

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, 405 Washington Ave. Albany, NY 12206

12.14.14 Sermon: "The Lamp Will Keep Burning"

Presenter: Rev. Sam Trumbore

Sermon

I begin with a meditation on Chanukah from a radical Jewish prayer book published by [Congregation Sha'ar Zahav](#) in San Francisco:

On Chanukah, Jews celebrate the victory of the Hasmonean fundamentalists who fought against the secular culture of Plato and Aristotle in order to preserve the rituals of the second temple. How can I praise a battle that I would oppose today? How can I **not** praise their victory, which helped preserve my own people?

The ambivalence of this meditation expresses my sentiments too. Hanukkah has not been my favorite Jewish holiday. I like latkes just fine and spinning a dreidel too. The menorah is very pretty and fun to light. But I object to celebrating a bloody military victory by fundamentalists for eight days. And I found out that the oil lasting eight days has no historical evidence to back it up. The reason for eight days was the delayed Sukkot festival and even that was a couple of years later to commemorate the victory.

But this year as I reviewed my Hanukkah notes, looking for inspiration, I saw something I hadn't appreciated before. It was an angle on the story I'd overlooked in previous years. And this dimension of the holiday gave it a whole new meaning for me; a meaning relevant for Unitarian Universalists.

A lot of what we know about Hanukkah comes from a book called First Maccabees excluded from the canonized books of the Bible, but included in extra source material called the Apocrypha. You heard a little of it in the reading today.

Palestine had been conquered by Alexander the Great in the summer of 332 BCE. After Alexander's death nine years later, his generals divided up the Greek empire. The Ptolemy got Egypt, Syria and Palestine. Because this area of the Middle East is a crossroads, it was continually fought over by other empires, with no one maintaining full control of it. Under Ptolemy rule, military units were stationed to repel attacks by the Seleucids and the Bedouins. Greek cities were established where they were garrisoned, and a fair amount of intermarriage occurred over the years between Jewish women and Hellenized soldiers.

By 221 BCE the Seleucid Syrian king Antiochus III invaded and finally gained control

until the Maccabean Revolt 53 years later. This is important because Antiochus III affirmed the right of Jews to live according to their traditions and laws. Thirty years later, however, Jews who favored Hellenization encouraged his son, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, to carry out their plans to Hellenize Jerusalem.

The key point here is that it wasn't just some arrogant occupying Syrian king who desecrated the temple and outlawed Jewish law and practice. Antiochus acted with the support of Hellenized Jews. And when Mattathias and his sons resisted, civil war ensued.

This is the part of the story that caught my attention. I was interested in how the conflict began in the first place. The king's officer strived to complete the Hellenization process. Mattathias resisted and said no. Then a Jew *in plain sight* defied him and offered a sacrifice on the profane altar. When Mattathias saw his defiance, he "burned with zeal and his spirit was stirred up." He killed him and the king's officer. The war began as a struggle within the Jewish community about assimilation.

The Hellenized Jews eventually lost so we don't get their side of the story. But I can imagine it. They must have been attracted to the sophistication of Greek culture that dominated their world. They probably enjoyed Greek philosophy. They enjoyed their food, the baths, the gymnasium, the body culture, and the cosmopolitanism.

And I'm sure you can recognize who would resist those trends: the farmers and the rural folk. These olive and wheat growers didn't live in those fun loving Greek cities and weren't being exposed to all the new ways and ideas.

That struggle between assimilation into the dominant culture versus retaining costly, even dangerous differences from the dominant culture continues to divide many peoples today. The Maccabees didn't settle the issue. Jews down through history have maintained distinctive marks, beliefs and practices that separate them from the dominant culture.

For most of their history, Jews have experienced exclusion and persecution. Only in Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth century Enlightenment period did they start having access to join the dominant culture. The Pogroms in Russia and the Holocaust in Germany and Eastern Europe in the twentieth century demonstrated that assimilation wasn't complete. They could still be persecuted mercilessly, even without identifying as Jewish.

The Jewish question today is the degree to which it is safe to assimilate into the dominant American culture. Will they be separated out again in the future or can they

truly become fully integrated into Western civic culture as part of the globalized world and enjoy the benefits of such affiliation?

There are parallels with what is happening in the Islamic world. Western European culture, rooted in Greek, Jewish and Christian religious ideas and philosophy, diverges significantly from Islam. Part of the Middle Eastern crisis today is a resistance to being assimilated into that Western European dominance. The Crusades are not a distant memory there. Yet many young people are more than happy to assimilate into Western culture with mixed success due to Western terrorism paranoia.

There are parallels with the grand jury decisions that refused to indict police officers for at least manslaughter. Agents of law enforcement are sanctioned with permission to harm and to kill those they deem dangerous to society. Even though many people of African descent have assimilated into the dominant white controlled society, they are still treated by police as a suspect criminal element, especially young black men. In that assimilation process, they can lose the distinct culture and heritage they enjoyed when they were excluded by segregation laws. In that loss of the affirmation of being part of a proud sub-culture, and without full inclusion into the dominant society, they can suffer both a loss of identity and a loss of meaning living in a limbo between worlds.

This struggle with assimilation and identity is also a problem for Unitarian Universalists. We are also a minority that suffers discrimination. Our non-Trinitarian Christian, non-creedal, approach to religion is not accepted by the mainline Christian churches. I'm grateful we live in a time of tolerance here in the Northeast. But in parts of the Deep South, our way of doing religion is not appreciated or welcome.

We have also suffered persecution during the 1950's and 1960's during the McCarthy era, during the Civil Rights struggle, and during the Viet Nam anti-war protests. Our congregations were spied on by the FBI and our congregations and members had their telephones tapped. The church in Los Angeles, for example, led at the time by radical socialist minister, [Stephen Fritchman](#), was harassed for a long time.

Have no doubt, it can happen again.

We also feel compelled to stand aside from the dominant culture and criticize it. Our principles critique nationalism, advocating for world community with peace, liberty and justice for all rather than American world domination for a few. We, as a Green Sanctuary Congregation, have a critique of materialism that degrades the ability of our planet to support life and advocates for the development of a sustainable culture that is not built around the endless growth of consumption. Being a welcoming congregation, we resist the homophobia in the dominant culture as well as sexual violence and

exploitation. We seek to dismantle systemic institutional racism and oppression. We have a strong critique of the military industrial complex that saps the economic strength of our society and promotes endless war. In all these ways we hold a vision of society different from the dominant narrative.

Yet we strongly affirm what I believe is foundational to American society: the separation of church and state. The state meddling in religion is what touched off the Maccabean rebellion. Yet when the Maccabees gained power in victory, they become corrupted by it, eventually making an alliance with Rome that led to their conquest. Christianity began its long process of corruption and suppression of dissenting voices following Emperor Constantine adopting the faith as the religion of the Roman Empire.

So the victory of the Maccabees against oppression can also be seen as a victory of liberation from religious oppression. People should be able to practice their faith without state interference. At the same time, the message of setting up one religion as the state religion is a really bad idea. Hanukkah can also be seen as an affirmation of religious pluralism that the Hellenized Jews wanted to end. Greeks and Romans were tolerant of religious diversity and willing to tolerate the Jews unwillingness to sacrifice to their Gods as well as their own.

So Hanukkah does have several ways it's complementary to Unitarian Universalism. And let's face it, Jews know how to celebrate holidays. I've heard it said that many of the Jewish holidays can be summarized as, "we fought, we won, thank God, let's eat!" Apples and honey for Rosh Hashanah, latkes at Hanukkah, Hillel sandwiches and matzos ball soup for Passover, what's not to like!

And so what if the tradition is a little fictionalized! What matters is having a story that may not be factually correct but carries metaphorical truth. Whether a lamp was actually lit and lasted for eight days, *the story that it did* is rich with meaning, the same way any fable carries meaning.

That fictional priest who lit that lamp with that wee bit of oil must have had a lot of doubt. I can imagine him shaking his head and thinking this will not work and God will be displeased. Rationally analyzed, it just can't happen.

Yet with each day the light remained lit, I imagine his faith strengthening. He begins to reflect on the other areas of his life where he has not risked because he just doesn't believe it is possible to do this or do that. Each day the lamp remains lit, he feels more and more energy, inspiring his vision and hope. So by the eighth day he knows beyond a doubt that great things are possible that are way beyond the capacity of his rational imagination. The only way we can know what is really possible is to risk and to act out

of an inner conviction.

That is sometimes how I feel as a Unitarian Universalist minister of a tradition that doesn't have a unified belief system, dogma, or faith. What has always united religious people is a common belief, a common faith and common religious practices. What we are trying to do here, living into a pluralistic approach to religious life, is completely new and different from how religion has been practiced before. Sometimes I feel like the priest must have felt on the second or third day. The light of our faith remains lit and we are holding our own as a religious association of congregations ... but the future is very uncertain. Will that inner light, that we feel within, remain lit, that we symbolize by this outer chalice? Can we remain relevant as a religious tradition and attract new people?

Today my experience and my belief tell me ... yes. Tomorrow is up to *all of you* and *your* continuing exploration and deepening commitment to our pluralistic path.

You will make it so and keep our lamp burning bright.