



CHAG V'CHESED: HOLIDAY DVAR TZEDEK

Chanukah 5768 By Rabbi David Ellenson

Last January, I was privileged to serve as rabbinic advisor to an AJWS-sponsored delegation of 25 rabbinical students drawn from nine different seminaries to the El Salvadoran village of Ciudad Romero. We were motivated by the conviction that Judaism is not an isolated phenomenon, and we all believed that Judaism demands our engagement with the world. For ten days, we worked the land with the residents of the region, as the citizens of Ciudad Romero graciously opened their homes and hearts to us. Their children embraced us as we ate at their tables, and we learned of their troubled recent history and of their heroic struggle for dignity despite the conditions of war and poverty that had so recently engulfed them.

Our hosts described for us how the residents of the region had come together in the past decade to build concrete homes in place of cardboard and wooden shacks, houses that could withstand the ravages of the torrential winter rains. They spoke as well of other advancements that had come to their village as they described how they had both constructed concrete curbs on their still-dirt streets and installed electricity that brought light to all the community's residents. We learned – whatever our differences – that there was a shared humanity that marked all of us, and we learned that the particularistic aspects and rituals of our Jewish tradition can be merged with our more universalistic commitments and obligations as we felt the presence of God in our encounters with our Salvadoran sisters and brothers.

Now it is ten months later, and the memory of El Salvador seems far away as winter approaches here in New York. Yet, I still bask in the warmth of those experiences, and as *Hag ha-Urim*, our Festival of Lights, comes, those encounters cause me to appreciate how the texts of our tradition contain reminders that our particularistic attachments as Jews command us to be mindful of universalistic values and engage in larger social concerns.

While Chanukah contains a particular narrative about Jewish liberation from Greek tyranny, there is a more universal message about the struggle for justice and freedom from oppression that is appropriately drawn from this tale. As the lyrics of Peter, Paul and Mary's "Light One Candle" exemplify, we often draw universal themes from this Jewish story. However, we generally do so without the help of classical Jewish writings themselves. My experience in El Salvador has drawn me anew to the Chanukah story, and has caused me to ground an obligation to bring peace to the world in traditional texts surrounding the holiday and its candle-lighting rituals.

The late Rabbi Hayim David Halevi (1924-1998), former Chief Sephardic Rabbi of Tel Aviv-Jaffa, highlights these dual values in his 'Aseh l'kha rav.' While he acknowledges the importance of the particular Chanukah story – the victory of the Hasmonean family over its Syrian oppressors – he also points to a more universal theme – the miracle of the cruse of oil – that expresses universalistic hopes and aspirations. As Rabbi Halevi states, this miracle signals the "renewal of worship in the Temple, and the Temple was not a place where the Israelites alone worshipped God, but a site where all the families of the peoples of the earth did so. As it is written, 'My house shall be a house of prayer for all peoples' (Isaiah 26).'" The miracle of the oil that lasted for eight days is a reminder that God rules over the entire world and that the light from the cruse must shine for Jew and Gentile alike.

Interestingly, the famous Talmudic debate between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel over the lighting of Chanukah candles, recorded in Shabbat 21b, reflects the same desire to find the universalistic message in this seemingly particular story. Although we follow the practice of Beit Hillel, who argues that we should add another candle each

of the eight nights, in keeping with the principle that “we increase in [matters of] sanctity and do not reduce (*ma’alin ba-kodesh v’ein mordin*),” my encounters in El Salvador directed me with renewed interest to the words of Beit Shammai.

Beit Shammai maintains, “On the first day [of Chanukah] eight lights are lit, and thereafter they are gradually reduced,” because “[the kindling of the Chanukah candles] shall correspond to ‘the bullocks of the [Sukkot] Festival’ (*parei he-hag*).¹”

The position put forth by Beit Shammai constitutes more than a ritualistic preference for the pattern established for appropriate sacrificial worship in the Temple during Sukkot. Rather, this stance reveals a philosophical position that ascribes a universalistic significance to Chanukah that is instructive for us today – the “bullocks of the festival” were sacrificed during Sukkot for “the peace” of all “70 nations of the world (Sukkah 55b).” What might at first seem like the most particularistic of interpretations in a most particularistic story is, in fact, a subtle argument for the role of Chanukah in bringing peace to the world. Beit Shammai and Rabbi Halevi teach us that even during Chanukah – when we celebrate the nationalistic victory of our ancestors over tyrants – we must focus on the responsibilities to all humankind that this miracle entails. Even as we rejoice in the triumph of the Hasmoneans, they remind us that we must be mindful of and share our blessings with the rest of the world. God needs to be realized through us, both within and beyond our community. Happy Chanukah!



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¹ In making this linkage between Chanukah and Sukkot, Beit Shammai is following the lead of II Maccabees 10:6, where the decision to celebrate Chanukah for eight days was intended to compensate for the fact that during the war against the Greeks the Jews were unable to observe Sukkot. As a result of this identification of Chanukah with Sukkot, Beit Shammai reasoned that, just as Numbers 29 commands that the numbers of bullocks sacrificed during Sukkot be reduced over the course of the holiday, so too the number of candles lit during Chanukah should be diminished.