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Tyrants Disappearing—A Hanukkah Meditation

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Hanukkah (הַנּוֹכַח [h^anukāh]) is a Hebrew word that means “dedication.” It is used in the Bible for the dedication of holy objects, such as the altar (cf., e.g., Num. 7:10), or for the dedication of holy places, such as the walls of Jerusalem, which formed the boundaries of the Holy City (cf., e.g., Neh. 12:27). As the name of a Jewish holiday, Hanukkah refers to the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem to its proper function as the place for worshipping the God of Israel. This rededication took place in the second century B.C.E., and the reasons for which the Temple required rededication were traumatic events that threatened the existence of the Jewish people and that have informed the practice of Judaism ever since.

During the second century B.C.E. the Jewish people in the land of Israel were ruled by a tyrant named Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Antiochus was a man who, though being powerful, was afraid of many things. Antiochus was afraid that his empire would be attacked by external enemies. He also feared that his empire would be undermined by enemies within. Antiochus ruled over many peoples whose customs and language and religion were

different from his own, and being a tyrant, he decided that the best way to deal with his fears was to enforce religious and cultural uniformity throughout his realm. Abhorring diversity, Antiochus decided that all his subjects should adopt a single identity, and the thing that would give coherence to this new pan-imperial ethos was worship of the gods according to Greek custom.

Antiochus' xenophobic tendencies were particularly at odds with Jewish identity and Jewish custom. Whereas the other peoples under Antiochus' thumb worshipped many gods (and so could afford to add a few more) and were more flexible in their manners of worship, the Jewish people worshipped a single god according to the commandments he had given them in the Torah. Therefore, while it was relatively easy for Antiochus' other subjects to adapt themselves to his whims, the Jewish people were caught in a bind: they could not remain loyal to their God and simultaneously obey the decrees of their king. Some Jews, of course, went along with the king's commands. Many of those who did so were members of the upper classes, even including some of the most prominent priests, since the wealthiest leaders of the Jewish community benefitted the most from good relations with the king. But, much to Antiochus' displeasure, many Jews refused to abandon their ancestral customs or to worship other gods. So furious did Antiochus become with his recalcitrant Jewish subjects, that he attempted to stamp out Judaism completely and to entirely erase Jewish identity. Antiochus banned the practice of circumcision, he prohibited observance of the Sabbath, he burned scrolls of the Torah, he converted the

Temple in Jerusalem into a pagan shrine, and he forced Jews to sacrifice to pagan gods.

Hanukkah celebrates the astounding—some might say miraculous—reversal of fortunes that saw the liberation of the Jewish people from the tyrannical rule of Antiochus Epiphanes and that witnessed the rededication of the Temple for the worship of the God of Israel.

Hanukkah, then, is a distinctly Jewish holiday, and I am not a Jew. Nevertheless, every year I celebrate Hanukkah, kindling the Hanukkah candles and watching them shine their light on cold December nights. And every year I reflect on the message of the Hanukkah story. And this year, in the aftermath of the brutal murders at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, which took place in a year that saw a dramatic rise in anti-Semitic attacks in the United States, I want to invite my readers and friends to reflect upon the message of the Hanukkah story too, and perhaps even to kindle Hanukkah candles of their own in solidarity with our Jewish neighbors, so that they will know that they are not alone.

What exactly the message of Hanukkah is, however, has been the subject of debate that is as ancient as the earliest sources that tell the Hanukkah story. The story of Hanukkah is told in two ancient Jewish histories that have been preserved in the Catholic Bible. They are *First* and *Second Maccabees*. *First Maccabees* was written from the perspective of the royal Hasmonean family, the family of Judas Maccabeus (or Judah the Maccabee) who defeated the forces of Antiochus Epiphanes in battle and whose brothers succeeded him as rulers of a free Jewish state. *Second*

Maccabees, while expressing a favorable opinion of the Hasomean family, it is not royal propaganda, and therefore it is the every-day sorts of people, rather than the members of a single chosen family, who are the heroes of the Hanukkah story. As the author of *Second Maccabees* tells the tale, God delivered Israel on account of the many faithful Jews who endured punishment, torture, even death rather than forsake their religious identity or their God.

As might be expected from a history commissioned by and for the Hasmonean family, *First Maccabees* touts the glory of their military victories in an extremely patriotic in tone. *First Maccabees* interprets the message of Hanukkah as one of nationalism: the Jewish people prevailed because of their innate excellence, and therefore Hanukkah should celebrate and accentuate that excellence.

Second Maccabees, on the other hand, interprets the message of Hanukkah as one of humanism: Hanukkah is the celebration of the inalienable right of every human being to worship according to her or his own conscience. Hanukkah commemorates the resilience of the human spirit in the face of tyranny. The message of Hanukkah is that hatred born of fear and ignorance may triumph for a time, but the divine light revealed in human dignity will never be extinguished. It is, of course, this more universalistic interpretation of Hanukkah that appeals to me. And not only do I find it appealing, I believe the Hanukkah message is one that is largely absent from American evangelical Christianity, and that this gaping hole in the heart of evangelicalism works greatly to its detriment.

The fact is, many Christians in the United States, especially those of the evangelical persuasion, have a warped sense of religious freedom and of religious persecution. There are Christians who believe that it is their right and, indeed, their responsibility to impose their religious norms on other people and on society at large. This type of Christian feels persecuted when his ability to enforce his views on others is denied. To give one minor example of this warped mindset, I still hear old-timers grouse about how prayer is no longer allowed in public schools. Even that complaint is not strictly true. Private prayer is impossible to prohibit, and even voluntary student-led group prayers are permitted. What has been prohibited in public schools is mandatory school-sponsored prayer in which all students are required to participate.

Given a moment's thought, it becomes clear that this prohibition on mandatory prayer in public school is a fair and just policy. Schools are public institutions which are attended by students from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. As public institutions, schools should not favor one religious or ethnic or cultural group over another. But instituting mandatory prayer in public schools would do just that. Must Jewish students and Muslim students and Hindu students pray in the name of Jesus? And even if we did choose to impose Christian prayer on every public school student, what type of prayer should that be? Should it be a Roman Catholic style of prayer? Or must they all pray like Episcopalians? Or Methodists? Or Baptists? Or should the State impose a bland style of prayer that is inoffensive to any religion (which, I suspect, is what Antiochus Epiphanes attempted to do)?

But then, even if we satisfied all the religious students, what about non-religious students? Why should they have to pray at all? Banning mandatory school-sponsored prayer in public school may not be the only solution to this problem, but taking religious instruction out of the hands of public institutions is certainly the most acceptable, reasonable, and practical approach.

Unfortunately, the warped sense of religious grievance among evangelical Christians, goes far beyond school prayer.

Evangelical Christians have been putting up a stink about how the government ought (or ought not) to define marriage, about who ought (or ought not) to have access to contraception, and about not being allowed to discriminate against clients, patrons, and customers who practice a lifestyle they don't approve of.

They even want to be the ones to decide whether a person is a man or a woman. Wouldn't the persons who inhabit the bodies know their own genders best? Their warped sense of religious grievance has turned many evangelicals into disagreeable meddlers in other people's private affairs.

I believe the celebration of Hanukkah could be the remedy to this disagreeableness. We Christians need an annual reminder that, as beautiful and true as the Gospel message is, we are not the only ones to have experienced the love of God or to have been touched by the hand of providence. And because Christianity does not possess the total sum of religious truth, we still need to learn about our brothers and sisters who belong to other faith communities. We need to learn from them as well. Above all, we need to learn that imposing our religion on another person or group of people is not merely disagreeable, it is a form of

tyranny. And tyrants do not fare well in the history of redemption. Tyrants like Pharaoh, or Nebuchadnezzar, or Antiochus, or Pontius Pilate are always the villains, and they always receive their comeuppance.

As the Jewish people celebrate the rededication of the Temple this Hanukkah, perhaps we non-Jews could take the opportunity afforded by Hanukkah to rededicate ourselves to resisting the impulse toward religious tyranny. As we kindle the Hanukkah lights perhaps we could pledge ourselves to actively oppose tyranny (religious or otherwise) whenever and wherever it manifests itself. In that way we could begin to place ourselves on the right side of redemption history. It will not guarantee that we are the heroes of the story, but at least it will prevent us from being on the side of the tyrants.

How to Celebrate Hanukkah: A Goy's Guide to Kindling the Hanukkah Lights

One of things that makes celebrating Hanukkah so enjoyable is its simplicity. Little more is required than reciting a few blessings, lighting some candles, and lingering in the Hanukkah light. And, because I didn't grow up with it as part of my tradition, Hanukkah isn't laden with all the emotional baggage that comes with the holidays I did grow up with. Hanukkah is free of expectations and obligation. So for me Hanukkah is a low key celebration. It is also free of the taint of commercialism which tarnishes nearly every Christian holiday in our country.

This year (2018) Hanukkah begins at sunset on Sunday December 2nd and continues for eight days, concluding at sunset

on Monday, December 10th.

To celebrate Hanukkah all you really need is a good supply of candles. You can buy a package of specially made Hanukkah candles, which will ensure that you have the right number (you'll need 44 over the course of 8 nights), or if you can't find those, you can use birthday candles. You want small candles because every night you're supposed to let them burn out. In this way each Hanukkah candle shines only to give Hanukkah light.



Click [here](#) to download a booklet of Hanukkah readings.

The candles are placed in a Hanukkiah (sometimes called a Menorah), which can be any kind of holder that will house up to nine candles. The middle candle is used to light the others. Each night of Hanukkah an additional candle is added until on the eighth night the Hanukkiah is full. Again, you can either buy a Hanukkiah or make one of your own. If you do construct your own, be sure to use safe, non-flammable materials. (Clicking [here](#) will take you to a website for some creative [DIY Menorah](#) ideas.)

Before lighting the candles, the following blessings are recited:

Blessed art thou, O LORD our God, King of the Universe, who sanctified us with his commandments and commanded us to light the Hanukkah light.

Blessed art thou, O LORD our God, King of the Universe, who performed miracles for our ancestors in those days at this time.

On the first night of Hanukkah this blessing is also recited:

Blessed art thou, O LORD our God, King of the Universe, who has given us life and preserved us and brought us to this occasion.

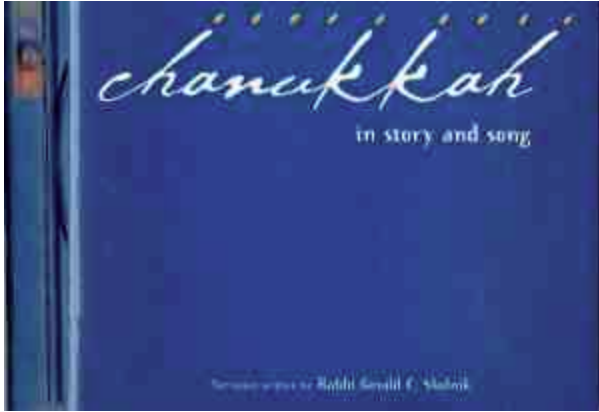
After reciting the blessings, light the candles, take in their light, and reflect upon the message of the Hanukkah story. My wife and I often do this by singing “Maoz Tzur,” a traditional Hanukkah song that spells out the meaning of Hanukkah quite clearly.

Here’s a YouTube video of the song:

That’s all there is to it. In case you want some help celebrating Hanukkah, I’ve made up a [free booklet](#) with readings (mainly from *First* and *Second Maccabees*) for each night of Hanukkah.

If you’re very ambitious and more skilled in the culinary arts than I am, you could try making some traditional Hanukkah foods. My wife makes excellent latkes. She uses the recipe for Ashkenazi Potato Latkes found in Janna Gur’s *The Book of New Israeli Food: A Culinary Journey* (New York: Schocken, 2007), 243. And Sufganiyot, or “Hanukkah Doughnuts” (recipe in *ibid.*, 240), are a whole other reason for making Hanukkah part of your life.





Click [here](#) to visit the Western Wind website, where [Chanukkah in Story and Song](#) with Leonard Nimoy can be purchased.

Finally, I enjoy listening to the NPR special *Chanukkah in Story and Song* narrated by Leonard Nimoy and sung by the Western Wind vocal ensemble. There's something thrilling about having Mr. Spock of *Star Trek* fame share the story of Hanukkah with NPR listeners.