



CHAG V'CHESED: HOLIDAY DVAR TZEDEK

Chanukah 5769 By Rabbi Rachel Cowan

Barack Obama ended his victory speech on election night with an evocation of the power of the spirit:

This is our time to put our people back to work and open doors of opportunity for our kids; to restore prosperity and promote the cause of peace; to reclaim the American dream and reaffirm that fundamental truth, that, out of many, we are one; that while we breathe, we hope. And where we are met with cynicism and doubts and those who tell us that we can't, we will respond with that timeless creed that sums up the spirit of a people: Yes, we can.

His words sounded almost biblical to me, and I thought of the verse from the prophet Zechariah that we read every Chanukah: "This is the word of Adonai unto Zerubbabel, saying: 'Not by might, nor by power, but by My spirit.'" (Zechariah 4:6). As Obama inspired people to consider the spirit of the American people, the Zechariah verse, read at this time of year and at this particular moment in American history, presents a wonderful opportunity for Jews to reflect on the role of spirituality in our work for justice.

The celebration of Chanukah has an interesting history. It is not mentioned in the Tanach, the Hebrew Bible, but rather in the post-biblical apocryphal books Maccabees I and II. These books describe an eight-day celebration, modeled on the festival of Sukkot, of the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem in 162 BCE, after the Maccabees defeated the Syrian Hellenist rulers and after they purified the Temple of the ritual residue from Hellenist worship rites. Later, the rabbis of the Talmud introduced the story of the miracle of the oil burning for eight days as the reason for lighting candles on eight nights (Shabbat 21b). At that time, the Jews were suffering greatly from the physical, economic and spiritual devastation of the Roman's quashing of the Bar Kochba revolt, and they wanted both to rekindle faith and to discourage future rebellions.

In Diaspora life up until the 20th century, Chanukah was a minor holiday, focused on God's miraculous intervention, that brought warmth and light to families in the midst of cold, dark winters. Then, with the birth of Zionism, Chanukah came to celebrate the power of humans to affect their destiny, and of a small group of dedicated fighters to overcome powerful enemies. For many ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel today, Chanukah still symbolizes the fierce fight against reformist movements. In the United States, Chanukah took on importance as a Jewish identity marker to counter the assimilationist attraction of Christmas. We created parties, bought many, and more elaborate, presents, and started lighting menorahs in the public square.

These generations crafted out of the Chanukah story the messages that spoke directly to the needs of their time. Today, as many of us look to Judaism for deeper levels of meaning, the story of Chanukah can once again be transformed to speak to our need for connection and spirituality. We want to know how Jewish traditions, teachings and rituals can help us live and act in greater alignment with our values; connected, as Obama said, to the idea that out of many we are one, with a felt sense of transcendent purpose. The opportunity for spirituality implicit in the Chanukah story is made explicit in a beautiful text from Proverbs that links the lighting of candles to the search for spirit: "The human spirit is God's candle" (Proverbs 27:20). It is our spirit that brings light into the world—the light of love, compassion, truth and justice. To the extent that we do the very Jewish work of cultivating these inner qualities, we can bring more light into the world. Our actions can lead us into a deeper connection with the whole, the holy.

All of us who pursue peace and justice do, of course, need power and strength in order to bring change. But without working on our selves, we can get caught up in the pursuit of our noble ends, divorced from the spirit that must inform our work. We begin to identify those we oppose as enemies, and those whom we organize as means for our ends. We become self-righteous and judgmental and risk losing our humanity—and theirs. We burn out—like a candle deprived of oxygen—and become exhausted and cynical. We cannot work effectively for justice without faith, hope and spirit, without understanding deeply that we are each part of the whole.

This year, as we celebrate Chanukah, we do not have to rely on miracles, but neither can we rely solely on our power and strength. We can rededicate ourselves—alone and in community—to cultivating our spirit, to remembering that we are candles of the divine, and bring that consciousness more clearly to our work for justice.



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