



Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

HANUKKAH: WHAT TO DO WHEN THE WAR IS OVER

We live in remarkable and challenging times. Globally, the Cold War has ended and new tensions are rising in trade wars and human rights across the globe. Eastern and Central Europe are groping to redefine their identities and to develop the kind of democratic and free institutions that will allow their people to thrive.

In our beloved Israel, peace appears fragile and under assault. Israel and the Palestinian Authority continue to try to refine the peace agreement to offer real hope (for the first time in Israel's half century of struggle to exist) for a lasting and just peace that recognizes the right of the Jewish people to a homeland in Israel.

The tension is balanced by hope: domestically, the walls that kept women out of the halls of power and prestige continue to fall — with women functioning as politicians, doctors, lawyers, judges, business leaders, and professors. It is no longer surprising to see women as authority figures.

Even the age-encrusted hostility against racial and ethnic minorities and homosexuals appears to be on the defensive in many quarters.

So many barriers have fallen, and so many are in the process of crumbling, that a new and unpredictable problem faces us today: we are skilled at living in a world of conflict and opposition, but we're less adept at thriving in a world of peace.

Hanukkah is the festival about adjusting to peace. The Maccabees faces a war to assure the future and survival of the Jewish people, and their struggle against the Syrian/Greeks and Antiochus Epiphanes culminated in the liberation of the Holy Temple and the Holy City of Jerusalem.

Girding for the fight required discipline and diligence. The entire Jewish people — women, men, and children — had to mobilize their arms, hearts, and minds in the service of the cause. And when the dust had settled, the Jewish people had won. The Temple was ours; our freedom was re-established.

That's when the true challenge began. It's easy to win a war when the enemy is clearly identified and external. But when the enemy is indifference, ambivalence, callousness, habit, or a desire to be like the others, the battle becomes much more difficult, because the enemy is much more elusive and subtle. Enlistment of enthusiastic partisans is much slower when the enemy is within.

The real task of the Maccabees was to take the enthusiasm and skill that the Jewish people showed in wartime and to sustain their passion in order to win the peace. After all, what would have been won if we got the Greeks to let us practice our religion but couldn't get the Jews to bother implementing its more demanding mitzvot: feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, maintaining one law for the Jew and for the strangers in our midst, pursuing justice. What was the point of winning the right to study and to teach, if no one took the time to learn that the equality and dignity of humankind is based on our reflecting God's image, each and every one of us? Why cleanse the Temple if it couldn't provide sanctuary for those needing to cling to its altar?

Winning the peace is a far greater challenge than winning the war. "Hanukkah," which means "dedication" is about securing the peace.

We, too, live in an age where how we respond to the challenges of peace will determine our survival as a species, the wellbeing of the planet, and the possibility of true justice around the world.

As Jews in the United States, we are free to practice our faith, free to study our holy writings, free to live by the mitzvot, to cultivate an intimacy with the Holy One, free to be a light to the nations. The only impediment standing in our way is our own unwillingness to break through indifference, ambivalence, and self-centeredness.

Being a Maccabee means summoning the dedication necessary to win after the fighting stops. Now, in a time of relative peace and prosperity, is the time to turn our attention to the perennial issues plaguing our progress: illiteracy, poverty, bigotry, greed and objectification.

Now is the time for us to cleanse the Temple of our society. It is time to let our lights shine.

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