



# CHAG V'CHESED: HOLIDAY DVAR TZEDEK

## Chanukah 5770 By Rabbi Michael Paley

In December of 1879, a group of revival-minded Jews called Keyam Dishmaya decided to bring back Chanukah.<sup>1</sup> The holiday, never a favorite of the Rabbis, who barely mention it in the Talmud, had fallen into disuse. The group was made up of young Jews in Philadelphia, for whom Chanukah represented a staunch rejection of assimilation, with the promise of national restoration and a call to continue God's work. They revived the holiday for the modern era, introducing the ubiquitous blue boxes of candles that we still use today. The revival of the ancient festival was a rousing success, and Chanukah emerged as a prominent holiday. Lighting Chanukah candles is now one of the most popular, if easy, ways of celebrating one's Judaism in America.

But the stories of Chanukah that most Jews celebrate today, tales of the military victory over the Syrian-Greeks and the oil that miraculously lasted for eight days, have stripped the holiday of some of its depth and removed it from its historic context. To tell the back story of Chanukah, with all of its complexities, is both more compelling and more serious than the congratulatory miracle narratives.

In the year 200 B.C.E., Antiochus III of Syria conquered the holy land and tried to implement a more progressive Hellenistic culture. The two major features of this culture were the establishment of the *gymnasium*, what we would now call health clubs, and education, through which anyone could become a member of the aristocracy. A community that had sufficient athletics and educational institutions could become a *polis*, or a small city-state. To my ear, these sound like highly appealing features of Hellenism. After all, American Jews love sports, and they revere going to college as a ticket into the socio-economic elite. But many of the Jews of that time resisted these changes, because they represented too great a break with the past, and seemed to them like forced assimilation. Ironically, the hard rejection of Hellenism might have been the very thing that triggered the more oppressive and brutal behavior of Antiochus IV, the villainous king of the Chanukah story.

In light of this history, what is the *real* issue of Chanukah and what should we be both celebrating and challenged by on this holiday? Chanukah, at its core, is a celebration of traditionalism—the rejection of any assimilation into the dominant culture. This raises some obvious challenges: why is a Jewish population in the most modern, progressive and welcoming country in which a Jewish community has ever lived celebrating a holiday that rejects all of Greek civilization and embraces separatism and ancient ritual?

This challenge leads us to question how much our modern American Jewish community should engage itself in the affairs and social needs of the different societies that we live in. Chanukah forces us to consider how much of the outside world we want to let in, and in turn, how much we want our Judaism to reach out and influence the world around us. After nearly 2200 years, perhaps we should reinterpret the message of the candles from celebrating isolationism to celebrating our capacity to impact the world. The candles can serve to publicize the miracle of our consistent strength as a people, and inspire us to take new risks of integrating ourselves with the

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<sup>1</sup> Sarna, Jonathan. *American Judaism*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004, pp 135-137.

progressive search for solving human problems. If Judaism is only focused on Jews, and doesn't take responsibility for the greater world, it will wither into an insignificant sect. But if we use our Jewish narratives and traditions to shine beyond our own concerns, we can mobilize our extraordinary resources and thereby contribute our services to the American and global societies we live in.

The Keyam Dishmaya strived to recreate a higher spiritual life for American Jews, but in focusing solely on restoring abandoned rituals, they neglected the more dramatic challenges of being a Jew in the progressive American milieu. Instead of celebrating separatism on Chanukah, we should think deeply about how much to reject and how much to accept of the culture in which we live. How much should we assimilate the best institutions and perspectives of America into the Jewish worldview? How do we move Judaism toward a more progressive vision, without losing what is essential to our people? What is the responsibility of the Jewish community to the rest of the world, in light of both our long survival and our current prosperity?

Traditionally, Passover is the holiday of questions and Chanukah the holiday of miracles. But I believe that Chanukah also poses questions for us as contemporary American Jews living in a global society. Chanukah should be a time to discuss, question and critique our relationship with the outside world. As the candles grow in intensity each day as the holiday progresses, we should consider the quality of the light that we emit into the world around us.



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