

## **Unexpected Miracles: The Hanukkah Story**

**By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD, Dec. 13, 2020**

The children run around with joy as the first night of Hanukkah begins! The first candle of the menorah – set against the backdrop of the living room window, illuminated by that night sky – is lit. The family recites the sacred blessing. The family huddles around the small dreidel playing a game with coins and candy. Fried potato latkes sizzle in the oil on the hot stove. The time of honoring and celebrating sacred miracles has begun.

Hanukkah is a story of miracles – a story of what can occur when one is deeply connected to their faith. This is a story where myth and fact overlap, and it begins with Antiochus Epiphanes – ruler of Judea. Antiochus denied the Jewish people the right to practice their religion – all religious observances were forbidden. Within these denied rights were the worship of their God, circumcision, and all of the Jewish dietary laws – and opposition lead to death. There was a grand, holy temple in Jerusalem – this temple was desecrated. Destroyed. These new laws serving to destroy the Jewish faith were enforced by the great Syrian army. And while many Jews submitted to these cruel laws, many also revolted. A local priest name Mattathias and his sons – they were known as the Maccabees – this group of Jewish people organized a revolt. They fought the Syrian army in a series of skirmishes and – they won! This group of devoted Jewish people defeated the large, well equipped Syrian troops. Mattathias captured the Temple and worked to restore it –purifying holy objects and spaces. He worked to restore the Temple to the rightful priests and its rightful sacred purpose. The sons of Mattathias prepared to light the sacred, eternal lamp of the Temple. When they went to light the lamp, however, they realized that all but one day's worth of oil had been destroyed. And yet – it would take eight days to purify more oil for the lamp. Reluctantly, the priest lit the oil for worship on the first day. The next day, the oil burned bright again. The third day, the oil still burned. This occurred for eight days! One day's worth of oil burning for the

duration. Jewish peoples around the world celebrate the miracle of this oil for eight days every year, during the celebration of Hanukkah.<sup>12</sup>

There are miracles in this story – miracles celebrated as divine intervention – miracles celebrated to this very day. Unexpected miracles. That flame – that sacred flame. That oil that was substantial enough to light the flame in that sacred lamp for one evening that instead lighted it for eight. A people joined to rebuild what had been destroyed – to rededicate their temple. And having that lamp lit was a crucial piece of their faith. And, in this story, as they acted guided by faith, as they centered themselves in faith – that flame remained lit. They paused in an act of faith and were presented with a miracle – they paused and were met with divine intervention.

There is a lesser explored miracle in this story as well – a story that author George Robinson writes about as he explores a midrash – a commentary on the Hebrew scriptures. This particular midrash explores the idea that the true miracle was not that the oil lasted for eight days, but that the miracle was that in the faith of the priests. The priests knew they did not have enough oil to last for eight days, but they lit the lamps each day anyway. They lit the lamps with only their faith in their God – trusting that their God would provide. The oil lasted.<sup>3</sup>

We cannot forget that this story also tells of perseverance, as that small Jewish army defeated the Syrian army and recaptured their sacred temple. These ancient people fought and overcame oppression – through the power of their faith.

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<sup>1</sup> *Essential Judaism: A Complete Guide to Beliefs, Customs, and Rituals* George Robinson 114-115

<sup>2</sup> *Living Judaism: The Complete Guide to Jewish Belief, Tradition, and Practice* Rabbi Wayne D. Dosick 151 -153

<sup>33</sup> *Essential Judaism: A Complete Guide to Beliefs, Customs, and Rituals* George Robinson 115

What makes these ancient stories so powerful is their applicability to our own lives – stories of inspiration and of the power of faith overcoming oppression. This story highlights the power of faith, and the beauty of those miracles that faith can help bring into being.

This begs the question, what is faith? We – as Unitarian Universalists – we are a people of faith! I understand faith to be something sacred that occurs when you connect with something higher, more than yourself – something outside of your very being; a source that helps guide us; a source that connects us to our souls and our true selves; an outside source that can provide strength to overcome hardship; if we hold faith in our hearts, if we lean on this and find strength in this, our faith can help us overcome so much. It can give us strength to persevere.

To the Jewish people in this story, their faith was their religion – this monotheistic God. To many folks, faith may be this idea of God – especially folks from the Abrahamic religions – this monotheistic idea of God. What about beliefs in the Goddess? What about those who believe in a multitude of deities? What about the humanist beliefs in the power of humankind – in the power of science? What about the Spirit of Love and Life that we pray to every Sunday? What about those in recovery who put their faith in an ambiguous higher power? Faith gives us the strength to produce and observe miracles.

But what, you may ask, is a miracle? A miracle is something entirely unexpected. A miracle is something beautiful. A miracle changes our perspectives and gives us strength. A miracle is when the unimaginable becomes imaginable – becomes tangible.

Faith can lead to miracles because faith can help give us the strength to keep going – to simply keep going. Faith can lead to miracles because of the love and compassion it inspires. Faith can lead to miracles because we have something beyond ourselves that we can lean on and gain strength from.

The story of Hanukkah highlights that our faith can help us overcome. It provides a story that shows what a deeply held faith can help spur into reality. Faith on its own cannot conquer an army, but it provides the strength to try. Faith can help provide the strength to rededicate a desecrated holy temple; to restore a very people. If we carry this faith in us with such strength, such vigor as those ancient Jews who defeated their oppressors, who rededicated their temple, I wonder what unexpected miracles we would encounter.

I think this story is powerful because the miracle seems so grand, so mysterious. But there are other, simple, yet just as grand miracles occurring in this story! Miracles that our faith can help us to cultivate each and every day. Miracles like the ones our readings pointed out – miracles of trust or hope or wholeness or love.

This story of Hannukah highlights the miracle of hope! This group of people had faced oppression and their faith was being stripped away from them. They faced despair. And yet! They kept going. They created an army and fought. They rebuilt a desecrated temple. I imagine a flame of hope inside each one of them – a flame just as meaningful as that flame in the menorah – a flame of hope that they could restore themselves as a people. Each night that flame remained lit – a beacon of hope that their faith would survive and they could rededicate their sacred ground. Their faith gave them the “miracle of hope in a time of despair.” That unexpected, beautiful hope. What about the miracle of resistance? They could have accepted their fate, they could have given up. But their faith inspired them with the ability to offer resistance, their faith offered them what they needed to fight and what they needed to rebuild and what they needed to persist. They found the “miracle of resistance in a time of oppression.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Each Candle a Miracle* Amanda Udis-Kessler

I think of my own miracle that my faith provided me. I don't need to go into the details of this story – but I had been wronged, and mistreated. And I carried this in my soul! I was angry, I was hurt, I was sad, I was perhaps a bit revengeful. Not beautiful attributes at all. And it was heavy – and I kept it with me. And at this time I had a practice of prayer, of centering and being with my own holy. I regularly spent time walking through my mother's neighborhood, walking those peaceful streets lined with houses, towering trees and scurrying animals, in a kind of meditative, prayerful state. One day I was walking through the neighborhood, - I remember the very corner I was on – when something beautiful and unexpected occurred. I realized; I need to forgive this individual! For these acts that occurred, they were weighing on my soul and continuing to cause me pain. Let there be relief – let there be forgiveness. I realized in that moment – connecting with my holy - that offering this person forgiveness did not at all mean that what they did was ok. It meant I released myself from what happened. It meant I realized this person had suffered – truly suffered – and this was how their body and mind reacted to that suffering. I was freed! My faith gave me the miracle of forgiveness. That unexpected beauty. In so many ways, I was healed. I still am healed. Did I overcome an army? Did I make one night's worth of oil burn for eight? No. But – in that moment – it felt as if I had.

We each face hardship – this is simply inherent to life. Everyone suffers. And we are presented today with a sacred story that demonstrates the power of faith. That, when things get difficult – in this case, a people facing oppression – that when things get difficult, we can hold on to that faith we have. We can hold on to that which is bigger than ourselves. That thing beyond us that connects us to something much grander. I ask us to connect with that flame – that sacred flame that should have only lasted one night and yet instead lasted eight. Let that story and that flame ignite within you all the goodness – all the miracles that faith can help provide us.

What miracles can our Unitarian Universalist faith offer us? What beautiful, unexpected things can occur if we remain fully grounded in our faith? Our own special, sacred, unexpected miracles. I wonder about the unexpected beauty of truly being able to see the inherent worth and dignity in every person. The unexpected beauty that occurs when we can approach anyone we encounter with sincere compassion. I wonder of the miracle of pausing to notice that sacred beauty of nature – and live fully into our interdependent web. Or when we come to terms with a great pain from our past – like that forgiveness I found. Perhaps the miracle is when we take time to help others. Perhaps the miracle is when we take time to help ourselves. Whatever our miracles are, let us always stay grounded with our holy – and let our faith be that light of goodness and love in the world. Our faith needs to ground us so we can pause and see all that is possible. Our faith needs to give us the strength and courage to go out into the world and do these good and loving and healing things! Our faith is something greater than ourselves that can lead to unexpected miracles each and every day.

That faith those ancient Jews had – that faith was powerful! That faith helped them overcome an army. Their connection with their God helped them rededicate desecrate ground. That faith provided the miracle of that flame – that sacred flame.

So when families join together to eat those fried potatoes and light, each night for eight sacred nights, a candle, they are celebrating miracles of a deeply held faith. I wonder what wisdom folks of any faith can garner from these sacred traditions; what we as Unitarian Universalists can learn. Perhaps, we can hold on tight to our faith and our holy, and through that love in each of our souls work to create our own miracles, to see and engage with those unexpected miracles all around us.

May it be so, and Amen.