

Weekly Teaching

December 23, 2016

This week — perhaps because winter has officially begun — I was especially cognizant of how dark the early mornings have become.

It feels colder; the roads wetter, the pot holes larger.

It would be so easy amidst the winter gloom to lose focus on God's light during this season of longer darkness.

And, yet, amidst the darkness we have our Festival of Lights, our Feast of Dedication (Chanukah).

When nature feels more oppressive we are ritually trained to remember all of God's great miracles.

In 167 B.C.E., our land was under military occupation by Syria.

The occupation was intended to both physically and spiritually oppress the Jewish People, with the overt desire to make Greek culture the dominant force for all Peoples in the land.

This foreign culture to the Jewish People affirmed a belief in many "gods", and the King of Syria declared himself to be one of the gods.

He called himself Antiochus Epiphanes (Antiochus — the manifestation of god.)

Since Jews only believe in the one and only "true living God," those who had fidelity to their faith refused to bend to the will of Antiochus.

So, Antiochus began to increase his pressure of religious oppression.

He placed statues of himself in all of the towns throughout the countryside, and ordered all Jews to bow down to his image and likeness.

In his most blatant overt act of religious totalitarianism, he placed an idol in the Great Jerusalem Temple itself, and then had a pig sacrificed on the altar so as to make the entire Jewish Temple ritually unfit, and thus the Jews would be unable to worship there.

One of the priests of the Temple, Mattathias, fought back.

He fled to the hills of Judea and organized the resistance to Antiochus, and his son Judah brought many other Jewish men to the hills in order to fight.

Judah was nicknamed "Maccabee," which means "the hammer," because the people began to see Judah as the "hammer of God."

The Apocryphal Books (which include 1 and 2 Maccabees) describe in detail the numbers and types of soldiers each side had in this battle.

Judah's troops were far outnumbered by the Syrians, and they were poorly armed.

But, they nevertheless assaulted the giant, well-trained, and well-armed Syrian army.

This army was trained in the fighting style of Alexander the Great, and they even had elephants that they used as both cavalry and a weapon by which to stampede the Jewish troops.

However, the Syrians lacked the most important assets for this battle.

They were the invaders; their cause was unjust, and they were not inspired by a fidelity to their "One true God."

The Jews possessed the necessary assets needed for a miraculous victory, and they manage to cast out the invaders, and restore the free practice of our Judaism.

The Temple was ritually cleansed and the Great Temple of Jerusalem was rededicated by the Jewish People.

According to tradition, there was found enough oil to light the Temple's eternal lamp for only one day, and it would take several days to prepare more oil according to prescribed ritual procedures.

So, God performed yet another miracle, and the small amount of oil that was found burned for eight days; long enough to ritually prepare the new oil that was needed.

It's this Chanukah story that especially catches our Jewish imagination; for it's the metaphor for our collective historical Jewish experience.

Throughout the dark periods of Jewish history and oppression we have not only found God's light for ourselves, but lived our spiritual mission to be a "light upon the Nations."

There will always be an "enemy" that would darken our horizon.

Sometimes we need to physically battle evil, but always we spend our energies by which we can effectively push aside the pervasive darkness. We perform our acts of Service to God and all of God's Creations.

It's why we light the special Chanukah Menorah with the shamash; the servant candle.

The other eight branches of the Chanukah Menorah commemorate the eight day miracle of the long-burning oil.

But, these candles are not lit without the "Servant" candle.

Blessings cannot be recognized without the service of the Shamash.

So it is with our own lives, our mission is to be the Shammash within God's world, to provide service on behalf of God by which we bring God's light more brightly within our lives.

It's why the Psalmist declared:

God's law is a lamp for our feet; a light for our path.

We have taken an oath and confirmed it; that we will follow God's righteous laws.

This Chanukah let's kindle our lights, and express gratitude for the blessings that are found within our lives.

Let our Chanukah observance prompt us to more greatly consecrate our lives as "servants" of God.

And, with our holiday observance, I think we can all feel that it really is less dark and cold outside, and our Divine path doesn't have any potholes.

Happy Chanukah and Shabbat Shalom,
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