

The Freedom to Celebrate¹
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The central themes of the Hanukkah story are religious freedom and the struggle against oppression. As someone concerned with justice, I find it easy to identify with that message. But as I began learning more about Hanukkah, I was also intrigued by a more subtle message which seemed to be hidden within the traditional rituals. The eight candle menorah actually holds nine candles all together: one for each night, plus an extra candle at a different height, called the *shammus*, or worker candle. The *shammus* candle is there to light the other candles, and for any other useful purpose that people might make of it. According to tradition, this is because the eight Hanukkah candles themselves cannot be used for any productive purpose; they are only for pleasure.²

The Hanukkah blessing starts: "Blessed are you, Lord, our God, ruler of the universe, who has commanded us to light the candles of Hanukkah." As an outsider, I find it intriguing that the blessing thanks God for commanding us to light candles. But if you add that message to the fact that the candles are for pleasure only, might that mean that God is ordering us to have some fun?

In our workaholic society, that is a challenging and wonderful message to take in. We are used to thinking of religion in more serious ways—for example, as a guide to ethical and moral behavior. And Hanukkah has its serious side. But it seems like Hanukkah is also trying to teach us that an important part of religious freedom is the freedom to celebrate.

What is the freedom to celebrate? To explore this question, first let me tell you a story from the *Tales of the Hasidim* by Martin Buber.

Rabbi Shelomo of Karlin said: When he, who has done all the commandments of the Torah, but has not felt the blaze of holy ecstasy in so doing, comes to that other world, they open the gates of paradise for him. But because he has not felt the blaze of ecstasy in this world, he does not feel the ecstasy of paradise. ...If he is wise, he leaves of his own accord, and goes to the zaddick, and he teaches the poor soul how to feel ecstasy.³

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² From a website called Judaism 101 at <http://jewfaq.org>

³ Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, p. 276-7

Hasidism began as a mystical expression of Judaism in the eighteenth century in Eastern Europe. It originated with Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer of Mezbizh, who became known as the Baal Shem Tov, or Master of the Good Name. He was a charismatic teacher and folk healer who transformed the lives of people around him. His followers became teachers and leaders in their own turn, and were called zaddickim. Martin Buber summed up the teachings of Hasidism in this way: "God can be beheld in each thing and reached through each pure deed."⁴ The Zaddickim preached a religion of direct experience, of wonder, of joy, of celebration.

Religion, according to the Hasidim, is meant to free us from the things that oppress our lives. That oppression may be occasionally life-threatening and earth-shattering. But usually, oppression takes simpler forms—drudgery, worry, troubles, financial struggle. Religion is there to remind us that life is more than work. Religion invites us into joy and celebration. And we are invited not merely to be joyful during naturally joyful times, such as weddings or births. But also, we are invited to be joyful right in the middle of the dark winter, right in the middle of the struggles of life.

The Hanukkah miracle was a miracle of abundance in the midst of lack. There wasn't enough oil for the temple lamps. But they chose to celebrate anyway, to light the lamps with what little they had. And then the universe entered into the celebration, too, and the lamps burned on for eight days. Hanukkah is celebrated through a kind of decadence in games and feasting. One tradition is the dreidel, a gambling game played with a square top and chocolate coins. Gambling implies that we have money to throw away. It is frivolous. The Hanukkah foods—potato latkes and fried donuts—are full of rich oil. Oil brings tastiness to foods and is an extravagance of the diet. All of these are symbols of abundance and plenty.

What if the purpose of religion is not just to make us good people, but to make us happy people, to give us the ability to find the joy in life?

Can you imagine what life would be like without holidays? We would be slaves to our jobs, to the relentless pursuit of our physical needs. Every culture has devised ways to find food and clothing and shelter and other material needs and wants. But every culture has also created times when those regular activities are set aside, for a time to celebrate, to remember things of greater importance.

Our own culture seems to place its highest value on work and productivity. The first question often asked at social gatherings is, "What do you do?" A person's identity is wrapped up with their work. When work is the center of life, those who are retired or unemployed are seen as less valuable, along with others who may not be able to work, such as children or some disabled people.

⁴ *Tales of the Hasidim*, p. x.

One of the earliest commandments of the Jews was the Sabbath day observance. Every person had the right to be free of work one day out of seven, for as the Torah reminded them, the Jews had been slaves in the land of Egypt. To force someone to work day in and day out was to make them a slave. Religion is a counterforce to the demands of production and labor; a counterforce to economic systems that measures value only in terms of profit. Religious freedom includes freedom from being merely a cog in the wheel of production.

The pagan cultures of Europe had holidays corresponding to changes of the moon and the solar seasons. There were eight major solar festivals and thirteen lunar festivals each year, not to mention the festivals of birth and coming of age and marriage and death. When Christianity took over, they had to absorb the holidays—the people were unwilling to give up their rituals and celebrations. They attached Christian stories and messages to the old pagan festivals. The birth of Jesus was attached to the winter solstice festivals, and Christmas took on the practices of gift-giving, carol-singing, and candlelight rituals in the midst of the longest nights of the year.

When the Puritans first came to America, they forbade any celebration of Christmas, claiming it was pagan and Catholic. They were a dour and serious sort of folk. This Protestant view of the world gave us the Industrial Revolution and modern Capitalism. That someone was "hard-working" became the highest form of praise. Everyone has probably heard the saying, "Idle hands are the devil's workshop." We pride ourselves on our Protestant work ethic.

When the Catholic immigrants first were employed in the factories, the factory owners thought of them as too lazy and too fond of fun and games. They took too much time off for celebrations and family events. They had to be taught how to be hard-working. Even in our day, a Jewish friend of mine told me about growing up on Long Island, where his parents were trying hard to assimilate into the middle class Protestant establishment. He wanted to hang out with the Catholic kids, because their families seemed to be having the most fun.

However, I don't think this is only a Protestant thing. Even at young age I remember myself as a serious child, despite being a Catholic. I was devoted to usefulness: I thought a vegetable garden was better than a flower garden because it produced food. I had a hard time with holidays, and never was drawn to gambling. I wasn't good at being silly. But my Catholic upbringing did give me a sense that life was more than work. The highest calling was to be a nun or monk who spent their days in prayer. I knew that joy was important, but I thought it was separate from this world, to be found by sacrificing the pleasures of earth.

I've come a long way since then, but I can still find it difficult to just enjoy myself. E.B. White once wrote, "I wake each morning torn between two desires: to save the world, or to savor the world. It makes it hard to plan the day."

My natural bent is to want to save the world. It feels important to notice when terrible injustices are causing great pain among us. It feels important to try to work with all my strength to bring change. It is more difficult for me to honor the importance of beauty and joy in our midst.

Holidays help me to learn to celebrate, though I have to work at it. Sometimes I dread the coming of the holidays. They seem to add more work to our already hectic lives. There are expectations of gift-giving, and gatherings, and family obligations. Shopping and cooking and sending cards. Who has time for all that? My serious practical self thinks of it as a waste of time and money. But my religious self hungers to enter into its deeper meaning. I want to find the freedom to rejoice in the midst of all that is troubling.

Rabbi Arye of Spola, called the Spola grandfather, had in his youth known the Baal Shem Tov. One Passover, he was leading a Seder, and began to speak about the exile of the people from the fullness of God. When he had said the words of the prayer he wept, and all wept with him. But after a while, he roused himself and cried: 'Now let us delight our Father and show him that his children can dance, even though they are in darkness.' He gave orders to play a merry tune and began to dance. ...

When the Spola grandfather danced on a Sabbath and on feast-days, his feet were as light as those of a four year old. And not a single one of those who saw his holy dance failed to turn to God at that very instance, and with their whole souls, for he stirred the hearts of all who beheld him, to both tears and ecstasy.⁵

The holidays offer us a chance to learn how to celebrate, how to savor the world, how to notice all that is most beautiful and wonderful about life. Alice Walker, in her novel *The Color Purple*, imagines a God who wants to be loved and admired, who surprises us with trees and birds and flowers. "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it." She adds, "...I believe God is everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found It."⁶

However, if we search for the joy of life, we don't always feel joy at first. Perhaps when we open our hearts, we feel sadness, or fear, or anger. Perhaps we are having family troubles. Troubles can seem bigger during holidays, when we are surrounded by images of the happy families. Perhaps we are dealing with illness, or financial troubles. To find joy, we must let in all our feelings about our lives. "Your joy is your sorrow unmasked," wrote Kahlil Gibran. Joy and sorrow come intertwined.

⁵ *Tales of the Hasidim*, p.171.

⁶ *The Color Purple*, p.167.

Through the holidays, we are invited to go deeper, to find a joy that comes in the midst of life's troubles, not merely at their ending. Here is a lesson I take from the miracle of the Hanukkah oil: If I look into my heart, I may feel I don't have enough joy to be celebrating; I don't have enough oil to keep a lamp of joy burning for eight days. I have only this tiny bit, perhaps enough to light one small taper of hope in the midst of darkness.

But we are invited to light that lamp, with the small amount of hope we can muster, perhaps even just a wish that we might find the deeper joy. We give ourselves to the holiday. And it is Life itself which responds to our act of faith. The Hanukkah lamp burned for eight days. There is a larger force in the Universe that can lift our small hearts into a Larger Joy. We don't have to do it ourselves. The oil will be there, if we merely light the first lamp. This is the promise of Hanukkah. If we open our hearts, the deeper celebration will find us.

I invite you to enter into a story with me. I heard this story from my colleague, Rev. Thomas Anastasi.⁷ I need you to help me with the telling of this story, so we can make it come alive in our midst. This is a story of a famous Hasidic "rabbi who was coming to visit a small town in Russia. It was a very great event for the Jews in the town, and each thought long and hard about what questions they would ask the wise man. When he finally arrived, all were gathered in the largest available room, and each was concerned with the questions they had for him."

I invite you to think hard about the questions in your heart today.
What are the struggles of your life? What is troubling you? What gives you anguish?
Bring your questions and your troubles here into this sacred room.
Bring your grief over the death of a loved one...
Bring your anguish over family separation or conflict...
Bring your illness or physical pain...
Bring your financial difficulties...
Bring your struggle with addiction or mental illness...
Bring your fear of war and violence...
Bring your anger over corporate greed and social injustice...
Bring your fears for the future of the earth...

Wouldn't it be wonderful to have a wise visitor who could give us some answers to the problems we face? All these troubles are very real, and they weigh us down.

"The great rabbi came into the room and felt the expectation and tension there. For a long time he said nothing, he closed his eyes in quiet. And then he began to softly hum a little tune."

hmmm

⁷ He says he tells it from Lawrence Le Shan.

"For a while everyone was listening quietly to his little tune, but presently they began to find themselves humming with him." If you all hum with me, we can re-create the feeling in that room. *hmmm*

"Then he began to sing the song and soon all were singing with him."

Haida, haida, hai-di-de-dy-da, haida, /clap/ haida, haida. (2x)

Hai...da, hai-di-de-dy-da, haida, /clap/ haida, haida. (2x)

"Then he began to sway, moving his arms back and forth in the air, and soon many of the people were rising up from their seats and all were swaying with him, moving as they were able." (*Rise up as you are able and sway with me as we sing.*)

Now there is one more place this song can go. "Soon the rabbi began to lift his feet in a dance and those present were caught up in the dance with him. All were moving as they felt movement in them, all just moving and singing and nothing else." And so I invite you to move as you feel moved, and join in a dance in whatever way you are able...

(And so we take the dance to the aisles, some dancing, and some swaying, everyone singing and clapping, for a long while. Then I move back to the pulpit and all to their places.)

"In that little town in Russia, in the dance, each one became whole within, each was healed, each was satisfied. After the dance went on for a time, the rabbi gradually slowed it to a stop. He invited the people to sit quietly again.

Then he looked at the group with tenderness and said, 'I trust that I have answered all your questions.'" And they went home that night with joyful hearts.

Benediction

The Hanukkah blessing says: "Blessed are you, Lord, our God, ruler of the universe, who has commanded us to light the candles of Hanukkah."

May the light of the universe fill our hearts with joy.

May we keep this commandment to celebrate,

to enter into a holiday season,

mindful of the wonders of our universe,

open to the miracles that may happen in our lives,

open to encounter the beauty of each person and each day.

May we remember to light our lamps

even in the midst of the darkness,

yes, especially in the midst of the darkness.

And now I invite you to sing with me once more, an old gospel tune, *Give me oil in my lamp.*

Song:

Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning.

Give me oil in my lamp I pray.

Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning,

Keep me burning 'til the break of day.

Sing Hosanna! Sing Hosanna! Sing Hosanna 'til the break of day!

Sing Hosanna! Sing Hosanna! Sing Hosanna 'til the day!

Give me truth as my guide, keep me seeking...

Give me joy in my soul, keep me shining...

Give me love in my heart, keep me serving...

Closing Words

Grateful for small miracles,

let us rejoice in the wonder of light that shines in the darkness

May all the lights of the universe fill our hearts with joy and hope.

As we extinguish the flame of this chalice,

let each of us carry its light into every day of our lives.