



Hannukah Gifts

Meditations for each night of Hannukah, offered by Rabbi Margaret Holub on behalf of the Jewish Voice for Peace Rabbinical Council.

The victory celebrated by the Hanukkah festival was actually a short pause in a huge historical struggle. The Maccabean Revolt did not end the oppression of Jews, nor did it ultimately protect the sanctity of the Temple. It was a moment to regroup in the midst of a long ordeal, a moment for the revolutionaries to take a breath and (at best) to rededicate to the overarching values which drove them, whatever life and history had ahead of them.

So too today Hanukkah can be seen as a moment to catch our breath in the midst of a long struggle and to rededicate ourselves to our own core

values. This past year has been a painful one on Israel and Palestine -- with the horrors of the Gaza war, the escalation of settlement activity in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, the resumption of retaliatory home demolitions and acts of very public brutality against both Palestinians and Jewish Israelis. At the same time it has been a year in which the Presbyterian Church-USA very publicly voted to divest from companies which promulgate the occupation, and other religious and academic groups have also supported boycott and divestment; when several European countries have moved to recognize a Palestinian state; and in which our own Jewish Voice for Peace has grown dramatically in numbers and in programs to bring about a just peace in Israel and Palestine.

This particular Hanukkah also falls during the shmita year, when we are called to rein in our drive to expand and consume, to forgive debt and to share our resources for the good of all. We might draw inspiration from this year of rededication as well to sustain our souls and our community for the long work of bringing a just peace to a drained and parched land.

In this spirit, here are eight Hanukkah gifts, one for each night -- eight little sparks of renewal to help sustain us for the long road. We might wish to reflect on these, either in our own hearts or with our family and friends, while our faces are reflecting the light of the Hanukkiah

- ❧ -

The First Gift: Smallness

The Maccabees were a small band, facing off against the full power of global Empire. Their strength was not in their armaments or numbers; it might even have been in their very smallness -- the courage of standing up in their local-ness, their relative poverty, their distance from the centers of power, standing up as who they were and where they were.

Tonight's gift is the power that comes from witnessing to what we know to be true, even against powers which seem vast. We might reflect as well on our heroes and teachers and allies, many of whom have stood up alone, or in small numbers against imperial power and have brought justice and peace closer. We might consider the possibility that our smallness, and our bravery in standing up in the face of power, might itself be a source of strength.

The Second Gift: Fellow Travelers

According to legend, the Maccabean Revolt was started after one old man, Matatياهو, took up arms. His five sons joined him, and they in turn raised up an army of their neighbors.

Tonight's gift is noticing how our community of resistance grows, from one person to another, one small group to another. We might wish to think about those who learn from us, who are inspired and motivated and organized and brought together by us. And we might also consider those who have engaged and inspired us and who make our activism possible. We might consider the power and meaning of those bonds in our own lives.

The Third Gift: The Honor Of Sacrifice

The Beit Hamikdash, the Holy Temple, was above all a place of offering. On its altar gifts were offered up to give thanks, to atone for wrongdoing, to seek healing or enlightenment, and to maintain the holy flow of time. The most urgent act of the Maccabees, once the battle was won, was to restore the desecrated altar and return to the life of sacrifice.

Tonight's gift is to see the beauty of our own offerings in service of justice. We might consider that it is an honor to be able to offer our resource, time, intelligence and at times even our physical well-being to seek a just peace in Israel and Palestine. We might also reflect on and honor the sacrifices of others, especially those who maintain the struggle for a just peace for all the peoples of Israel and Palestine in the face of terrible personal and communal oppression.

The Fourth Gift: Half-Light/Half-Dark

This is the mid-point of the Festival, with four lights lit and four dark. Whether you light your menorah in the fashion of Hillel (as do most menorah-lighters today,) kindling one candle the first night up to eight the last, or in the fashion of Shammai, who lit eight candles the first night and reduced the light each time to a single light on the final night, there is always a balance point.

So too for us, the gift of balance: there are times when our energy and passion for justice is soaring in intensity, and there are times when we are barely flickering. There are people in the struggle

who burn hot and fast, and there are others whose light is small but steady. Tonight we honor both states and all others in-between. There are times to blaze outward and times to dim down. Tonight we might contemplate the long career of our own energy for justice and peace -- its times of brightness and its cooler times -- and honor the balance of both states.

The Fifth Gift: Unexpected Strength

There was that little cruse of oil that should only have burned for a day but blazed for eight! So too we are stronger than we know, and so are those around us. We have it in us to endure more than we think we can, to offer more than we think we have. And so do our friends, our allies, our companions in struggle, our leaders and teachers. We might consider the nature of that capacity to stay strong even when we think we can't. What is its source for us?

The Sixth Gift: Change

Little dreidl spin and spin... One turn and we come up nisht -- nothing. And the next time it's gantz -- everything...

Tonight we might consider that in whatever situation we find ourselves right now, it will not be the same tomorrow. And neither will the situations of people in Israel and Palestine. Change is constant. We control little of it, but our actions contribute to much larger currents. This has been a painful year for those who yearn for a just peace, with many losses. It will change. And change again.

The Seventh Gift: Night Vision

The seventh night of Hanukkah is always the darkest night of the year -- the mid-winter new moon. Most years tonight is the dark of the moon closest to the Winter Solstice. Jewish mystics teach that the dark of night is especially propitious for tikkun, cosmic repair. And so the especially pious have sometimes trained themselves to rise in the dark of night to pray for the healing of the world.

Tonight we can claim our ability to see in the dark. We don't need to be confused; we don't need to despair. We know how to find our way down the path using gifts and sensitivities we didn't know we had in lighter times. We can see and feel each other. We can trust our inner wisdom. We can guide and be guided. And the sun will rise in the morning.

The Eight Gift: Presence

"And Your word broke their sword/when our own strength failed us..."

Tonight as we light our final candle of the festival, we might wish to give thanks for the point of light that burns within, among and beyond us. We are not alone and never have been. We are part of our beautiful earth and the night sky, lives that came before our own, memories, song, our inner-ness, the bonds between souls, oxygen, all that sustains us and all that we sustain. This world has within it much pain; but it is so much more than pain. May we all be filled and renewed.