-I-IGHT...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vzoGCG8w8Wc>

But this Hanukkah, another thought has struck me. It's this: it's a mitzvah for us to place the lit Hanukkiah where it can be seen - by a window, in a doorway or anywhere else below a certain height where it will be visible from the street. This is called by the Rabbis *pirsuma d'nissa*, publicizing (or 'spreading out' - it's the same word as we use for a tablecloth) the miracle.

But because a Hanukkiah has, as it were, a back and a front, this means that the person passing by is going to see the Hanukkiah reversed. The candles that go in from the right will all be on the left!

Let me leave that idea out there while I add another. A couple of weeks ago I was sitting on the altar of St Joseph's Church on Tulane Avenue. I'd had the privilege of being invited to participate in the annual service commemorating the deaths of the homeless of New Orleans. I was asked to supply a reading - I brought Isaiah's excoriating criticism of ritual without heart, the haftarah we read on Yom Kippur - and my sisters and brothers from the other faith traditions of the city brought along their own readings, thoughts and prayers. At the heart of the service was a beautiful ceremony where a candle was brought to the steps of the altar for every person who had died on the streets last year. Two of my Muslim colleagues received the candles and placed them on racks, nine to a row, and I thought to myself: what a bitter Hanukkiah this is. What was the true cost of those lights?

Now let me add a third thought. We had visitors come to the shul a couple of weeks ago - a high school class from the Golda Ochs academy in New Jersey. Twenty or so seniors came to NOLA for a week to work on various social justice projects. It's become the tradition here that they are cooked dinner by Robin Lew and then subjected to an hour of learning with the Rabbi. This year, we worked together on a set of texts that ask: what is the real story of Hanukkah? Is it the one from the Talmud, which is about the oil? the version told in the Israeli songs we sing, which places the emphasis on heroes? Is it the one from the Al Hanissim paragraph of the Amidah, which gives God all the credit? Is it even the story of Judith cutting off Holofernes' head? The conclusion that we drew is that the Hanukkah story varies considerably in the telling - and thus, the festival has various messages and dimensions.

As I consider the reversed Hanukkiah my neighbors see and that sombre version by the altar of St Joseph's, I find myself thinking of yet another version of the Hanukkah story, one we didn't study in class. You probably know it:

*Light one candle for the Maccabee children
With thanks that their light didn't die...*

It's worth a closer look at how Peter Yarrow, who composed the song and the lyrics, tells the Hanukkah story. He links our own narrative of the Maccabees, told in the first verse, to the capacity for us to empathize with the suffering of others, set out in the second:

*Light one candle for the strength that we need
To never become our own foe
And light one candle for those who are suffering
Pain we learned so long ago
Light one candle for all we believe in
That anger not tear us apart
And light one candle to find us together
With peace as the song in our hearts...*

And the third verse then goes on to wish for justice:

*This is the burden, this is the promise,
This is why we will not fail...*

And on into the refrain about not letting the light go out:

*Don't let the light go out!
It's lasted for so many years!
Don't let the light go out!
Let it shine through our hope and our tears.*

This version of the story carries the message that Hanukkah should never be only for us. Our own miracle has to prompt us towards creating miracles for others. Part of the eternal message that the Jewish people brings to the world is *will not let what happened to me happen to you*, and Hanukkah, set in the deepest darkness of the year, is our reminder.

And so it makes sense that our Hanukkiah seen from the street doesn't look right - not to those in need, and therefore on some level, not to us either. It is to remind us that there are still miracles that need to be created, miracles that need our help to make them happen.

It is only on the last night of Hanukkah, when the light is greatest, that others see the Hanukkiah that we ourselves see.

And the Hasidic tradition would tell us that this is not an accident. The eighth day of Hanukkah has a special name. It is called *zot Hanukkah* - this is Hanukkah - as if the other days somehow aren't. When the miracle blazes brightest, we all witness the same thing.

The point about a candle is that its flame can be transferred without decreasing. In the same way, our sacred task as Jews, revealed at this season, is that we bear our unique message to the world while still bringing light to the darkness of others - until we can rejoice together in the greatest light of all.

Shabbat shalom; and happy Hanukkah.