

“Hanukkah: Eight Gifts for the Soul”

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Many years ago, when Arline Sutherland served as minister of the Winchester Unitarian Society, she had an unusual experience. As she was leaving the building, she found on the stone steps a large, red velvet box. Curious, she opened it to find the figure of a lion shaped into a gorgeous bronze menorah.

Perhaps the menorah was left behind by accident, some thought. But this box appeared on the steps right before Hanukkah was to begin. And she saw someone rushing away from the building just as she opened the door, a member of the congregation.

Some believe they know who gave the menorah. But the loved ones of this benevolent suspect affirm that even if he were the one, he would want to remain anonymous, lest word of his generosity cast a shadow over the magic of such an unexpected gift.

Since the menorah’s arrival, the mystery of its appearance remains. As we do not know for certain who gave our congregation its menorah, we don’t know why they gave it or what the celebration of Hanukkah means to them.

And some might wonder why one would give a menorah to a Unitarian congregation. Here we are, gathered on Sunday morning, following a Protestant-style of worship, in the glow of stained glass. The menorah is used in the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah. By all appearances, this is not a Jewish congregation.

Yet Unitarian Universalism is a pluralistic faith. We find meaning and wonder in the world’s religions. And beyond our openness to many paths to wisdom and peace, our congregations include people who have practiced and do practice traditions beyond Unitarian Universalism. Whether you are as some say “a recovering Catholic” or part of an interfaith family or deeply engaged in Buddhist practice outside of worship here: much of the pluralism we cherish comes through the life experiences of those who create the congregation.

So we do not celebrate Hanukkah just because we are open to Judaism. We celebrate Hanukkah because we are Jewish. And Christian. And Pagan...and then some. A Unitarian Universalist congregation in the South once had a sign in front of their building reading “A Christian, a Jew and an Atheist walked into a church...We call that ‘Sunday.’”

The annual celebration of Hanukkah begins tonight at sundown so we are invited to turn our hearts and minds to this sacred time. While the long arms of my faith tradition embrace Judaism, I was not raised in the Jewish tradition. So I am grateful to Judy Lipperman for meeting with me and sharing her experience – and books from her library – to help me better understand the practice of Hanukkah.

The subtitle of one of these books, by Shimon Apisdorf, gives us the title of today's reflection: "Eight Gifts for the Soul."¹ What does the Festival of Lights, lasting for eight nights, offer those who celebrate?

Hanukkah grants us the gift of history. Like many religious holidays, Hanukkah is celebrated to commemorate a specific event.

Throughout time, the Jewish people have been persecuted by many cultures and regimes. While some sought to enact genocide against Jews, the Syrian/Greek regime, led by Antiochus IV sought to force Jews to adopt their cultural norms – to pray to Greek gods and to abandon Jewish practices such as circumcision and eating kosher. Jewish women who wanted to marry were forced to submit to Greek soldiers before they could wed. Studying Torah or following Jewish customs rendered one vulnerable to death. The Greeks ransacked the Jewish temple and defiled it by installing an altar to Zeus and slaughtering pigs inside.

Mattathias, a faithful Jewish man, challenged these assaults against his people when he refused to bow before Greek gods. His son, Judah Maccabee, went on to lead a successful revolt and reclaim the temple. Traditionally, the name "Maccabee" is understood to refer to Torah passages. Celebrating Judah's power, others associate it with a Greek word for "strong" or a word meaning "hammer."

Once they liberated the temple from the Greeks and won the right to practice their faith in freedom, the Jews rededicated their sacred space. As the story goes, it would take eight days to create new holy oil for the temple lamp, the menorah. They found a small jar of oil, only enough to last one night. But mysteriously – miraculously – the oil burned for eight, just enough time to make more oil. Another unexpected gift.

Thus, the name "Hanukkah" for this annual commemoration, means "dedication." It also means "they rested on the 25th," referring to how the battle to reclaim the temple ended on the 25th day of the month of Kislev.²

Hanukkah also grants us the gift of ritual. Like many holidays, each element of the commemoration is full of meaning.

Part of the ritual aspect of Hanukkah is its timing. It begins at the time in the year when the Maccabees vanquished the Greeks, often correlating with winter solstice. In *Seasons of Our Joy*, Arthur Waskow observes that this is a moment when

the sun is also in exile. The day is at its shortest and the night at its longest, before the sunlight begins to return. It is the darkest moment of the year, the moment when it is

¹ Apisdorf, Shimon. *Chanukah: Eight Nights of Light; Eight Gifts for the Soul*. Leviathan Press: Baltimore, MD. 1997.

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hanukkah>

easiest to believe that the light will never return, the moment it is easiest to feel despair.³

Lighting the menorah is a ritual to be performed at home at sundown, with all the family present. For every night of Hanukkah, another candle is added to the menorah, placed from right to left. The shamash or “attendant” candle is lit and blessings are said over the candles. Using the shamash, the menorah candles are then lit left to right. They are required to burn for at least a half hour.

No one may work while the menorah is burning. It is said that the menorah candles themselves cannot work so one may not read by the light of a menorah. This is one reason why there is a shamash, to labor on behalf of the other candles.

Unless it would put the family in danger, Jews are commanded to place their menorah in a window or outside by their front door so they can “publicize the miracle.” Rabbis were clear about the expectation, writing that “even a poor person who is supported through charity must beg or even sell his clothing in order to purchase oil to light.”⁴ As I prepared for this service, I saw a powerful photo on-line, a black-and-white image of a menorah in a window, across the street from a government building in Nazi Germany, a courageous act in itself echoing the courage of the Maccabees.⁵

Hanukkah grants us the gift of home and family. By coming together to bless and light the menorah candles, members of Jewish families reenact a holy miracle in their most intimate space. Freedom from work allows families to relax and play together, to strengthen their identities as Jews and their bonds with one another.

Hanukkah grants us the gift of women in spiritual leadership. Traditionally, women were prohibited from leading religious rituals. Yet, the story of Hanukkah is a story of how women in particular suffered under the dominion of Greek men. The Maccabean revolt also includes the account of Judith, who tricked Holofernes, a Syrian-Greek general into falling asleep and assassinated him. For these reasons, women are not just invited but obligated to bless and light the menorah candles.⁶

In some North African Jewish communities, the seventh night of Hanukkah is celebrated as the Festival of the Daughters in honor of Judith. One Reconstructionist Jewish website encourages families to light a separate menorah on the seventh night with one candle each for:

- Judith and all Jewish women heroes throughout history
- Women heroes that you admire, by name
- Women teachers and spiritual leaders whom you know

³ Waskow, Arthur. *Seasons of Our Joy: A Modern Guide to the Jewish Holidays*. Beacon Press: Boston, MA. 87.

⁴ <https://reformjudaism.org/publicizing-miracle>

⁵ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hanukkah#/media/File:A+menorah+defies+the+Nazi+flag+,+1931\(1\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hanukkah#/media/File:A+menorah+defies+the+Nazi+flag+,+1931(1).jpg)

⁶ Waskow, Arthur, 97-99.

- Jewish mothers and grandmothers, including your own
- All Jewish girls
- Your family
- And the Shekhinah, the indwelling presence of God in every person (In Jewish mystical tradition, the Shekhinah is depicted as female).⁷

Hanukkah grants us the gift of food: There is a joke about how many Jewish holidays follow the same formula: “They tried to kill us, we survived, let’s eat!”⁸ Yet, holidays of many faiths and cultures are defined by their signature treats.

As oil is central to the Hanukkah narrative, fried foods are part of the tradition, such as Sufganiyot or jelly donuts and potato latkes. Another way Judith is remembered and celebrated is through enjoying cheese dishes as it is said that she sedated Holofernes with cheese and potent wine.⁹

Hanukkah grants us the gift of play. When I met with Judy, she reflected on how Hanukkah is a holiday often celebrated in ways to delight children. One tradition is playing dreidel, a game using a four-sided top. The Hebrew letters on the top spell out a phrase: “a great miracle happened there.” In Israel, some dreidels spell “a great miracle happened *here*” instead.¹⁰ Tradition says that when Torah study was prohibited, Jews at study would pull out their dreidels and pretend to play if Greek officials came by.

Giving children money is also a Hanukkah tradition. In Eastern Europe, it was customary to give children money to give to their teachers at Hanukkah. Eventually, families also gave children money for them to keep. Now it is common to give children their *gelt* as chocolates shaped like coins. These chocolate coins make great tokens to use while playing dreidel. Giving gelt was supported by some rabbis as another way to “publicize the miracle” of Hanukkah.¹¹

In our time and culture, it is common for people to exchange gifts during Hanukkah. This is merely the influence of Christmas; there is no traditional meaning behind this practice.¹²

Hanukkah grants us the gift of human dignity. It is fitting that our menorah is in the shape of a lion. Often a symbol of strength, courage and majesty,¹³ in Judaism the lion represents the tribe of Judah, although not Judah Maccabee but Judah from the Hebrew bible.

At its heart, the story of Hanukkah is a story of Jewish self-determination and religious freedom. A story of not just military strength and courage but also cultural strength and courage. Of

⁷ <https://www.ritualwell.org/ritual/chag-habanot-festival-daughters>

⁸ <https://henryabramson.com/2013/08/02/jewish-history-1-1-they-tried-to-kill-us-we-survived-lets-eat/>

⁹ Waskow, Arthur, 99.

¹⁰ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dreidel>

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hanukkah_gelt

¹² Apisdorf, Simon, 14.

¹³ <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/10001-lion>

defying those who seek to render you invisible or powerless through claiming your faith and loving your God, no matter the risks. Hanukkah is a story specific to the Jewish people yet universal, familiar to any community that has sought to claim safety and equality in times of oppression.

Hanukkah grants us the gift of faith. On a Reform website, Leon Morris reflects on the spiritual meaning within the celebration of Hanukkah. He asks:

What is the miracle that we publicize? It is most certainly deeper and more profound than the fact that the oil burned longer than was expected. Lighting that ancient menorah in the Temple while knowing that new oil could not be procured for eight days was ultimately an act of hope in a time of utter despair. It was a statement that the future is not predetermined, that the world can indeed be different.¹⁴

Thus, Morris reminds us that reclaiming the temple was a profound act of faith by people who, in the moment, held on to a fragile victory. That they were driven by vision, by belief in the impossible. That something larger than themselves was present in this turn of history and destiny.

This presence of the divine is subtly reflected in the practice of lighting the menorah candles over eight nights. There were two schools of thought about the ritual – one proclaiming that Jews should light all eight candles on the first night and reduce the number for each night that follows and another affirming that the number of candles to be lit should grow over the eight nights. The symbolism of beginning with one candle and ending with eight - which was eventually accepted as protocol - is that the presence of the divine grows as time progresses.¹⁵

Like many religious observances, celebration of Hanukkah is complex and sometimes contradictory. I was surprised to learn that this holiday, founded on a story of reclaiming Jewish life and identity, originated among Jews who, in the eyes of other Jews, were less faithful, more assimilated into Greek culture. The oldest surviving accounts of the Maccabean revolt were written in Greek, by people who were some of the first Jews to convert to Christianity.¹⁶ Thus, Rabbis were careful to focus on the miracle within the Hanukkah story, glorifying God, over celebrating the military triumph of the Maccabees, a community of Hellenized Jews.

The timing of Hanukkah inspires the question of whether it began as a Solstice celebration. There are differences of opinion about whether the Jewish people claimed a pagan practice for their own.¹⁷

And, in our own time, Hanukkah has emerged as a more significant holiday because of the widespread celebration of Christmas, falling around the same time of year. Addressing

¹⁴ <https://reformjudaism.org/publicizing-miracle>

¹⁵ Waskow, Arthur, 94.

¹⁶ Waskow, Arthur. 90.

¹⁷ Waskow, Arthur, 92-93.

thousands of years of religious history, British writer George Monbiot observed “the Christians stole the winter solstice from the pagans, and capitalism stole it from the Christians.”¹⁸ In brief, to use a “ten dollar” seminary term, Solstice and the contemporary celebrations of Hanukkah and Christmas remind us that faiths and cultures are *syncretic*, heavily drawing from one another and creating something distinct.

While our menorah has not been part of congregational life every year, the blessing of its arrival is undiminished. Once given, a gift may never be ungiven; once occurring, a miracle of enduring light may never be extinguished.

Over the next eight nights, candles will fill menorahs around the world until the final night when all eight are standing, along with the shamash, just as ours is this morning. May the Festival of Lights, be celebrations of great joy. May the miracle be known by all.

¹⁸ <https://quotefancy.com/quote/1533496/George-Monbiot-The-Christians-stole-the-winter-solstice-from-the-pagans-and-capitalism>