



Some members of the Beth Israel Synagogue community surround Salisbury's menorah in November 2021.
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HANUKKAH, THE FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS

It's a time of transforming darkness into intimacy

Your Turn
Rabbi Ruth Smith
Beth Israel Congregation of Salisbury
Guest columnist

Darkness can be a time of fear or a time of intimacy. Hanukkah is a holiday which embodies this truth.

On both the figurative and literal level, Hanukkah is a time of transforming darkness into intimacy. It is a holiday that can remind us what a difference a little bit of light can make.

The holiday itself commemorates a time when the darkness of political and religious oppression was overcome by the righteous fire of the Maccabees, who overthrew their oppressors. The Seleucid Greeks (during the Hellenistic period from 323 BC to 63 BC), based in what we now know as Syria, were the rulers of the western remnant of the Greek empire.

Under Antiochus IV, indigenous traditions were no longer honored. The Jewish Temple in Jerusalem was overthrown. Jews were threatened on point of death to abandon their traditions, including the teaching of Torah.

Many Hellenized Jews adopted the Greek culture and were perfectly comfortable living in the Greek style. However, a makeshift army, led by a Jewish priest known in Greek as Mattathias, rebelled against Antiochus's decrees.

For seven years these freedom fighters fought a guerrilla war against the Seleucid Greeks and were finally able to overthrow them. This band of fighters, known as the Maccabees, became the rulers of the Jewish people for the next one hundred years. The figurative darkness of oppression was expelled by the light of hope.

Their triumph led to a tradition that has become known as the Festival of Lights. The Rabbits tell a story, now well known to us, of the seven branched lamp that stood in the Second Temple in Jerusalem.

According to the Torah, this lamp, called the menorah, was forged during the exodus from Egypt. Each morning, the High Priest would light the menorah with sacred oil. Over the course of the day the oil would burn, so that he would need to light it again the next morning. According to tradition this practice continued in both the First (Solomon's) and Second (Herod's) Temples, but was discontinued by Seleucid Greeks.

According to the rabbinic story, when they tried to reestablish the practice, only one vial of the sacred oil was found. Just as in days of old, this was only the amount of oil needed for one day.

However, a miracle occurred, and that oil lasted the full eight days it would take to make more. It is the memory of this miracle that is

understood to be the basis of the practice of lighting candles for eight days.

Today, the miracle that we experience is how a little bit of light can banish darkness. It is certainly miraculous that after 2,000 years, Jews are still able to come together and celebrate.

When we look at the little bit of light from the Hanukkah candles, we can experience the joy of friends and family gathered for the holiday, and we can experience the beauty of a tradition that has kept its light for so long. Today, when celebrated with friends and family, Hanukkah is clearly a time where a little light transforms darkness into intimacy.

Ruth Smith is rabbi of Salisbury Beth Israel Congregation.

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