

# Weekly Teaching

## November 30, 2018

Soon, we celebrate Chanukah, our Festival of Lights.

Light is a very important element in many different religious traditions and holidays.

Light is a symbol of the Divine Presence within our lives, and our constant desire to cast away the darkness of gloom and despair, and replace it with the brightness of hope and renewal.

It is not coincidental that Chanukah comes in December; the darkest time of the calendar year.

While nature may have diminished the sunlight within our day, we light our Chanukah menorah as a public testimony that God's light is never diminished when we are here to pursue holiness in our lives.

2200 years ago, King Antiochus tried to force his pagan religion on us. But, led by Judah the Maccabee, we revolted and defeated the overwhelming forces of Antiochus' Syrian armies.

The importance to Western Civilization of our Jewish victory can't be underrated.

If we had lost and subsequently been assimilated to the surrounding pagan Greek culture, there would be no Judaism, Christianity or Islam today.

Our defeat would have stymied the entire ethical evolution of the Western World.

When we light our Chanukah menorah, we recall that when the Maccabean army got to Jerusalem, they found that the Syrians had desecrated our Temple.

The Temple's "eternally lit" Menorah—the seven branch lamp-stand that was a main feature of the Temple—had been extinguished and needed to be rekindled.

According to rabbinic legend there was only enough oil to keep the Menorah lit for one day, but a miracle happened, and it stayed lit for eight days until there was the opportunity to get more oil.

It is important to recall that approximately 250 years after the Maccabean rededication of the Temple, it was subsequently destroyed completely by the Romans.

Eventually, after this cataclysmic destruction, the Jews rose in revolt against Rome, led by Bar Kokhba. Unfortunately, this revolt was crushed, and there was a huge and horrible slaughter of the Jews.

After the crushing militaristic defeat, the rabbis pursued more pacifist means to resist Rome. Wanting to avoid Chanukah's emphasis on the Maccabees military victory, they chose to stress the "miracle" of Chanukah—that God saves the spirit of our People, no matter the circumstances.

We publically light our Chanukah lights, originally with oil, but in the Middle Ages we began to use candles like our Christian neighbors.

When we kindle the "lights", we are marking the light of God's Presence.

There are three main Jewish concepts on “light”:

1. The light of day.
2. Light, as a manifestation of God’s presence.
3. God’s light can be shared with all human beings.

In the Book of Ecclesiastes, the blessing of wisdom is “seeing the light of God’s face...The light shines for the righteous.”

In the Book of Isaiah, God tells us that the mission of our Jewish lives is to be “a light to the nations”.

The traditional Priestly Blessing, recited constantly over our children: “May God cause the light of his countenance to shine upon you.”

The light of God’s presence is our greatest of blessings.

When God said at creation, “Let there be light,” and there was light, God saw that it was “very good.”

What God created was both the normal light of nature, but, also the supernatural light; the light of God’s presence that is for the “good”.

Our concept of light in Judaism is also present in the Christian religion.

You can read of this concept in Christian Advent hymns, and also in common Christmas Carols.

A common Christmas ritual tradition is to light 4 candles around the circumference of their wreath, one for each of the four Sundays of the Advent season.

An additional white candle is then lit in the middle of the wreath.

Their interpretation is that the first candle stands for the Hebrew prophets; the second Candle for their Christian prophets; the third for Mary; and the fourth candle is lit for all people.

The fifth candle is lit to symbolize “God’s light coming into the world.”

Christmas for Christians is their particularistic celebration of God’s light, and Chanukah for us is our particularistic celebration of God’s light.

When Christians and Jews gather together; sharing respectively our particularistic light; we enable the mitzvah of accessing universalistic light that is God’s presence in our lives.

The light of God shines brightest among us, when we can foster understanding, tolerance and peace, not just between our sibling religions, but among all of humanity.

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Chanukah!

Rabbi Mitch

[rabbimitch@templesholom.com](mailto:rabbimitch@templesholom.com)