

Between The Lines—Hanukkah

Weekly Midrash Learning with Rabbi Abigail Treu

Hanukkah usually falls in December, and on the very nights we burn our festive lights, our evenings are spent, checkbook in hand, doling out tzedakah for tax-year-end.

Two weeks ago, Dr. Yochanan Muffs, professor emeritus of Bible at The Jewish Theological Seminary—a renowned scholar and beloved professor—passed away. In deference to his passing, we pause this week from this column's usual attention to midrash *hashavua* to remember him by way of a short passage from one of his best known works, *Love and Joy*.

We have seen from a wide range of midrashim, all dealing with gifts to the tabernacle, the crucial juristic significance of the inner will of the donors. Furthermore, we have seen that absence of inner joy, whether caused by outward coercion, by lack of inner conviction, or by the overzealousness that causes a man to donate more than he ought—thereby suffering rather than rejoicing in his gift giving, if not actually invalidating the gift—at least greatly depreciates its significance and value. (p. 171)

Gifts to the tabernacle were mandatory. Our ancestors did it because they had to in order to be counted as part of the community. Generations later, the giving of tzedakah to Jewish causes continues to be one way in which Jews “count themselves in” and express their commitment to the community. As such, it is not obvious that this giving should carry an emotional valence. One might give grudgingly and still count; one might wish one didn't have to give, or regret one's gift after the fact.

But is giving in order to be counted the only reason they gave? Didn't giving to the tabernacle, to God's Sanctuary, fulfill a deep spiritual need too? It is this that Muffs picks up. He teaches us that, in fact, the “inner will of the donors” matters, because giving is an opportunity for spiritual expression. If we only give because of “outward coercion” (which in our day we might read as social pressure) or if we give too much and are adversely affected by the lost income, then our gift does not count: the inner will of the donor carries “crucial juristic significance.”

As we sit down to write those rushed end-of-year checks, sifting through the piles of mail from organizations that need our support to determine which ones merit our tzedakah this year, and as we grapple with how generous we can afford to be, I am struck with a crucial lack in Jewish liturgy. To my knowledge, there is no blessing to be recited when writing a check to charity. Rabbi Dov Elkins once advised in a sermon that we should write “thank you” in the memo field of the checks we write as a way of expressing the gratitude and joy we feel in giving tzedakah. To which I add, we might recite a prayer of thanksgiving too. And precisely because there is no formula in tradition to recite, we are each free to say it in our own words, in our own way. In this way, as we give tzedakah during the same time of year that our ancestors were rededicating the Temple and lighting those first Hanukkah lights, we can feel the joy that ought to drive our giving and do what we can to keep the foundational institutions of our communities filled with light.

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Torah from JTS

Parashat Mi-ketz
Genesis 41:1–44:17
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Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi David Hoffman, scholar-in-residence, Development Department, JTS.

From Darkness Into Light: The Untold Story of Hanukkah Revealed

We Jews know that stories are not simple things. As a people, we tell tales that place us in the drama of world history and connect us with a common past and a shared future. Our national stories challenge us as individuals and as a community; they provide us with contexts to work out moral dilemmas, and help us reflect collectively on what it means to live life well.

We also tell stories about our personal histories. Each of us has a story that narrates the important events and experiences that we believe explain who we are in the world. Sometimes the stories we tell about ourselves expand our opportunities and at times these same stories create self-imposed obstacles.

Stories are never just stories. We know that narratives—both personal and national—are not only about the past. We Jews know that the stories we tell help create our future. Our stories explain who we are and how we want to be in the world.

It is in this context that I would like to reflect upon the stories of Hanukkah.

Which story do we tell and how do we use these accounts to create meaning in our lives?

The first story of Hanukkah appears in the book of Maccabees (circa 100 BCE). The Seleucid King, Antiochus IV, imposed drastic reforms on the Jewish population of Judea, prohibiting the observance of the laws of the Torah. Brazenly, he dedicated the Temple in Jerusalem to the pagan god Zeus. The book of Maccabees dramatically describes the events lead

Then the king's officers who were enforcing the apostasy came to the city of Modein to make the Jews offer sacrifices. Many from Israel came to them; and Mattathias and his sons were assembled in the crowds . . . A Jew went up before the eyes of all of them to offer a sacrifice on the pagan altar in Modein as the king had commanded. Mattathias saw him and was filled with zeal and his heart was stirred. He was very properly roused to anger and ran up and slaughtered the Jew upon the altar. At the same time he killed the king's officer who was forcing them to sacrifice and he tore down the altar . . . Then Mattathias cried out in a loud voice in the town and said, “Let everyone who is zealous for the Law and stands by the Covenant come out after me!” (I Maccabees 2:15–27)

With this call the insurgency had begun. Mattathias and his sons then

mustered a force and struck down Jewish sinners in their anger and in their wrath those who disobeyed the Law and the rest fled to the Gentiles to save themselves. And Mattathias and his friends went about and tore down the altars, and forcibly circumcised all the uncircumcised children that they found within the borders of Israel . . .

They rescued the Law from the hands of Gentiles and their kings . . . (I Maccabees 2:44-48)

Judah Maccabee led “these mighty warriors of Israel”—a small, radical group—who fought heroically and ruthlessly to protect Jewish traditions. In their efforts to guard the Torah, the Maccabees were ready to strike Jews and non-Jews alike. In the autumn of 164 BCE, this band of freedom fighters retook Jerusalem and rededicated the Temple exclusively to the God of Israel. This is an exciting story about human agency, zealotry for the law, and nationalism. At various moments in Jewish history, this story has been particularly compelling. It should not come as a great surprise then to learn that Theodor Herzl concluded his book *The Jewish State* with the words: “the Maccabees shall rise again.”

The Rabbis were profoundly aware of the power of stories and they would not tell *that* story.

The Rabbis of the rabbinic period (the first centuries of the Common Era) present a radically different narrative than the story detailed in the book of Maccabees. Gone are the personalities of Mattathias and Judah the Maccabee. In their stead, we are told of a small vial of pure oil that contained just enough oil to stay lit for one night. The Rabbis tell us of a miracle that occurred, during which the oil burned for eight days (see BT Shabbat 21b). God is the hero of this telling and the violent actions of the Maccabees are gone from Jewish history. This rabbinic story furthers the particular piety that the Rabbis sought now to nourish in the communities they were building. They would not tell stories of religious revolt or Jews slaughtering Jews. The Rabbis would tell a story that emphasized rabbinic values: faith and God’s love as manifested in the miracle of the oil.

These are two of the most popular stories of Hanukkah, but I would like to present a third story. The rabbis never explicitly link the following passage with the holiday of Hanukkah, but the connections are intriguing. A story is told about Adam—the first human being—in the talmudic Tractate Avodah Zarah:

Our rabbis taught: when the first man (Adam) saw the daylight hours were becoming shorter and shorter, he said, “Woe is me! Perhaps because I have sinned, the world is becoming dark around me and is returning to chaos (*tohu va-vohu*). This is the death sentence declared upon me by Heaven!” He sat for eight days in fasting and prayer. After the winter solstice when he saw the days becoming longer and longer, he said, “This is simply the way of the world!” He went and made an eight-day festival . . . He established them for the sake of Heaven and they established them for idolatry. (BT Avodah Zarah 8a)

This talmudic story invites us to imagine what it must have been like to experience the first winter. The nights grew longer, the days grew shorter; it was difficult to stay warm. Adam feared that God was returning the world to the *tohu va-vohu* of pre-Creation. As it turns out, Adam’s fears at this moment were unjustified, but God would destroy the world with the flood. Believing he was the cause of the darkness, Adam prayed and fasted. When he began to see that the days were growing longer and nights were growing shorter, Adam realized that this is simply how the world works. There are seasons, and some periods of the year have more light and others have more darkness. It is because of this realization that Adam made an eight-day festival. Adam established these eight days celebrating the return of the sun as an offering of gratitude to God. However, “they”—the Romans—celebrated this winter solstice holiday with idolatry. (Indeed, the Romans did have a week-long festival called Saturnalia during the same period of the year.)

Here is a rabbinic text explaining the origins of some unknown eight-day festival, smack in the darkest part of winter, celebrating the return of light to the world . . . hmmm . . . curious. I don’t think I am going out on a limb to propose the idea that one of the origins of the holiday of Hanukkah has nothing to do with the Maccabees, nor the miracle of oil. These are highly particularistic stories. Rather, Hanukkah has, in its distant past, the most universal of messages. It is a holiday about experiencing fear, vulnerability, and darkness and not being consumed. It is a holiday that reminds us that light and security will return again, as sure as we know darkness will return. These are the cycles of life. The challenge is remembering that the darkness will, in fact, retreat. So this too, like the story of the oil, is a story of profound faith.

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A Taste of Torah

A Commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS

Genesis 41:8 Next morning, his spirit was agitated, and Pharaoh sent for all the magicians of Egypt, and all its wise men; and Pharaoh told them his dreams, but none could interpret them for Pharaoh.

B’khor Shor, “but none could interpret them for Pharaoh.” They thought that the two dreams were for Pharaoh’s benefit, about him personally; but he thought that all they told him was nonsense.

A dream drives the narrative of Parashat Mi-ketz and propels Joseph to power in Egypt (leading him to save both Egyptians and Israelites from a devastating famine). Recall his enigmatic dream of cows and grain: emaciated cows consume those that are well fed, and parched grain swallows flourishing plants. Pharaoh senses the enormity of this vision. He summons all of the magicians and wise men of the country, yet “none could interpret them for Pharaoh.” It is Pharaoh’s wrestling that jogs the memory of the royal cupbearer who finally remembers a certain Israelite dream interpreter languishing in prison. And as we well know, Joseph successfully translates the dream into a concrete plan of action. But could it be that there was no Egyptian Sigmund Freud to be found in the entire land? How are we to understand this interpretive debacle?

B’khor Shor gives us insight into precisely what was bothering Pharaoh vis-à-vis the interpretations of his wise men. He writes, “They thought that the two dreams were for Pharaoh’s benefit, about him personally.” Pharaoh knew well that his vision was of far greater import than his interpreters were willing to admit. Far from being a “personal” dream, this was a vision of national significance. B’khor Shor’s commentary dovetails well with that of Rashi, the prolific medieval commentator who fills in the picture: “The voices of the interpreters did not enter Pharaoh’s ears; their interpretations did not satisfy him.”

One may distill five distinct steps in this brilliant narrative that redeems Joseph from the pit of an Egyptian prison. It is Pharaoh’s dream that represents a call to action, the assembling of interpreters, discernment on the part of the leader, recognition of God’s Presence, and a concrete plan that transforms reality. Each of us would do well to learn from the model of Pharaoh. When we are gifted with a vision and a dream, it is a call to action. The challenge is being able to seize the moment, assemble the proper group of interpreters, and implement an effective plan. Pharaoh and Joseph become partners in saving civilization—thereby affirming God’s Presence. As leaders struggle to piece together a coherent and effective policy on climate change, it is a powerful lesson for us today.

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