

The Light of Faith: A Hanukkah Story

By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD December 5, 2021

We light flickering candles on those stormy nights when lightning strikes and the power switches off, flame illuminating our way in the darkness as we traverse those familiar spaces now foreign. Or when immersed in the woods at night, campfire casting light on the surroundings, towering trees and hidden ferns, offering a sense of security as the darkness thickens. What about those flames of faith, those theologies or messages or stories or insights that serve to guide us and illuminate our path as we recover from grief or pain or hardships? What about the light guiding the oppressed toward equality, toward freedom, toward liberation, the flame rekindled over and over and over, returning to guide the way after each setback? Today we hear of a miracle flame, a spark of the divine. Guiding a people through darkness, illuminated by their faith, seeking liberation from oppression – a people persevering. Today we honor the ancient Jews through the story of Hanukkah.

The story of Hanukkah is fact intermixed myth. Syrians occupied Jerusalem and, in an attempt to destroy the Jewish faith, destroyed the city's holy Second Temple. They defiled the space and banned Jewish religious practices in an attempt to eliminate Jewish history. The Jewish people faced violence and oppression as the ancient Syrians worked to Hellenize Palestine. A rebellion broke out, led by Jewish priest Mattathias and his sons – the Maccabees, and they retook Jerusalem. In an attempt to reclaim their religion, they destroyed the defiled Temple and built a new one.¹

Here is where the miracle comes in. The Jews never gave up, and neither did their holy. In rededicating their Temple, they required eight days of celebration and rededication. Yet, they only found enough consecrated oil to last for one evening. Reluctantly and with dismay, the priests lit that one evening's worth of oil for that night's worship. With perhaps some hope in their hearts, they returned to worship the following evening, and found enough oil to illuminate

¹ *Essential Judaism* George Robinson pg. 114

their candles. They returned the following night, and the following. Eight nights they returned to this space, met with the necessary oil to fulfill their sacred, ritual observances, the same oil that should have simply offered enough kindling for that one evening.² A miracle – flames of sacred light offered by their holy. When lost in a familiar space, small flames served to guide their path; in the darkness they were offered security. This miracle is observed with flickering candles lighting up the homes and hearts of Jews each year as those nine symbolic flames on the menorah commemorate this time of faith overcoming oppression.

There is joy in this tale; wonder, hope and love intermixed with and overcoming hardship and oppression, an invitation to open to joy. A light in the darkness; small flames that demonstrate an unyielding faith, illuminating the shade cast by a veil of oppression. A religious people offered strength and survival from their holy – their God. A holy miracle – the miracle of light – marking the Festival of Lights. This day marks freedom, miracles, and love. We, as a people of faith, as Unitarian Universalists, can likewise depend on our own holy when life closes in around us, and let our sacred guide us to the light that saves, open to joy in our own, sacred way! We can each be open to miracles. There is joy in rebuilding the temple; an act of defiance and self-preservation that serves to inspire. Love, peace, perseverance, light, miracles, hope – let us hold this in our hearts.

Every year there are celebrations of this unexpected joy and the actions of the sacred – nourishing mind, body, and soul. Lighting candles, sharing prayers, exchanging gifts. Joy is found in the food eaten on these eight holy days – latkes and jelly donuts filling stomachs, significant in that they are fried in oil – that same oil that served to illuminate the flames in that re-dedicated Temple.³ Food serves to connect the generations spanning millennia, connecting those of the Jewish faith to their sacred and to the miracles of this holiday – deep fried dough and potatoes steeped in meaning, creating a bond among a people of faith.

² *Essential Judaism* George Robinson pg. 114-5

³ <https://www.history.com/topics/holidays/hanukkah>

This is a story of a survival of not only a people but also of their faith. The ancient Greeks attempted to repress Judaism and the people and yet were, in this story, thwarted and subsequently the God of the Jewish faith prevailed. Judaism continued to be practiced in defiance of hardship and oppression and continues to be practiced this very day. Faith persevered. Hope persevered. The sacred persevered. Judaism as a religion survived. Where there was dark, those evenings when they entered worship, anticipating none of their holy oil, those sacred flames offered light by which to pray. When the darkness of oppression crept in around them, faith and a miracle illuminated their way forward – they were saved by something much bigger than their individual selves; they were offered perseverance through a divine miracle. Judah called on his followers to cleanse the sacred Second Temple, rebuild the altar and light the menorah – what was destroyed was rebuilt.⁴

We will each, as individuals, and as a people of faith, face hardship. Just as the Jews were, we, too, can be saved by our holy. Hanukkah offers Jews the “freedom to believe and worship as they wish,”⁵ and we as a faith have this same freedom. And yet what is different between the Jewish God and our own sacred as Unitarian Universalists is that we do not have one collective holy, one idea of the divine, but individual narratives of what we each define as our sacred. This is beautiful in that it is a life-giving creation of each heart and each soul. The overarching spirit of life and love that connects us all – that interdependent web of which we are each a part – our sacred offers us each those illuminated flickers of light in ways beautiful and unique to each one of us. When I feel myself cloaked in a blanket of hardship obstructing my way forward, I find that sacred illumination through a prayer to my own, loving God, or through connecting in nature. That is what allows a glimmer of hope that seems so very small grow and grow and become much larger than I could have initially imagined – just as each successive light on the menorah. My own divine flame – my own flame kindled by faith. Others also find this through a connection through a God of no names and a God of many names. An understanding birthed from the Christian or Jewish God of childhood, or an understanding of

⁴ <https://www.history.com/topics/holidays/hanukkah>

⁵ “Hanukkah Lights, Hanukkah Nights” adapted by Vicki Merriam

Allah. Perhaps in the loving wisdom of the Goddess, or the higher power found in 12-step groups. Maybe found in the mystery and grandeur of nature – the expanse of the ocean or the small miracle that changes a caterpillar to a butterfly. The divine perhaps held in works of art or through connections with the ancestors. Each of these and myriad more offer that glimmer, that flame, when others would work to snuff it out. Each understanding of and connection to our own sacred opens us to joy – even when all seems lost.

And yet while we have these individual ideas of the divine, we are still connected through our faith, through those Seven Principles we covenant to live by, and through the theology that spurred the very creation of Unitarian Universalism. This, too, kindles a light in our darkness – as we cope as a sacred collective, a sacred flame that sustains us as a faith community. To the ancient Jews, it was the God found in the Hebrew Scriptures. To the forebears of Universalism, this flame was divine goodness, a divine that will damn no one. To the founders of Unitarianism, this flame was the inherent goodness found in each person. The traditional Unitarian Universalist faith in this good, forgiving God and in a people with inherent worth served to light the way through hardship and served to orient swaths of people to overcome and persevere. This divine and human goodness opened our ancestors to joy as they welcomed and engaged with love in the world. Both Judaism and Unitarian Universalism offer the idea of covenant. To those of the Jewish faith, they covenant to follow the path of God in exchange for protection and land. To us, we covenant on ways we want to be in the world, to interact with the humanity around us, to our Seven Principles. The symbol of our liberal faith – a chalice – a flame that would flicker and die without the oil that nourishes it, as Pam read earlier.⁶ The oil that keeps the flame of Unitarian Universalism alive – I believe this oil is love. Love for each other, love from our sacred. Love for all of those in our midst – seeing the inherent worth in each person and maintaining and honoring that which connects us all. This love serves as a beacon for justice. A love that grounds us firmly in our morals – searching for meaning and working for peace. A love that illuminates each of our paths as we navigate

⁶ Offering words by John Saxon

whatever life brings our way.

Hanukkah is a story of a people overcoming religious oppression, using faith to persevere. They never gave up, and neither did their God. When all seemed lost – when their place of worship was destroyed and desecrated – those priests, they lit that flame anyway – they opened to joy. Their God – their God kept those flames burning until their period of celebration and rededication came to an end. I wonder how they felt when they returned to their Temple. I wonder how they felt when they came face to face with what was meant to destroy them. I wonder, then, how they felt on that second night, and the third, and the sixth, and the eighth, as the flame was rekindled again and again.

The Jewish God in this tale and other Jewish stories repeatedly served as a liberator from oppression, and I believe our holy does the same. It is that overarching faith of Unitarian Universalism that unites our individual beliefs. We are in covenant through our Principles to affirm and promote the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all. Our Christian roots dictate that “faith without works is dead.” In our spiritual grounding we are called to this work of liberation of all oppressed groups. We are each called to justice work led by our own passions kindled by the experiences of our past and the morals that dictate each of our actions. We are called by our humanist source to be the change we want to see in the world. That is the light we each carry, serving to illuminate the path for ourselves and for all of those in our midst.

This past week those of the Jewish faith have been celebrating the Festival of Lights, honoring and commemorating that miracle that occurred millennia ago. While the tangible miracle of that time was a kindling flame, we heard Pam earlier read us those symbolic miracles as well – miracles key to Judaism in this sacred time, and miracles that touch each and every one of us. Miracles that serve to open us to joy! The miracle of light in the dark – tangible yes, and symbolic – the sacred forever illuminating the paths of our journeys if we stay grounded in faith. The miracle of hope amidst despair; reminding us to never give up; to never let go. The

miracle of faith in a time of cynicism! Of keeping faith amidst oppression; of remaining true to our holy and remembering divine love. The miracle of wholeness in a time of fracture; that which is maintained through the sacred connections of our faith communities. Or of the peace that was found amidst violence, or courage in the face of fear that these oppressed peoples carried within them. “In a time of hatred, we rededicate ourselves to the miracle of love.”⁷

In this story, in our own faith, love always prevails. These are some of the miracles we can notice – some of those sacred things that allow people to persevere each and every day – finding that light and persisting. Finding that divine spark and knowing the holy is there; knowing that faith can never be destroyed. I’ve found myself in these past few months reflecting on what, to me, is perhaps the biggest miracle at all – the miracle that each and every one of us is even alive – the improbability of each and every one of our births. A miracle. Is there anything more sacred and precious than our own existence and the existence of those we hold so dear? Let this miracle be the catalyst to the rest as we work to live our best lives and work to be a force for justice in this one, precious world. This miracle of light, a sign of our sacred, a match struck by what we hold holy when we are lost and finding our way.

May it be so, and Amen.

⁷ “Each Candle a Miracle” Amanda Udis-Kessler