

## **Miracles of the Flame**

**By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD December 17, 2023**

Hanukkah is, in part, a celebration of miracles. There is the significant and profound miracle of the oil – that small amount of oil, enough to kindle a flame for a single day – lasting, inexplicably, for eight. And yet if we delve deep into this celebration and its history, we see layer after layer of miracles that preceded and accompanied this kindled flame. Miracles – events steeped in mystery, the two, in fact, synonymous in many ways. What, you may ask, is a miracle, and how is it accompanied by mystery? A miracle is the impossible becoming possible. It is those events we can never truly understand – that which defies explanation. Events held in mystery because we simply do not know how it came to be. Events that change hardship to joy, pain to compassion, despair to hope. And so today we explore the miracles of a people perceivably destroyed who instead found perseverance. Those who were meant to be stripped of faith whose sacred instead led them towards survival. A temple that was desecrated imbued with holiness once again. And so let us introduce the miracles we will explore this morning – that there were a desperate people who made a choice to persevere against all odds. That there was a quiet spark within guiding them to do so which they were remarkably able to engage with. And finally, that the light they kindled incomprehensibly multiplied.

They made a choice. The Jewish people persisted and invited hope when all seemed lost and despairing: they decided to persevere when they were meant to be destroyed. Rev. Gretchen Haley introduced and elaborated upon a miracle of this ancient, sacred time and space, which was this: “the choice that was made to light the lamp in the first place, even though everything seemed hopeless.”<sup>1</sup> A choice of this magnitude becomes a miracle. This, she offers, is what makes the story so crucial to us today, in this modern time. They chose hope amidst despair. I offer, too, that they chose love. That they chose faith. They chose all of that which healed, inspired, and strengthened their resolve.

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<sup>1</sup> “Limitless Light: A Hanukkah Reflection” by Rev. Gretchen Haley

What does it mean to choose hope? It means ridding oneself of despair. It is to acknowledge that there is persistent goodness and love in the world. That it is this that will ultimately persist over hate, fear, and the resulting violence. That this goodness and love is always within our grasp. To maintain hope is to know that not everything can turn out as desired, but that we look to a profound, universal goodness that keeps us from despair.

What does it mean to choose love? It means that we strengthen our connection to all that is, understood as kindred spirits with creatures, the wind, and one another. It means there is a place in our hearts for every lost soul. Is to be struck by the pervasive goodness people offer one another, overpowering acts of selfishness and indifference.

What does it mean to choose faith? It is to see beauty and awe saturating this planet we call home, while not understanding how or why these wonders came to be. It means we see the inherent goodness and beauty in everyone. That we can commune with creatures, with nature, with the divine in inexplicable ways. That there is an overwhelming mystery; something far greater than any of us can understand.

Hope, love, and faith are held in stark contrast with hate, violence, and animosity. And yet each is a choice, a profound intention. Sometimes to choose hope, love and faith seems the obvious course of action. Sometimes it feels nearly impossible – miraculous, indeed – as in the miracle of choice present on Hanukkah. I offer this: that the sacred found its way back inside this holy temple by finding a small crack in the rubble through which to re-enter the space that had been profaned. I offer this: that these sentiments of hope, love, and faith created that crack welcoming God back to that sacred building. If we are broken, the sacred within us defiled, may we, too, create this crack for our God to permeate. May we, too, bask in this miracle, this mystery, of healing and restoration. May we pray, may we meditate, may we center in beauty and awe.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg introduces us to a second miracle, that the desperate Jews – amidst chaos and crisis – were able to listen to that quiet spark within inspiring them to restore the desecrated temple – a sacred space stripped of its holiness. “What you need matters,” she writes, “and your intuition—the still, small voice within—tells you this, all the time. The hard part is making the space and time to hear it.” Listen to this, the “tiny flicker that we need to follow all the way home.”<sup>2</sup> What is this voice within? It is the sacred – that source of all that is, that great mystery, but a piece of this residing in our hearts. It is our intuition, that which we know to be true, and yet that which can be cloaked over and hidden. It is our soul – that immortal piece of us – the whispers of love and hope and compassion that live on for eternity; our earthly bodies end but these sentiments remain. We need our sacred, we need intuition, we need that immortal hope and love to guide us on our way back, our way home, just as the Jews did.

This is what is held within, and if we commune with it, there is nothing external we need to grasp on to – all we need is within us. These aching, ancient people knew this. This inner spark unceasingly whispers words of compassion, faith, hope, love, and strength – perhaps, most importantly, guidance – that which is innate in each of us. That which is beyond us – and so very loud – is the superficial, the manufactured, the lies, quite often. There is no innate anger, hate, or call to violence held within us. This we are taught; this is fueled by a fear crafted by those in power. And so, she calls us to create the space and time to hear, instead, that which is within – the whispers of our souls. To pause and breathe. To feel the wind on our faces. To meditate on the love held in our hearts. To center in nature or, as the Jews did, to commune with each other – to commune with those of profound faith. May we each find that which is held within.

That inner spark – these sacred flames shine brightest when all seems to be hopeless – it is held in, it creates, stark contrast. If the temple had not been profaned, would the flames of hope held in that oil ever have been kindled? Would we see these flames so brilliantly if we were not

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<sup>2</sup> Soul Matters Worship Research December 2023

lost, wandering, or scared? So, when in the throes of violence may we see a flame of peace. When veiled in hate may we note the flicker of love. When immersed in anger may we kindle a light of compassion and calm. When shrouded in prejudice may we note the flame of interdependence. We are not proud of hate or anger or prejudice, but it does not mean we cannot be guided back home. When the Jews were met with destruction, they kindled a flame of restoration. For this – this is what we hold within us – this is that quiet, ever-present spark, begging to be heard. If we are lost, if we are wandering, if we are despondent, let these inner truths guide us home. The Jews – amidst chaos and crisis – were miraculously able to listen to that quiet spark within.

This brings us to our third miracle, as articulated by illustrator Micaela Ezra. When that which is material is shared, it is halved, quartered, made smaller and smaller. It becomes less than; diminished. And yet, what she calls the “currencies of the spirit... light, love, and knowledge” increase and grow and multiply and “become eternal.” “On Chanukah,” she notes, “when we use one flame to light another, the glow is not halved – the light is multiplied.”<sup>3</sup> When we give of the spirit what we share multiplies, just as one flame became eight. What we share ripples out and is made eternal, for light, love, faith, and compassion never die, they linger on beyond any finite life. Imagine goodness, love as a small pebble, tossed into a calm body of water. The water ripples out far beyond that single stone – beyond that single act. So, too, is it with the intangible.

Think of love. Think of the first time you spoke or heard the tender, precious words “I love you” from a friend turned intimate partner. Those three words shine light beyond any other. All that is around us becomes saturated with it – the world seems brighter, life seems brighter, our other relationships seem brighter, and we act with this newfound joy and wonder. It beams beyond us, inadvertently touching so many.

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<sup>3</sup> Soul Matters Worship Research December 2023

Think of faith. As I sat writing this sermon, watching the nature outside my window, as I reflected on the pain both within these walls and beyond, I was reminded of the practice of prayer. When we ask for prayer, when we offer prayer, it is usually not a solo act, but a sacred offering provided by so many; a multitude of souls praying for one. I wonder, in this moment, of prayers of petition – asking for healing, solace, peace. One prayer becomes many as people of faith ask of their God for these blessings to be bestowed upon their aching beloved. This becomes an expanding network of individuals communing with their God – nature, an entity in the sky – all on behalf of one aching soul. Prayers multiply. These holy acts foster profound hope and love and faith for those both offering and receiving prayers – and this spreads as well.

I think, too, of compassion. One act of kindness or love becomes another becomes another becomes another. We can speak kind words of comfort to the dispirited which leads the recipient to smile at one carrying immense pain inside which in turn leads to a hope that heals and allows the one in pain to continue this thread of compassion. Perhaps we open the door for someone who is then inspired to give what they can to an unhoused person in the street. We never know what one small act can lead to. The light is not halved, it is multiplied – just as the flames of those ancient Jews. This is a miracle.

So may we choose that which is life-giving, beautiful, and imbued with strength. May we choose hope, knowing and believing that goodness, faith, perseverance, and kindness are always within our grasp. May we choose a love that makes us kindred spirits with all that is, and a faith mirrored in the beauty and awe that saturates this earth. Let us engage with that still, small voice within, those ever-present echoes and murmurings of love and compassion and kindness, searching, not beyond, but within – for within we hold all we need. May the currencies of our heart multiply and shine – may love illuminate the beauty of the world, may faith heal and inspire, may compassion touch the heart and soul of stranger and friend alike. For these are miracles of Hannukah – miracles of these ancient peoples of faith who persevered and overcame all obstacles. On Hanukkah, we celebrate mystery. On Hanukkah, we celebrate miracles.

May it be so, and Amen