

Weekly Teaching

December 16, 2016

This year, Chanukah and Christmas Eve begin at the same time. There are some wonderful parallels between both of these winter holidays. Each respective celebration has an appropriate emphasis on the theme of light, and our desire to pierce the veil of darkness that too often attempts to darken our world. It is not a coincidence that each respective holiday is in the proximity of the Winter Solstice; physically we are confronted with the sun less present in our sky, and we want to affirm that the light will again shine brighter for us all, and the season of spring is both physically and spiritually around the corner.

While we can explore in depth the motifs of light in the different faith tradition, it is important to realize that for Jews, Chanukah also is a celebration of religious freedom. The origin of this Jewish minor festival was the rededication (Chanukah) of the great Jerusalem Temple almost 2,200 years ago. The Temple had been desecrated under the leadership of Antiochus, a Syrian King who wanted to coerce the Jews into accepting an appropriate Hellenistic way by which to lead their lives. The desecration of the Temple was intended to insult the Jews, and further coerce their submission to the Greek Value system.

Antiochus ordered that all Jews must worship Zeus, and cease to study their own sacred texts. They were forbidden to circumcise their sons so as to physically manifest their Covenantal relationship with God. Pigs were brought to be sacrificed to Zeus at the Temple; swine being ritually forbidden to Jews. The Jews were further ordered to eat the forbidden meat. Eventually, because the “stubborn Jews” wouldn’t relent, they were forbidden to practice any form of Judaism under the penalty of death.

A village priest, Mattathais, refused to offer a false sacrifice. He killed the Syrian soldier who was threatening him, and he fled to the hills where he soon died. His son, Judah the Maccabee (Hammer), then led the revolt against Antiochus. Overcoming great odds, they cast out the oppressors, re-took Jerusalem, and then re-dedicated the Temple for its primary Jewish rituals on the 25th day of Kislev; the Hebrew month that is December.

From this time onward, we celebrate Chanukah as a reminder that we have the privilege to practice our Judaism, and we must rise up against anyone who would attempt to prohibit our religious lives.

In America, where we are blessed to live in a free society, we can choose our own forms of religious expression. This freedom cannot be taken for granted. At times there are Americans who want to “coerce” religious form on others. Chanukah is a reminder to stand firm against such tyranny. Any religion, or for that matter any society, that builds itself upon a fundamentalism that can’t accept societal diversity is a threat. All the great religions have their share of fundamentalists. And, for themselves to practice what they wish is their right. However, if they wish to coerce others into the same practice then they take the first step towards the sins performed by Antiochus.

No matter our faith tradition, let’s share the commonalities of our sacred traditions, and equally appreciate their diversity. In this way, we truly better bring God’s light to our world because we will be able to see that each different person is different, and yet all equally created in God’s image.

Shabbat Shalom,

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