

Reflections for Chanukah

Sunset December 20 through Sunset December 28, 2011

Chanukah. How many memories come to mind when we just hear the word?

For so many of us they are memories of food, smells, conversations, blessings, and presents. There may also be memories of difficult times during the Chanukah season; a time of waiting for test results, a time of medical treatment, and of recuperation. The holiday spirit can be refreshing—welcoming another season with all its wonder, and it can be a deluge—a surreal contradistinction between the outer world of celebration and the inner world of challenges. No matter the circumstance, we are surrounded by a concentrated season of happiness. For some of us it is wonderful, for others of us it is burdensome.

If we are able to enjoy the season with little or no anxiety, Chanukah is a wonderful time filled with building more happy memories. All the foods, the sights, the smells and Chanukah story are easily incorporated into our lives. Equally, if our tradition is to remain sustaining, we need to weave it into our own life experience even when that experience is painful.

We learn that the Greeks, slowly but surely, enacted laws that limited Jewish expression. Judah Maccabee led a group of fellow Jews, underground, to fight a war against the Greek onslaught and won. We are told that once he liberated the Temple he re-dedicated it by lighting a lamp of oil. A small amount of oil lasted a full eight days and, thus, we have the miracle of Chanukah.

How can we apply this basic storyline to a life of treatment, diagnosis and all that it entails? Just as the Greeks tried to control the entire body of Jewish life with restrictive laws, we are sometimes caught with the control of medical appointments, pills, treatment options, and the like. The nature of metaphor is its flexibility to make a point. While medicine is, generally speaking, a vital part of sustaining life, it is not always curative. While it may be life-saving, it is not the whole of our own particular lives. A limited body can still bring a mind to soar. A limited body can still speak expansively. In other words, medical realities may define how we spend our time, but they need not define the fullness of how we live.

The Maccabees—despite the restrictions on their religious activity—studied and prayed while underground. How can we—despite the ways medical treatment may alter our lives—nonetheless re-dedicate ourselves to what we think is the most important? We can make choices for respite: listen to music, meditate, watch TV or a movie, play with a pet. We can call a friend and say “talk to me about you; I don't want to talk about myself today,” or we can turn off the telephone ringer for an hour. What are the ways you can-despite life's alterations-re-dedicate yourself?

May this Chanukah season bring a re-dedication to the respite we need and the warmth of sustenance in the challenges we face.

Excerpts © Rabbi Eric Weiss, Executive Director of the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center, a beneficiary of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties

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