

## **DEDICATED AND REDEDICATED**

**A sermon given in honor of Hanukkah by  
The Rev. Dr. Kelly Murphy Mason at UU Wellesley Hills on  
Sunday, December 2nd, 2018**

**Shortly after 4:12 pm today, when the sun sets over our region, the first night of Hanukkah will be ushered in by those celebrating the Jewish Festival of Lights. You and your household may be among them. It's customary for Jewish holidays to start in darkness, the night before the first day of any given holiday. I find the symbolism of that particular religious tradition incredibly rich — think of it: a holiday has to dawn on us. We have to wake to it. Hanukkah arrives quite early this year, so it effectively inaugurates the entire 2018 winter holiday season. These holidays help us to acknowledge that here in the northern hemisphere, we dwell in the darkest part of our year, when days are shortest and nights are longest. We need to light our candles, and for the eight successive nights of Hanukkah, we watch flames flickering above the menorah illuminate this special time.**

**Hanukkah commemorates the rededication of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem after the Maccabean uprising ended with its liberation from foreign occupiers in 166 BCE. During the occupation of the city, the temple had been defiled by the Hellenists, so the Maccabees needed to purify this sacred space and build a new altar. In the temple, they celebrated for eight days and nights. According to Jewish lore, although there was only enough consecrated oil to light the lamp**

for one night, that oil burned for eight nights in a row. The Maccabees considered this a miracle and the next year established a festival in honor of that. This is the same holiday that we celebrate millennia later by placing lit menorahs in the windows for all to see.

“Night after night, the candlelight increases,” Arthur Waskow notes in Seasons of Our Joy: A Modern Guide to the Jewish Holidays. “We experience and feel the turn toward light from the moment of darkness, the turn toward salvation from the moment of despair.” That despair does not defeat us even when most afraid it will, when our situation looks at once dim and grim. While it is a relatively minor holiday in the Jewish calendar, Hanukkah has come to occupy a larger place in the popular imagination, no doubt because its themes are timeless. Who among us has not needed to find a pivot point where we could turn away from despair?

In observant households, Waskow writes, there is always at least one menorah lit in the home, but in certain Jewish communities, the custom is for each person to light an individual menorah. Everyone lights the candles as soon as they possibly can following nightfall, speaking these three blessings in Hebrew: “Blessed be You... Who... commands us to light candles for Hanukkah”; “Blessed be You... Who worked miracles for our forebears in those days”; and “Blessed be You... Who has given us life, lifted us up, and brought us to this season.” After the blessings, several songs are sung, including one that proclaims, “these lights are holy”. During Hanukkah, special prayers are said and select psalms recited, all with the intention of consecrating this time.

**Another name for the Festival of Lights is the Feast of Dedication, which seems somewhat misleading. Hanukkah most importantly celebrates our human powers of rededication. The Maccabees were determined not to be defeated by the desecration of the Temple after its years of hostile occupation. They would light the sacred lamp with whatever they had on hand, however limited it might first appear. Waskow observes that “the single bottle of oil symbolized the last irreducible minimum of spiritual light and creativity” available to the community, and that even “that tiny amount could unfold into an infinite supply of spiritual riches. Infinite, because the eighth day stood for infinity” in Jewish numerology. Infinite too because the darkness could not, would not ever overtake the light.**

**As you undoubtedly recall, this fall there was a mass shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh that left eleven dead. It was the deadliest attack on the Jewish community in the history of the United States, and fed by vile anti-Semitic rhetoric and sentiment. Recent years have seen an uptick in hate crimes nationwide. Local areas have witnessed public buildings defaced with slurs and swastikas. This year, in some nearby communities, some Gentiles are celebrating Hanukkah in solidarity with their Jewish neighbors by placing lit menorahs in their own windows.**

**While I cannot be sure how well this gesture will be received - some rabbis disapprove of it, while others endorse the gesture - I can certainly appreciate the spirit behind it. As Unitarian Universalists, we hold Jewish teachings as an important source of our faith, and indeed, a number of UUs identify as Jewish themselves. This year,**

**Hanukkah speaks to our time and place in a way it might not have in past holiday seasons.**

**Sadly, the Tree of Life Synagogue was one of several American houses of worship targeted by gunmen this past decade. In 2008, the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Knoxville had shooter who killed two and injured seven in attendance. I was part of a UU Trauma Response Ministry team that was mobilized in the wake of that tragedy, and one of my assignments was supporting congregants re-enter the Knoxville sanctuary the Sunday after the attack. One of the Tennessee Valley members wanted to take me on a tour before people started to arrive. It was a summer morning, and the interior was suffused with sunlight, and she showed me the places in the walls where the bullets had made holes. Then she told me something that has stayed with me ever since. She said, “This is a beautiful church.” I noticed she used the present tense. “I can see that,” I replied.**

**In the end, I did not spend the morning in the church, but at the synagogue just next door. Members of the temple had loaned us their space to broadcast the UU worship service to any overflow audience, and soon there was standing room only at both the church and synagogue. So many people from the community rallied to show their support. The volunteers at the synagogue couldn’t have been any kinder. As I was thanking them for gracious hospitality, the rabbi confessed how shocked he was by the shooting next door. “If something like that was going to happen here,” he said, “I just assumed it would happen to us first.”**

**There's less safety that any of us can assume anywhere these days, though I am loathe to admit that publicly. Some of you have told me how you now worry about coming to worship here at UU Wellesley Hills. Those we call lone gunmen are really domestic terrorists, and like all terrorists, they want us to be afraid. They want us to fear for our children at school, for our friends on the job and in nightclubs, for our neighbors during their worship times. The lethality of their weaponized hatred makes headline news and shatters lives across America, I know. They want to violate what we hold dear. They intend to desecrate what we have held sacred. Honestly, I cannot see how this is not a modern form of spiritual warfare.**

**Then I remember that the Maccabean rebellion against the prevailing norms of that time is precisely what made the original discovery of that lone vial of consecrated oil possible. Human history almost invariably contains horrors and triumphs alongside each other. The Hellenistic occupation of Jerusalem and Jewish territories was brutal and humiliating epoch, but the Maccabees nevertheless resisted foreign rule by force. The irony is that their history got preserved in the Greek scriptures, not in the Hebrew Bible. Otherwise, we might not tell their tale today. Obviously, it our bears repeating.**

**Over millennia, the details of that initial Hanukkah have been domesticated and considerably softened — we tend to abbreviate the violence and suffering and tragedy that provided the backdrop in Jerusalem. But it is a celebration of spiritual survival against unfavorable odds. “You have kept us alive,” neighboring Congregation Beth El testifies in its lovely Hanukkah liturgy. Year after year, the holiday has occasioned Jewish communities “finding**

warmth” and “nourishing hope where reason fails” by “rejoicing in the wonder of light” amidst darkness. Aren’t all these worth our attempting, too?

Real dedication requires repeated rededication — of ourselves and our institutions to our highest ideals and religious values. We probably ought to think of corruption and desecration as more routine matters than we do; every generation has had to contend with them. “Overcoming the... enemy, cleansing the polluted sanctuary, rekindling the extinguished lights is an almost miraculous endeavor,” Rabbi Jules Harlow tells us in Siddur Sim Shalom, the prayerbook for the United Synagogue of America. “It must be accomplished anew in every age.” Our own is no exception.

The recent attack on the the Temple of Life was largely politically motivated. While the Pittsburg shooter was virulently anti-Semitic, he also had right-wing objections to the stance that faith community took on immigration and the support and aid it provided refugees. Ten years earlier, the Knoxville shooter declared his political motivations in targeting the Tennessee Valley UU Congregation, decrying its liberal politics and affirmation of BGLTQ persons. In the aftermath, neither the synagogue nor the congregation surrendered its commitments, but instead, rededicated itself to them. “Be bold,” Lynne Ungar reminded us in her Hanukkah reflection — “declare victory, even when the temple is wrecked... Set lamps in the windows. Declare your presence your presence, your loyalties.” Let this holiday be your prompt.

**One leader in the Pittsburgh Jewish community noted that for her, the menorah has taken on renewed significance as a symbol visibility this Hanukkah. “It’s... something we light so that passersby can see... that feels like an act of resistance... We’re... showing we’re not afraid,” she said in a recent interview, “even with what has happened, we’re not afraid to put that symbol in the window and let people know in the boldest way possible that we’re still here.” Her defiance seems entirely in keeping with the original Maccabean spirit of the holiday.**

**Although Jews remain a religious minority in America today, they have not hesitated to make their faithful witness known in our country, most often for egalitarian and progressive causes. Even in the aftermath of such a tragedy, Rabbi Hara Person of the Central Conference of American Rabbis states: “There’s... an affirmation of our values... loving the stranger, helping the stranger, caring for the vulnerable... we won’t be scared into submission or scared [into going] against the values that we hold dear to us...” This year, the rabbi’s holiday plans have taken on a distinctly meaning; as she explains, “there is an increased sense that I have of fighting back against the darkness... That’s how I’ve been framing my Hanukkah,” she says. “Let’s come together and bring some light into the darkness and bring some love and some joy into times that are otherwise bleak.” Note that in Jewish observance, the rededication is always communal, something people share with one another and with their G-d.**

**So this Hanukkah, I believe it will be important for all of us in this faith community to consider how we can rededicate ourselves to living in allegiance with our highest ideals in a modern era marked by**

anxiety and fear and punctuated by moments of terror. Whether or not you actually light a menorah in your window, I wonder - how will you frame this Festival of Lights, for yourself and for your neighbors? How can each of us here at UU Wellesley Hills live out our call to struggle towards a better world and truly witness to what we hold most sacred? As Waskow declares in Seasons of Our Joy, “Hanukkah can become a resource to help us experience our moments of darkness whenever they occur... and strike new sparks.” Time and again, we will need to strike new sparks. It has to become part of our religious routines.

In his book To Life! A Celebration of Jewish Being and Thinking, Rabbi Harold Kushner contends, “even a little light can dispel a lot of darkness”. Over time, this becomes an article of faith, this belief that one by one, our individual lights can catch and shine and burn brightly. History is long and the Jewish calendar reflects that - today is the 24th of Kislev in 5779. Blessedly, the Jewish community has a pronounced awareness of its own survivorship, of exactly what it has survived, era after era, place to place. We would do well to learn from that. Jewish prayers make frequent mention of the season - what happened in that season in that time, for instance, and what it means for us to have been brought to this season. This morning, we began just another December day - but by the time we go to sleep, it will be Hanukkah, again. At 4:12 today, something subtle will shift. What will the holiday awaken in you this season? In me? In us, together? This is the time we have been given time to discover that...

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