



Sermon

The story of Hanukah that we tell at this time of the year is a simple story. Israel was under the control of the Greeks and King Antiochus wanted to destroy the Jewish people and force them to be Greek. Anyone who tried to hold onto their religion and culture faced harsh consequences. Some people did what they were told. But others couldn't, and one of those was Mattathias. Mattathias and his five sons called all Jews to join them in fighting back. The Maccabean Army was formed. No one thought they had a chance. But they kept fighting and after three years regained control of the temple, the most holy place in Judaism. It was badly damaged, but they put everything back together. Then, when it was time to light the flame, they found only one day's worth of oil. But they lit the flame anyways and miraculously, it burned eight long days. The point of the story is this: justice and truth always win, even against unimaginable odds, so hold on to what is right and true. If you have faith, you have nothing to fear. So, don't let anyone tempt you into betraying your values and doing evil because good will always triumph.

But let me ask you this. Am I the only one here who hears this message and feels a little cynical? I would love for it to be true that if you have faith, what you desire will come to you but I see so many cases where that does not happen. At this time of the year, we say all kinds of beautiful things, and it's lovely, but does it change anything in the long run? We speak of peace, love and goodwill and sometimes a little voice inside me will say "Whatever! There's always been war. There always will be war. How is that goodwill?" We talk about the light of truth, and I think about last Tuesday's board meeting and how true it is that 7 Unitarians at a table means 8 views of the truth.

Who among us has not doubted that good triumphs over evil? When I was in middle school I learned that a friend of mine was abused by her parents. I was shocked. It was like a veil of innocence dropped from me because I didn't know things like that happened. I wanted to help her. So I talked to my mom. My mom told the school. The school called Children's Aid. My friend refused to tell them. So nothing changed, except that neither my mother nor her parents allowed me to visit her house ever again. It was a hard lesson, and I was hard pressed to see how good had triumphed over evil.

So today I want to talk about how we hold onto these beautiful ideals we have spoken of here, while anchoring in the reality of our imperfect world. We need those ideals, we need to trust that one day's worth of oil can really last for eight, and we also need to be able to live in a way that is authentic and real. Because sometimes $1 + 0 = 8$, and sometimes it just equals 1.

So I want to tell you the real story of the Maccabees, the story of history. It's not so simple and good and evil aren't quite so clear, but maybe in learning the unrefined version, we can understand a bit better how to reach for those lovely ideals while living in reality.

2,342 years ago, the Greek Empire gained control of Israel. It was 333 B.C. so by the time of Mattathias, the Greeks had ruled Israel for 158 years. Some of the Jews really liked Greek culture because it seemed so modern and liberal compared to their own. No one forced them to assimilate. They wanted to assimilate, and saw those who resisted as old fashioned and conservative. So there was a growing divide within the Jewish people between those who wanted to become more Greek and those who feared it would destroy Judaism. For a time it looked like the modernists had the upper hand. But then in 175 B.C., the Greek empire, for some unknown reason, made the mistake of sending King Antiochus to rule over Israel. His agenda was to force assimilation, not allow it to happen



of its own accord. It was the first time conservatives like Mattathias could even get enough men to fight. Most just didn't see why they needed to.

So the war was not just against King Antiochus. It was against modernizing Jews. For instance, many Jews had stopped the practice of circumcising boys, and there are multiple accounts in 1 Maccabees, the oldest account of the Maccabean War, of Mattathias' army engaging in forced circumcision. For Mattathias, there was only one way to be a Jew, his way, and he would use force if he had to.

The war was far from over when they took back the temple, but what a moral victory! Clearly God was on their side. But in 1 Maccabees, there is nothing about one day's worth of oil lasting eight days. That miracle was added to the story later. Instead, they danced and prayed and lit the temple lamp. The war continued and both sides were absolutely vicious. There's more than one account of Maccabean troops marching into an enemy town, killing every man woman and child and victoriously walking over the bodies to the next battle. And then there are stories of the Greek army doing exactly the same thing to Jewish villages. That was war. Sometimes it still is.

And in the end, the Maccabean army could not secure its independence on its own. As they wore down the Greeks, three other empires, Egypt, Syria and Rome saw a potential power vacuum and tried to use it to their advantage. And the Maccabees pit all four empires against each other, offering loyalty in exchange for political independence. In the end, they saw the Romans as their best bet. And then the Romans finished the war off with them by beating back the Greeks, the Syrians and the Egyptians. It was a win/win situation. They got rid of the Greeks, gained Rome as an ally and protector, secured political power, and purged Judaism of modernist influences. They had won! But, once inside the circles of power, they became corrupt and oppressive themselves, creating the conditions for the Roman occupation of Jerusalem in 63 BC.

This is a pretty different story different story isn't it? Who is right and who is wrong? What kind of good is triumphing over what kind of evil? How did this turn into that we know today?

As Unitarian Universalists, we have a long and honored tradition of religious deconstruction! We love taking age old myths and asking the asking the question – did this really happen? But usually, we tend to focus these efforts on Christianity because so many of us have been hurt by Christianity in some way or another! So we have a certain energy for that, might I say. We don't often ask the same difficult questions about other religions. We tend to accept them rather uncritically. So we look at Buddhism, for instance, but often ignore the fact that Buddhism has been used as a tool of repression by many political leaders. We approach Hinduism, and look beyond the fact that it has provided the religious justification for a caste system that holds some people in high value and makes others almost worthless. But Christianity, oh that comes easily!

So what do you do when you find a religious story that ends up being more myth than fact. Do you throw it out? Say it has no value? Only if there's only one kind of truth, factual literal truth. If there's only one kind of truth, then forget about Hanukkah or Christmas or Easter or Brahma and Vishnu and Buddha. Forget about it. But that's a slippery slope. That's how we get intelligent design and creationism. That's oppression! But if you expand what you see as truth – meaning there are literal truths and poetic mythic metaphorical truths, then you've opened a wonderful door to a bigger way of being in life itself. It means that the Hanukkah story many of us grew up with



stays beautiful and true and meaningful. It also means we get to explore the historical facts of the Maccabean War and it doesn't threaten at all the poetic mythic story. It all gets to be true.

So how did the raw story of the Maccabean War turn into the Hanukkah we celebrate today? The simple answer is that stories about the past are always told through the lens of the present. We do this all the time. How we remember our own pasts says more about who we are now than who we were then. We turn our histories into what we need them to mean. The Maccabean struggle is no different. It became an important story for the Jewish people because they could point to one time in a very difficult and often sad history where they had won. The temple was theirs again and even though they didn't hold it for long, they held onto the story. This was a story to hold onto after the Romans destroyed the temple in 70 A.D. It was a story to hold onto as Jews scattered throughout the world and tried to start new lives. It was a story to hold onto during centuries of oppression in Europe. It was a story to hold onto as they struggled to make sense of the holocaust. It was a story to hold onto as Israel forged itself into a nation surrounded by enemies. It was a story to hold onto as a way to resist the growing commercialization and power of Christmas. And it remains a story to hold on to as many in the Jewish community struggle with how to be Jewish in a multicultural world. This is a story of survival. They beat us down and we got up over and over and over. There were more of them than us, and we won. And when there was only one day's worth of oil, it burned for 8 days. How many times has it been predicted that our people would disappear? Think of the temple lamp, burning miraculously, and that is our story. We always survive.

And in a faith like ours that wants to respect all world religions, we have taken this story and made it into a symbol of hope. We use it to state our faith in the unstoppable arc of justice. We need stories like this because quite frankly, we live in a world that is not so different than the one the Maccabees lived in, where it feels like our values get trampled over and over again. Our religion is ultimately about fairness for all people. It's why so many Unitarian Universalists stand for things like world peace, marriage equality, universal health care, environmental responsibility and economic justice. We work so hard for these things, and have faced defeat after defeat. So a story like this gives us hope. Don't give up. Good will triumph over evil. Justice will prevail.

And yet, we need the historically accurate story too. Because like the Jews of 2000 years ago, we live in a complex contradictory world. President Obama said as much in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize this week. Here he is, the commander in chief of the largest military force in the world, fighting two wars, one of which he is escalating, accepting the Nobel Peace Prize. There's a lot of people questioning the wisdom of his decision. Are we just one more occupier? Will this make us any safer? Are we the good guys anymore? Can more war create peace? For Obama the answer is yes. For others, it is no. Who's right? Who's wrong? There are many who still ache for the simple answers. The Maccabees ached for simple answers. And it just wasn't like that.

What I take with me from the historically accurate version of the story is that there is no one who is only a liberator or only an oppressor, only a good guy or a bad guy. Some Jews felt that the Greeks liberated them. They got to be Jewish in new ways. The Maccabees saw no freedom in that but only enslavement to a dangerous watering down of Judaism. Any accommodation to non-Jewish ways would destroy what they held dear. That's a debate that still goes on in Jewish circles, especially as practicing Jews struggle with the reality that greater numbers are marrying non-Jews or becoming secular. What is going to become of their people?



The story of the Maccabees shows us how easy it can be to get off track when you absolutely believe you're the good guy. It is so easy to become self-righteous and judgmental. It is so easy to justify doing whatever you need to do to, to get other people to be more like you. There's an arrogance there. It's really self-centered and we make ourselves into God, deciding for other people what is right and true. We do this as individuals, as churches, and as nations. The historical story of the Maccabees asks us to be humble, to declare that we carry only pieces of the truth and should have the courage to look at every single human being as a carrier of truths that the world needs.

So what does it mean to light the Menorah? If the traditional story is more myth than fact can we still celebrate Hanukkah? Absolutely. Just like next week we'll celebrate Christmas knowing much of the story is absolute myth. We'll sing songs with words we couldn't possibly agree with, and we'll love it! This is life - holding the tension between the stories we need believe, and the stories we struggle to understand. Which is pretty much what real life is about anyways. In an imperfect world, where some injustices will never be fixed, with pain and suffering that may have no answer, we light a candle. And whether there was oil for one day or eight, we light a candle because we love each other and this imperfect world. And if we do the best we can, and sometimes it makes a difference and sometimes it makes no difference at all, we light a candle because we have faith that there are things we cannot see that would give us hope if we could see them. And if there is conflict in our midst, still we stand before the menorah thankful for each other and what the conflict has asked us to learn, and light another candle. Knowing that we are both the good guys and the bad guys, we light another candle.

Because ultimately, it is about love, "without which our lives would dissolve into nightmares of violence and hatred, competition and selfishness. Love is at the center of everything that is good and worthwhile. Love is the reason for every question we ask and the root of every answer we desire. Only as we are able to love and be loved can we find the deepest meaning of human life." (from a Menorah candle lighting written by Kenneth Pfifer).

Amen and Blessed Be.