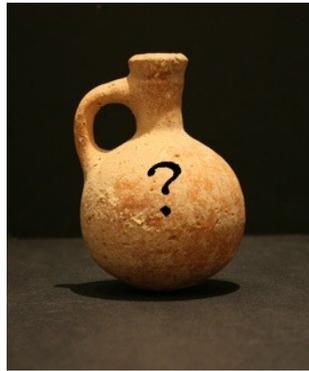


THE MIRACLE OF INTELLECTUAL INTEGRITY by Rabbi Tom Heyn - November/December 2015

Last year at a Hanukkah party, I found myself sharing what I had learned in rabbinical school about the holiday's historical background. I explained how it began not only as a struggle between



Jews and Greco-Syrians but as a battle within the Jewish community between zealots and early reformers. The Maccabees ushered in a period of Jewish independence plagued by intrigue and fratricide which led to its own downfall. Soon after, the Talmudic rabbis decided to whitewash this tragic outcome with a story about oil that lasted for eight days.

As I was chatting away, I suddenly became aware that my hosts were staring at me with mouths half-open as though they were stunned.

"What's wrong? What did I say?" I wondered aloud.

"Are you saying that the miracle of the oil is a myth?"

"Well, a *sacred* myth..." Unfortunately, it was too late. By then, it seemed a cloud had settled over the party and we ate our *latkes* in silence for a while until someone changed the subject.

Since then, I've spent quite a bit of time in our Tuesday noontime classes teaching a core group of students about the stages of faith development and the skills associated with spiritual intelligence. I find it interesting that the fourth skill is "complexity of inner thought." In other words, as people grow and mature, their capacity for nuance and complexity can also develop. When that happens, their ability to consider multiple points of view can lead to "third options" which can take everyone to a new level.

It's unfortunate that most religious communities do not encourage this complexity of inner thought. Instead, they prefer to stick with the stories we learned as children. Jews who are interested in higher levels of critical thinking typically find their way to academic or secular pursuits, revisiting the religious stories of their youth on occasions like Passover and Hanukkah.

They are happy to suspend their disbelief long enough to sit through a seder or a retelling of the Hanukkah story, then they return to reality as they know it and live it on a daily basis. This is true in other religious communities as well, which may account for the overall decline in religiosity in "first-world" populations.

Of course, I have many Jewish friends who appreciate, if not relish, traditional stories along with the values they represent. Some of these folks have been blessed with the ability to overlook complexity. Usually this ability goes hand in hand with a deep and abiding affection for *yiddishkeit* and everything Jewish. It's an affair of the heart, not of the head. For others, like myself, we appreciate the stories *because* of their complexity.

My analytical perspective and obsession with intellectual integrity may be due, in part, to the fact that I was born into a family of German-Jewish descent. It's no coincidence that critical biblical scholarship and Reform Judaism also had German Jewish roots. Furthermore, my affinity for Judaism emerged in my late twenties as a consequence of my being a spiritual seeker. It wasn't already engrained in my psyche, as it is for people who were raised by family members who could speak Hebrew or Yiddish and could relate first-hand stories about the Holocaust and the building up of the State of Israel. This could also explain why, for me, this holiday is more complex than it seemed to be for my Hanukkah party hosts.

You see, Hanukkah isn't just about the miracle of the oil, or even about the struggle of the Maccabees against the Greco-Syrians. It's also about the conflict that raged within the Jewish community between traditionalists and reformers, a conflict that continues unabated to this day.

In his New York Times column, David Brooks observed that Alexander the Great brought modernizing ideas and institutions to the Middle East. "At its best," he writes, "Hellenistic culture emphasized the power of reason and the importance of individual conscience. It brought theaters, gymnasiums and debating societies to the cities. It raised living standards, especially in places like Jerusalem. Many Jewish reformers embraced these improvements.

"Urbane Jews assimilated parts of Greek culture into their own, taking Greek names like Jason, exercising in the gymnasium and prospering within Greek institutions. Not all Jews assimilated. Some resisted quietly. Others fled to the hills." It was only when Antiochus sought to eradicate religious observance altogether that Jewish traditionalists took up arms. When they did, the first person they killed was a fellow Jew.

The Maccabees went on to forcibly circumcise Jews who had chosen to assimilate into the dominant culture. Not content with winning their own right to religious freedom, once they won the war and re-captured the Temple, they imposed their religious views on everyone under their power. In the eyes of Hellenized Jews, were they freedom fighters or fundamentalists? The truth depends on who's telling their story, and for what purpose.

As Ari Zavitsky wrote in a piece on Hanukkah for *Zeek*, such extremism is starkly at odds with pluralism and rationalism. "It says

you're either with us or you're against us, or rather, you're either with God, or an apostate." When we celebrate Hanukkah without asking when and how the Maccabees lost the moral high ground, we miss an opportunity to examine our own values and consider multiple points of view.

I don't want to ruin anyone's Hanukkah party this year, but I do think we can use this holiday as an opportunity. On Passover, we ask questions and spill wine from our glasses to acknowledge the suffering of our oppressors. On Rosh Hashanah we read and struggle with Abraham's blind obedience to God's command that he bind and sacrifice his son Isaac.

If adding candles to the menorah for eight days symbolizes the increase of light in times of darkness, wouldn't it make sense for us to increase our knowledge of, and appreciation for, complexity?

My experience tells me that critical thinking and intellectual integrity aren't a threat to faith but can help it to shine even brighter.



Chag Urim Sameah –Happy Festival of Lights!