

“The Servant Candle”

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To do or to be? It’s an age-old question and one for this morning as we light our candles of Hanukkah. At this Festival of Lights, which began last Tuesday evening, a candle is kindled each night until the menorah, the Hanukkah candle holder, is filled with light. To do or to be is a question that goes hand in hand with another question: How many Hanukkah candles are there? Of course, there are eight, one for each night of Hanukkah. Then we take a second look and count nine, noticing that candle that rises above the others. We revise our answer: There are nine candles of Hanukkah. Both answers are right, sort of.

Paramount in Jewish tradition is that the light of the eight candles must not be used for any purpose. They witness simply and solely to the miracle of light that lasted beyond expectation. They must not be used to read by, cook by, do anything by. They *are*, like the miracle that was. As if on Sabbath rest, they do no work.

So how are these eight non-worker candles to be lit? Certainly not by lighting one and “using” that one to light the others. On the first night of Hanukkah, this might work, for there is only one candle to be lit. But when multiple candles need kindling, what then? The solution was simple. Add a candle to the menorah that holds them all. This extra candle is known as the *shamash*, the servant candle. It serves the other candles by lighting them.

Shamash is the same word used to designate the “caretaker of the synagogue,” the custodian. As candle or custodian, the function is work in deference to a higher purpose. *Shamash* is a term used also for the long strand that binds the knots of the *tallit* or prayer shawl worn by Jews for morning prayer. Its purpose is to hold the *tzitzit*, the four strands extending from the body of the shawl. Tying the *tzitzit* is a ritual and an art. As with the Hanukkah menorah, an extra strand is needed to do the work. This is the *shamash*. It winds its way through these other four strands in a mode resembling macramé to achieve the desired pattern. All is grounded in Torah, Jewish law. As a weaver of sacred knots, as a caretaker, and as a candle, the *shamash* plays a multi-faceted servant role in Jewish tradition and practice.

As for the *shamash* on the menorah, I imagined that with the passage of 2200 years since the first Hanukkah, there would be stories by the score to endow this singular candle with the blessings of legend. My colleague Rabbi Shira Joseph, of Congregation Sha’aray Shalom in Hingham, tells me there are none. I wonder. Let’s back up a bit into the annals of Hanukkah history and see if we might find there a glimmer of something other than a ho-hum servant candle.

It was 169 BCE and those ancient dynamics of imperialism, conquest, and oppression were in full play. Remember Alexander the Great? Alexander was imperialism incarnate, so wide was the range of lands that he and his armies invaded and occupied. Antiochus Epiphanes was the Hellenistic ruler of the Syrian branch of Alexander’s empire. As such, he forbade the practice of all local religions, Judaism included. The penalty for religious observance was death.

As for the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, it was defiled by rites that were out and out pagan. Secular Hellenism prevailed, sustained for a time by many who were Jewish, so tantalizing was the cultural and intellectual character of Hellenism. Others risked their lives, held on to their

beliefs and their practices, and resisted. Among them were Mattathias, a priest, and his five sons, from a place called Modin. As guerilla insurgents they came to be called Maccabees. The term Maccabee comes from the Hebrew word meaning “mallet” or “hammer” and calls to mind the hammer-like blows struck by Mattathias and his sons and their followers against their oppressors. Judas, Jonathan, and Simon were among the five who led the revolt. Writes one researcher: “I could not locate the information about the two other sons, so [we’ll] call them Levi and Larry for now.”

After three years of hard fighting, this raggedy band of brothers and others succeeded, taking Jerusalem back in 166 BCE. Yet much work lay ahead in preparing the Holy Temple for rededication, for it had been profaned beyond use. It wasn’t until 164 B.C.E. that it was ready. All is recorded in the two books of the Maccabees, each with an account of the rededication. In the first book, we read that:

...early on the twenty-fifth day of the ninth month, the month Kislev, in the year [164 B.C.E.] sacrifice was offered as the law commands on the newly made altar of burnt-offering. On the anniversary of the day when the Gentiles had profaned it, on that very day, it was rededicated, with hymns of thanksgiving, to the music of harps and lutes and cymbals. All the people prostrated themselves, worshipping and praising Heaven that their cause had prospered.

They celebrated the rededication of the altar for eight days.

And in the second book of the Maccabees we read that:

The joyful celebration lasted for eight days; it was like the Feast of Huts (Sukkot), for they recalled how, only a short time before, they had kept that feast while they were living like wild animals in the mountains and caves; and so they carried garlanded wands and branches with their fruits, as well as palm fronds, and they chanted hymns to the One who had so triumphantly achieved the purification of his own temple.

In its earliest celebration, Hanukkah was an extension of the Jewish festival of *Sukkot* that had been forbidden, like all other religious practices. This is why it lasted eight days.

We might think that the Maccabees were deemed heroic throughout Judaism. Not so. These ancient Jews were as adept at what I call kaleidoscope theology as any of us who stand in the tent of Unitarian Universalism. The rabbis weren’t *sympatico* with the Maccabean approach to Judaism. They regarded only rabbinical power as legitimate, the kind of power known through prayer and ritual, not through overt resistance to oppression and certainly not through the power politics waged by the Maccabees. What sustained the Jewish people according to the rabbis? Prayer, not political resistance, even though the Maccabees had overthrown the very forces that had made it life threatening to practice Judaism.

In the words of Arthur Waskow, 20th century peace activist, historian, and advocate of the reformation of Judaism in his own time:

“...the rabbis were critical of the meaning and ultimate outcome of the Maccabean revolt. And so, without utterly rejecting the national liberation movement, they refocused attention away from it toward God’s miracle – toward the spiritual meaning of the light that burned and for eight days was not consumed.”

The books of the Maccabees were preserved only because the Hellenistic Jews had deemed them sacred. When many of them became followers of the prophet we know as Jesus, they carried with them this high regard for the recorded history of their rebel ancestors. So I and II Maccabees were included in the Apocrypha, meaning, the “hidden books,” of what early Christians affirmed as the Old Testament. Yet these writings didn’t make it into the canon of what we recognize as the Old, or the First, Testament, perhaps because they were preserved in Greek, not Hebrew.

Waskow reports that it is the Talmud, the commentary on the Torah, that carries the rabbinical line of thinking about Hanukkah – what it was and what it wasn’t. The writers of the Talmud treated Hanukkah as a shirt-tail relative of holy days. They knew it existed, but it wasn’t regarded as an authentic member of the family – rather like the Maccabees, even though they had made the rededication of the temple possible.

So it was that one day the rabbis were conferring on what candles might be used for the Sabbath, when one of them asked off-handedly about Hanukkah candles and whether the same rules apply. Another piped up: “What’s Hanukkah?” Imagine, a rabbi today asking, “What’s Hanukkah?” The response was an account of what presumably happened on the twenty-fifth day of Kislev, the ninth month of the Jewish year, with the rededication of the temple, the single serving of oil, and the miracle of its lasting for eight days. All the rabbinical to-do was really about candles, not about the revolt that preceded the eight-day miracle. They made what we might call in Yiddish a *megillah*, a “big deal,” out of the candles themselves.

Hanukkah candles were lit at the appointed time, but with minimal reference to the religious political history that preceded the event of rededication. What was important was the miracle of light, extended by God for eight days into an infinity of spiritual riches, for eight was the symbol for infinity.

Yet another controversy rises from the history of this holiday, and that is over the timing. Was it accidental that candles were lit at the darkest time of the year? On the 25th of *Kislev*, the moon was, in Waslow’s words, “in exile,” as was the sun if this holiday arrived at the time of the winter solstice. The lighting of fires at earth’s darkest time is a practice ancient and pagan. It is no coincidence also that Christmas was decreed for the 25th of December, again the time of maximum darkness, when the presumed Son of God mirrored that other sun that, during solstice, all but disappears. Light is needed for the human spirit to hold hope. Candles must be kindled. Fires must be lit. A holy child would naturally be born at such a time.

So yes, there are undercurrents of the pagan in these celebrations, meaning simply that they are tied to the rhythms of the earth, to darkness and light, and to the human need for hope that light would return. At the darkest time of year, that hope is ritualized in observances religious and pagan.

As a celebration, albeit minor, of God’s miracle, as an extension of that once forbidden holiday Sukkoth, and unconsciously perhaps, as a rite of hope for the return of light to the world, Hanukkah was observed over the centuries. But it wasn’t until the late 19th century that the status of this holiday rose in stature. With the *haskalah*, the Jewish enlightenment, came a certain scorn for miracles and a greater respect for the pragmatics of what the Maccabees had achieved. Zionism surged. At the same time, Christmas was turning into a celebration festive beyond the imagination of the early Christian church or for that matter, of 17th century Puritans in this country. How to counter the allure of Christmas in Jewish households? Renew that holiday grounded in resistance to assimilation. Restore Hanukkah!

New blessings came to be said over the candles of Hanukkah, blessings that blended the miracle of extended light with the liberating exemplars, the Maccabees. One such blessing is spoken thus:

“We kindle these lights on account of the miracles, the wonders, the liberations, and the battles that You carried out for our forebears in these days at this time of year, through the hands of Your holy priests. For all eight days of Hanukkah these lights are holy. We are not allowed to use them; they are only to look at, in order to thank and praise Your great name on account of Your miracles, Your wonders, and Your liberations.”

Did you hear anything in this blessing about the *shamash*, the servant candle? I did not. While Hanukkah advanced in status, the *shamash* is not even counted in this blessing. Yet without it, no light would be kindled for the eight. While the historic conflict between Rabbi and Maccabee can be resolved in affirming both perspectives, in creating a richer holiday of spiritual and political memory, that lone candle seems not to have been liberated, even though it stands higher than all the others on the menorah.

Stories have a way of happening when you least expect them. Friday night I was in the kitchen preparing dinner. Dan, my husband, was working in the living room. “Hey Jan,” he called out, “Do you know what a *shamash* is?” “Oyveh! I thought! I’ve been “shamash-ing” all day over this sermon.” I responded with a litany of three options for the *shamash*. He was duly impressed, then downloaded for me a most remarkable commentary by Sharon Astyk, a young mother, academic, farmer, gardener, and self-described “Peak Oil activist.”

Stirred by 20th century poet Wallace Stevens’ enigmatic work, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” Astyk had authored “Not Quite 13 Ways of Looking at a Menorah (with Apologies to Wallace Stevens).” Stevens’ first stanza reads thus:

Among twenty snowy mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the blackbird.

Astyk’s counterpoint reads thus:

Among the snowy houses
There was only one
Candle lifted to light another.

She is speaking of the *shamash*.

Astyk proceeds point-counterpoint, tapping most of Stevens’ refrains for her own poetic reflections on each of the nine candles of the menorah. Then she takes a leap of faith forward to Passover, that spring holiday celebrating the liberation of the Jews from another oppressor. She recalls the sung prayer, “*Dayenu*,” which those of us who have celebrated the Passover seder know well. *Dayenu* means, “It would have been enough.” All the miracles of what God presumably has done to liberate the Jewish people from their oppressors in Egypt or ancient Syria, to part the waters of the Red Sea, to impart oil that burned beyond its time, all these miracles were well and good, but “it would have been enough” if God had given only the Sabbath and the Torah without the liberation, if the oil would have burned for a single day as anticipated. “It would have been enough,” she writes, “had we never discovered the modern miracle of the oil, and had we never created our industrialized society. We had enough.” As for

the ancient miracle of oil, that was not what mattered most. It was rather “the ordinary miracle of sufficiency.”

And so with the *shamash*, the servant candle, the candle anonymous in most Hanukkah blessings, it is enough that its purpose is to give light to the other candles, to spark the blessings of those candles whose purpose is simply to be. It is enough that the *shamash* does what it does, that it is useful beyond measure. Our lone servant candle holds the miracle of enough in its capacity to kindle radiance and hope in a time of darkness.

It is enough that there are no volumes of stories or parables for this candle. It is enough, *dayenu*, that the *shamash*, the servant candle, is a carrier of light to the others. It is enough, *dayenu*, that the candle of doing and the candles of being reside side by side on the Hanukkah menorah.

Peace, Shalom, Amen.

Sources

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