

FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH

“DON’T LET THE LIGHT GO OUT”

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READING FROM 1 MACCABEES – verses 36-59

³⁶ Then Judas and his brothers said, “See, our enemies are crushed; let us go up to cleanse the sanctuary and dedicate it.” ³⁷ So all the army assembled and went up to Mount Zion. ³⁸ There they saw the sanctuary desolate, the altar profaned, and the gates burned. In the courts they saw bushes sprung up as in a thicket, or as on one of the mountains. They saw also the chambers of the priests in ruins. ³⁹ Then they tore their clothes and mourned with great lamentation; they sprinkled themselves with ashes ⁴⁰ and fell face down on the ground. And when the signal was given with the trumpets, they cried out to Heaven.

⁴¹ Then Judas detailed men to fight against those in the citadel until he had cleansed the sanctuary. ⁴² He chose blameless priests devoted to the law, ⁴³ and they cleansed the sanctuary and removed the defiled stones to an unclean place. ⁴⁴ They deliberated what to do about the altar of burnt offering, which had been profaned. ⁴⁵ And they thought it best to tear it down. . . So they tore down the altar, ⁴⁶ and stored the stones in a convenient place on the temple hill until a prophet should come to tell what to do with them. ⁴⁷ Then they took unhewn stones, as the law directs, and built a new altar like the former one. ⁴⁸ They also rebuilt the sanctuary and the interior of the temple, and consecrated the courts. ⁴⁹ They made new holy vessels, and brought the lampstand, the altar of incense, and the table into the temple. ⁵⁰ Then they offered incense on the altar and lit the lamps on the lampstand, and these gave light in the temple. ⁵¹ They placed the bread on the table and hung up the curtains. Thus they finished all the work they had undertaken.

⁵² Early in the morning on the twenty-fifth day of the ninth month, which is the month of Chislev, in the one hundred forty-eighth year, ⁵³ they rose and offered sacrifice, as the law directs, on the new altar of burnt offering that they had built. ⁵⁴ . . . it was dedicated with songs and harps and lutes and cymbals. ⁵⁵ All the people fell on their faces and worshiped and blessed Heaven, who had prospered them. ⁵⁶ So they celebrated the dedication of the altar for eight days, and joyfully offered burnt offerings; they offered a sacrifice of well-being and a thanksgiving offering. ⁵⁷ They decorated the front of the temple with golden crowns and small shields; they restored the gates and the chambers for the priests, and fitted them with doors. ⁵⁸ There was very great joy among the people, and the disgrace brought by the Gentiles was removed.

⁵⁹ Then Judas and his brothers and all the assembly of Israel determined that every year at that season the days of dedication of the altar should be observed with joy and gladness for eight days, beginning with the twenty-fifth day of the month of Chislev.

SERMON: DON’T LET THE LIGHT GO OUT

The Jewish celebration of Hanukkah recalls the miracle of the lights – how the Temple menorah once burned for eight days when there was enough oil for only one. The miracle is part of a much larger story of a people fighting to overcome occupation and oppression, a story of armed struggle for religious freedom. The passages from 1st Maccabees describe what the Jewish fighters found upon returning to

the Temple, and what they did to restore it as sacred space. This is what happened before they entered the Temple.

In 200 BCE when the King of Syria defeated the King of Egypt in battle, Judea became part of Syria. The Syrian King wanted to win the favor of his new Jewish subjects so he guaranteed their right to "live according to their ancestral customs" and to continue to practice their religion in the Temple of Jerusalem. Less than three decades later, when the King's son succeeded him on the throne, Syrian forces invaded Judea. The Second Temple in Jerusalem was looted and religious services ceased. Judaism was effectively outlawed. A few years later, the King ordered an altar to Zeus erected in the Temple. A revolution followed led by Jewish priest Mattathias and his five sons. It was Mattathias' son Judah who became known as Yehuda HaMakabi ("Judah the Hammer"). The Jewish revolt against the Syrian monarchy was successful. The Temple was liberated and rededicated. The Jewish people reclaimed their right to "live according to their ancestral customs" and to practice their religion in the Temple of Jerusalem; no king's guarantee required.

Fast forward to the United States today, to the 21st century landscape in this religiously pluralistic nation. Within Jewish tradition, Hanukkah has been a minor holiday. For some, it has become something of a counterbalancing force to the dominance of one of the two major holidays of Christianity. Its proximity to Christmas affects the way it is viewed, and how it is described. Some refer to it as the Jewish Christmas. In this shopping season retailers from K mart to Macy's offer traditional Hanukkah decorations and holiday items - menorahs and dreidls and gelt - along with more modern ones. . . .like Hanukkah bushes, some in the shape of trees and some in the shape of menorahs, and various ornaments and yard decor including a Frosty the Snowman look alike once identified to me as Smiley Shalom.

In this holiday season, there are many ways to share both the meaning and the celebration with family and friends.

In this holiday season, there is a particular way in which the challenge of religious freedom is present.

This counterbalancing of Christmas and Hanukkah highlights the dilemma in which many in our country who are not Christian find themselves – being both part of and apart from the dominant culture.

For Jews at the time of the Maccabean revolt, the freedom to worship god as they understood god called them to disobey the laws of the government under which they lived, take up arms to secure their freedom, reclaim and rededicate the sacred site at which they worshipped.

In some places today, religious freedom is a matter of armed struggle with religious identities being used to define who is my enemy and who is my neighbor.

In these days in this country, religious freedom is often framed in the context of separation of church and state. For this framework we can give a nod to Thomas Jefferson, that small u unitarian – content, as he said, to be a unitarian by himself – who was the author of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom.

Law suits and court cases are filed over prayer in public schools and in the meetings of city councils; over the location of religious holiday displays; over public displays of religious symbols from the Ten Commandments to the crèche; over whether or not corporations have a religious identity and, if they do, what their exercise of religious freedom means. Legal questions are raised over the rights of individuals to health care and health care information vs. the rights of religiously affiliated hospitals or other facilities to determine care based on religious belief/doctrine.

In these days in this country, religious freedom is tested not only in the courts. It is tested by a lack of tolerance for difference. And more it is tested by lack of understanding and lack of respect for

difference. For a Muslim woman who wears the hijab. A Sikh man who carries the kirpan, the “ceremonial sword” An atheist who declines to affirm “one nation under God”

In an article published in Sh’ma magazine in 1992 and reprinted recently on the website My Jewish Learning, Rabbi Philip Cohen (currently serving Agudas Israel Synagogue Hendersonville NC) wrote,

“It’s true we have Hanukkah, whose fortunate arrival as a winter solstice holiday has blessed us with the American-Jewish Christmas . . . in the Jewish pantheon a nothing yontiff (the yiddish word for Jewish festival)” when “great bubbe and zayde back in the shtetl may have given some gelt, played a bit of dreidl and lit the menorah but probably not much more. . . .In the American open society . . . in the cultural place in which all Jews live some of the time and in which most Jews live all of the time – Hanukkah symbolically is exactly what it isn’t in reality: The Jewish Christmas.”

The irony is unavoidable – a holiday born of a struggle for religious freedom has become for some a defense against the cultural domination of another religion and for all of us an experience of the imperfections of religious freedom. In this season with a wealth of holidays representing a diversity of faiths and practices, we are reminded that religious freedom is a work in progress.

Whatever your celebration this season, make a place in it to light one (or one more) candle – a candle for freedom, for tolerance, for respect. Light one candle for this truth – that we are one human family, on one fragile planet, in one miraculous universe, bound by love and called to know our own truth by the paths we choose.