

Through Our Love and Our Tears
Sunday, December 10, 2023
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists
Summerfield, FL
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lake County
Eustis, FL
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Hannukah is a holiday all about the struggle against assimilation, but because of where it happens to fall on the calendar right near this big other holiday it sometimes becomes a vehicle for some adapted assimilation. Back when I lived in Columbia, Maryland many of my neighbors would go all out in decorating their homes in December. One neighbor's home was as fully decked out as any other in the neighborhood, but there were some differences. The lights were blue and white. The front yard tree was decorated not with Christmas balls but with dreidels and Stars of David. In the front window there was, if I remember correctly, it was a long time ago, a Hannukah bush as well as a menorah.

The children's author Daniel Handler who goes by the penname Lemony Snicket has written a book titled, [The Latke Who Couldn't Stop Screaming: A Christmas Story.](#)

"Santa Claus has nothing to do with it," the latke said. "Christmas and Hanukah are completely different things."

"But different things can often blend together," said the pine tree. "Let me tell you a funny story about pagan rituals."

You will not find the books of 1 and II Maccabees in the Tanakh or Jewish Bible. You won't find them in a Protestant Christian Old Testament either. There is a good article about these books on the "Got Questions Ministries" website. It says in part, "The books of 1 and 2 Maccabees are early Jewish writings detailing the history of the Jews in the first century BC(E). Both books are part of the canon of Scripture in the Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Coptic, and Russian Orthodox churches, but they are not recognized as canon by Protestants and Jews. The books outline the history of the Maccabees, Jewish leaders who led a rebellion of the Jews against the Seleucid Dynasty from 175 BC(E) to 134 BC(E). The first book portrays the effort by the Jews to regain their cultural and religious independence from Antiochus IV Epiphanes after his desecration of the Jewish temple....In the second century BC(E), Judea existed between the Egyptian Ptolemaic Kingdom and the Syrian Seleucid Empire, kingdoms formed after the death of Alexander the Great. Judea fell under the control of the Seleucids in approximately 200 BC(E). During this time, many Jews began to adopt a Greek lifestyle and culture in order to gain economic and political influence. They avoided circumcision and advocated abolishing Jewish religious laws.

"Antiochus IV Epiphanes became the ruler of the Seleucid Empire in 175 BC (E). He was inconsiderate of the views of the religious, traditional Jews in Israel... He banned traditional Jewish religious practice, outlawing Jewish sacrifices, Sabbaths, feasts, and circumcision. He established altars to Greek gods upon which 'unclean' animals were sacrificed. He desecrated the

Jewish temple. Possession of Jewish Scriptures became a capital offence....In 167 BC(E) Antiochus sent some of his soldiers to Modein to compel the Jewish inhabitants to make sacrifices to the pagan gods. Mattathias, as a leader in the city, was commanded by the officers to be the first person to offer a sacrifice as an example to the rest of the people. He refused with a powerful speech...Fearing violence against the people for Mattathias' refusal, another Jew volunteered to offer the sacrifices to the pagan gods in the place of Mattathias, but Mattathias killed this Jewish man, as well as the soldiers of the king. He then destroyed the altar to the pagan gods, after which he, his sons, and a number of followers fled to the mountainous wilderness. These men formed a large, guerrilla warfare army and soon began to launch raids against the towns of the land, tearing down the pagan altars, killing the officials of Antiochus, and also executing those Jews who were worshiping the pagan gods.

“Mattathias died in 166 BC(E), just as the revolt was gaining momentum, leaving his son Judas in charge of the rebel forces. Even though greatly outnumbered, Judas and his rebels defeated general after general in battle, winning decisive victories against overwhelming odds...The people of Israel gave Judas the nickname ‘Maccabeus’ (the hammerer) because of his success in ‘hammering’ the enemy forces into the ground....the Maccabees marched into Jerusalem, cleansed the temple, and resumed traditional Jewish religious practices. The festival of Hanukkah commemorates the cleansing and rededication of the Jewish temple,” [What are the books of 1 and 2 Maccabees? | GotQuestions.org](#).

The Hannukah miracle of the one day of consecrated oil that lasted for eight until more could be prepared is not recorded in I or II Maccabees. It appears in the Talmud, a compilation of Jewish teachings, collected long after the events of the Maccabean Revolt. From the Talmud:

“What is Chanukah? The sages taught that on the 25th of Kislev we begin the 8 days of Chanukah, in which we neither eulogize nor fast. [Our celebration is to commemorate] when the Greeks entered the Sanctuary, they defiled all the oil of the Sanctuary. And when the Hasmonaeans (another name for the Maccabees after one of their ancestors) overcame them and defeated them [in war], they searched and found only one jug of oil that was sealed with the imprint of the High Priest, and there was sufficient oil to last only one day [to light the Menorah in the Temple]. A miracle occurred and the oil burned for eight days. A different year [the next year] they established it as a holiday of praise and thanksgiving.” (Shabbos 21b) [The Oil Miracle of Chanukah: Myth or Fact - The Rational Believer \(jewishbelief.com\)](#). Why did the rabbis emphasize a miracle of God at the reclaiming of the Temple as the reason to celebrate Hannukah and not the military victory of the Maccabees? I do not know if this is true, but years ago a teacher of mine suggested it was to discourage revolts against the Romans and infighting between Hellenized and traitional Jews which were succeeding only in getting Jews killed.

Remember what I read earlier from the GotQuestions website. In the time of the Maccabees, around 200 BCE, “... many Jews began to adopt a Greek lifestyle and culture in order to gain economic and political influence. They avoided circumcision and advocated abolishing Jewish religious laws.” If you were a young man who wanted to advance in Greek society one of the places to be was the gymnasium. According to Wikipedia, “The gymnasium...functioned as a training facility for competitors in public games. It was also a place for socializing and engaging in intellectual pursuits. The name comes from the Ancient Greek term *gymnós*, meaning ‘naked’ or ‘nude’. Only adult male citizens were allowed to use the gymnasia.

“Athletes competed nude, a practice which was said to encourage aesthetic appreciation of the male body, and to be a tribute to the gods.” Jewish parents who wanted their sons to go to the gymnasium might think twice about circumcision, which would make their sons stand out as different.

Of the Maccabees we heard earlier that, “These men formed a large, guerrilla warfare army and soon began to launch raids against the towns of the land, tearing down the pagan altars, killing the officials of Antiochus, and also executing those Jews who were worshiping the pagan gods.” That might be as simple an act as going to the gymnasium. We were told earlier that the Jewish man who offered to make the pagan sacrifice in Mattathias’s place thought he was doing so to save the people from violence. For this Mattathias killed him.

The Maccabean revolt targeted Hellenized Jews as well as the Seleucid soldiers and officials. The rabbis of the Talmud may not have agreed with Jews not following the Torah, but they may also not have advocated killing them.

Antiochus IV Epiphanes was terrible. Under him Judaism was outlawed. He required everyone to worship as he did. Once the Maccabees came to power though, they were not better. They required everyone living in the land under their control to practice Judaism. There was no tolerance of other religions.

Words in our closing song, “Light One Candle” say, “Light one candle for the pain they endured when their right to exist was denied. Light one candle for the terrible sacrifice justice and freedom demand. But light one candle for the wisdom to know when the peacemaker’s time is at hand...Light one candle for those who are suffering the pain we learned so long ago. Light one candle for all we believe in, that anger won’t tear us apart. And light one candle to bring us together with peace as the song in our heart.”

Of the song "Light One Candle", “Rabbi Allison Bergman Vann wrote:

‘Peter Yarrow's now famous song, which was written in 1983, became a defining song for my generation of high school and college students to become activists, to make the world a better place. I heard Peter Yarrow singing that song on the steps of the Capitol, in 1987... during the march to free Soviet Jews. Listening to him sing, surrounded by literally thousands of like-minded individuals, I learned of my obligation to change the world; to engage in tikkun olam, repair of our broken world. And, during that incredible day, I knew that we could, indeed, change the world.’”

Peter Yarrow is the son of Ukrainian Jewish immigrants. So may we remember Ukraine today. “In 2000, in an effort to combat school bullying, Yarrow helped start Operation Respect, a nonprofit organization that brings to children, in schools and camps, a curriculum of tolerance and respect for each other's differences,” What can we tolerate? What can we not tolerate? Yarrow is an alcoholic. He has gone to treatment and is in recovery. If his alcoholism led to behavior that was self-destructive or destructive to others that could and should not be tolerated. He got treatment. Yarrow is also a convicted sex offender who claims remorse. Obviously sexual offences should not be tolerated. He says he is remorseful and will not offend again.

How do we live with someone who has offended, done their prison time and is now again in society? These are not easy questions to answer. [Peter Yarrow - Wikipedia](#) .

Those are questions between people. What about questions between nations? I cannot get through a Hannukah sermon and say nothing of today's war between Hamas and Israel. Hamas has said Israel should not exist. They attacked Israel. They killed. They raped. They took hostages. They still have hostages. Israel naturally declares that they need to be defeated. But if you are trying to defeat an enemy that is underground, under homes, under schools, under mosques, under hospitals how much collateral damage are you willing to inflict in the fight? How many civilians need to die because of this war?

I don't have answers. I believe Israel has a right to exist. I believe Palestinians have a right to life, safety and a homeland. "Light one candle for the pain they endured when their right to exist was denied. Light one candle for the terrible sacrifice justice and freedom demand. But light one candle for the wisdom to know when the peacemaker's time is at hand...Light one candle for those who are suffering the pain we learned so long ago. Light one candle for all we believe in, that anger won't tear us apart. And light one candle to bring us together with peace as the song in our heart." Rabbi Vann said that listening to this song, "surrounded by literally thousands of like-minded individuals, (she) learned of (her) obligation to change the world; to engage in tikkun olam, repair of our broken world. And, during that incredible day, (she) knew that we could, indeed, change the world." Some days, too many days, I am not sure that is so, but on my best days I know that it is important to try. As Rabbi Arthur Waskow writes in his book, Seasons of Joy, "Hanukkah is the moment when light is born from darkness, hope from despair." May it be so.