

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany  
**“Impossible Illumination”**  
 Sam Trumbore December 13, 2009

## Spoken Meditation

Spirit of Life and Love,  
 May the flames  
     that dances before our eyes,  
 Inspire us this morning  
     as we take strength and inspiration  
     from the light of the Hanukkah candles.

The religious freedom we enjoy blesses this gathering.  
 Much blood has been shed, and hardship endured  
     To allow us to gather here in peace  
     To choose our own way to celebrate all that is holy  
     To hold all that we cherish in our hearts  
     and speak our thanks in our own tongue.

May the story of the oil's endurance  
     burning seven extra days  
 Inspire our own courage  
     to believe we can do much, much more  
     that we believe is possible.  
 The miracle may not be in the physics  
     but in the imagination of those who kindle the flame.

May the flame of our inner spirit burn bright  
     as we give thanks this morning for the gift of life,  
     the opportunity to serve,  
     and the blessings of being loved  
     beyond our wildest dreams.

## Sermon

The first chapter of the first book of Maccabees tells the story of Jewish suffering under foreign oppression. Palestine had been conquered by Alexander the Great in 332 BCE. The territory was administered by the Syrian Seleucid rulers, but Judea remained a Jewish theocracy. Antiochus IV Epiphanes came to power in 175 BCE. Six years later he captured Jerusalem and a year later desecrated the temple and outlawed the practice of Judaism. Antiochus wanted unity in his kingdom.

The king sent letters by the hands of messengers to Jerusalem, and to all the cities of Judea: that they should follow the law of the [Empire], ...  
 And should forbid holocausts and sacrifices, and atonements to be made in the temple

of God.

And should prohibit the sabbath, and the festival days, to be celebrated....

And he commanded altars to be built, and temples, and idols, and swine's flesh to be immolated. (1 Macc. 1:46-50)

Those of us inheriting Euro-centric religious and cultural supremacy may not know what it feels like to have your religious practices prohibited, your holy places desecrated, and holidays and festival days outlawed. We Unitarian Universalists are a minority faith in this nation but we've never suffered like this.

One way we might be able to step into this story emotionally is with a thought experiment. Imagine an evangelical, fundamentalist Christian President coming to power. Imagine, that President wanting to reestablish our country as the New Jerusalem the Puritans sought to create. Imagine that President muscling through Congress a constitutional amendment decreeing that every religious organization would be required to display a crucifix at least six feet tall where the adherents worship. Any organization unwilling to do this would lose their tax exempt status and be subject to felony charges of national disloyalty.

What would your response be? Would you join an armed rebellion against this unjust law? Would you participate in civil disobedience and go to jail? Would you grudgingly put up the cross and go along to keep the congregation out of trouble? Would you be happy that Christians would be getting the respect they deserve in this congregation? If we put up that six foot Cross, would you take advantage of the display of this symbol and use it to join exclusive clubs that only admit Christians?

Hellenistic culture was very attractive to some Jews. Some were happy to build a gymnasium and get their penis' fore-skin recreated so they could pass as Greeks. (Men were naked in these gymnasiums so it was easy to see if someone was circumcised or not) After Antiochus outlawed the practice of Judaism, "many of Israel consented to his service, and they sacrificed to idols, and profaned the sabbath."

Others did not. Many Jews revolted starting in 166 BCE. The Hasmonean leader Mattathais, then, after his death, his son Judah the Maccabee, the Hammer, led a bloody two-year war of liberation.

The attractiveness of blending into the dominant culture lures those from an oppressed subculture willing to sacrifice part of their identity for inclusion and acceptance. There was a lot there for those syncretistic Jews to like. Studying and emulating those great Greek philosophers. Enjoying the pleasures of eating forbidden foods like shrimp, crab and pork. Ending the practice of male genital mutilation aka circumcision. Escaping from tiresome ancient rituals and obligations that had lost their meaning for them. Speaking an international language and traveling to exotic places. Hellenization had a lot going for it, just as blending in as a Christian does in certain parts of this country today.

The struggle to preserve the purity and practice of Judaism recurs again and again throughout Jewish history. Most of the apostate groups the Torah warns the reader about likely had Jewish followers. Worshiping the Golden Calf is attacked often enough to suggest

many Jews had adopted this practice of their neighbors. The Samaritans come in for scorn. The Roman and Greek beliefs are ridiculed.

The Maccabees revolt gets cleaned up as the Hanukkah candles are lit ... but the holiday has within it the story of a civil-war between a liberal, reformist faith and an orthodox faith. This problem isn't unique to the Jews. We have it here in our congregation too. For us, it focuses around words and symbols. Some dislike references to God from the pulpit. Some reject using the word worship to describe what we do here on Sunday. I offer a spoken meditation rather than a prayer. I've trained my tongue over many years to refer to us as a congregation and not a church. Fortunately, we don't kill each other over these disagreements. But people feel strongly about the language I use as your representative.

In actuality, this is a problem of identity *every* religion has. We see the problem at the core of the struggle right now in the Islamic world with extremism. Muslims are wrestling with just how much to absorb from the dominant Western culture and how much to reject. What practices and traditions are essential to Islam and what cultural artifacts can be discarded? When people of different cultures live side by side, the question always arises, "Do I assimilate to the dominant culture ... or do I hold on to the old ways?"

This was the problem for the rabbis of the Talmud, the record of rabbinic discussions pertaining to Jewish law, ethics, customs and history, as rabbis reflected on the history surrounding Hanukkah several hundred years later. They asked the question, *Mai Chanukkah?* (Shabbat 21b) A loose translation might be "What the heck do we do with this Hanukkah story anyway?" You see, first and second Maccabees, the texts that record this history were not canonized by the Jews into the Hebrew Bible. We receive those texts through the early Christian church (who didn't canonize them either). If the Hanukkah story was a central story, then why wasn't it canonized in scripture like so many other stories that have holidays?

And missing from first and second Maccabees is the miracle story of the flask of oil lasting for eight days.

Perhaps these rabbis knew a little too much about what happened after Judah the "Hammer" succeeded in retaking Jerusalem. Once the temple was reclaimed and cleansed, the first celebration immediately held was the delayed eight day festival of Sukkot, the most important festival of Temple times. This late festival seems to have morphed into Hanukkah.

The rabbis knew about the civil war between those who wanted strict observance and those who were attracted to the worldliness of Hellenism and assimilation, a struggle that continued under Roman domination. The Hasmoneans reestablished the monarchy of Israel, something prohibited for a priestly family. Ironically, They later became advocates of Hellenization. They were the family that invited the Roman Empire into a protectorate relationship with Israel, opening the door to much easier Roman Conquest. The Temple based Hasmoneans were also on the other side of the Synagogue based Pharisees who defined what has become contemporary Judaism.

The Pharisees had learned by the end of the First Century that military revolt was not

the path to preserve their faith. With the destruction of the temple in the First Century, I suspect they realized continuing revolt against Rome would be hopeless and self-destructive. Better to develop more peaceful methods to preserve their tradition in diaspora. Thus, one might see why the rabbis might want to edit the Maccabees out of the history to prevent hotheads from repeating it and refocus Hanukkah on something besides their military victory.

So the Talmudic sages put a new spin on the established holiday: God wrought a great miracle for the people, enabling the few to triumph over the many, and God showed the people another miracle in the oil, when a flask of ritually pure oil sufficient for one day lasted for all eight days. [http://www.kolel.org/pages/holidays/Chanukah\\_intro.html](http://www.kolel.org/pages/holidays/Chanukah_intro.html)

But the Maccabees story didn't die. And perhaps this is a different kind of miraculous story of illumination.

Had the Jewish religion been destroyed and the remnant tribes of Israel scattered by the imperialism of the Syrians, the whole world would have suffered. The major monotheistic religions of Christianity and Islam might not have been born. And, most important, the values embedded in those traditions might have been lost.

The Maccabees rebellion was an early demand for the right to practice one's religious tradition **even if** it wasn't the dominant culture's religious tradition. In the Greek and Roman Empires, there were a variety of religions practiced. Devotion and sacrifice were offered to a variety of non-Greek and Roman Gods. The empires accepted this because they also had lots of Gods. Each town had its own God protecting it. What they wanted was ritual sacrifice to their gods as a way of showing loyalty. The Jews rejected this arrangement because they were monotheistic, believing in only one God. They wanted the freedom to follow their beliefs and **not follow** other beliefs, particularly the deification of human beings like oppressive emperors. A polytheistic mandate was **not** an option.

We Unitarian Universalists owe a lot of who we are today to this belief in the free exercise of religion the Maccabees held so fiercely. In this congregation, **no one** can impose their religious ideas on another. Each of us is free from an institutional mandate that tells us what we should or should not believe. I **cannot** stand up here and tell you to believe in God or **not** to believe in God. I cannot tell you the correct way to pray, or meditate, or offer praise, or perform rituals. By mutual consent, we design a Sunday service that serves the goal of exiting the human spirit and inspiring its growth and development. We honor the uniqueness of each person's human spirit and the individual direction of that human spirit's growth and development. I don't have the answer for you. What I can do, and I hope I do do, is energize you and inspire you to find your own answers.

My message for you this morning is connecting that beautiful religious freedom we enjoy here, to the passion that drove those Maccabees to rise up and fight. They knew that it was wrong for one culture to impose their religious ideas on another. We Unitarian Universalists have taken that process one step further to say that no person or institution should impose its religious ideas on another person. We believe that our minds, hearts and spirits grow and develop best when we are directed from within. Our way is not the path for everyone. There are many people who grow their minds, hearts and spirits **best** when directed by religious authorities. And that is fine for them. They should have the freedom to

follow that religious path. Not us. That is not our way here.

Our way is a minority approach to religion. The impulse to say, “You're belief is wrong and my belief is right” is practically universal. I must guard myself against it constantly. In a world that primarily views human beings as sinful, defective, and in need of religious authority for correction and salvation, we stand apart. That fire of inner resolve and dignity the Maccabees had, that the authorities were wrong to impose their beliefs, still lives in us today. Following our Unitarian Universalist historical trail back to that time may seem difficult, or next to impossible, but some of their fire still burns in us today.

So, if part of your religious practice is to light the menorah, know that Unitarian Universalism continues to be illuminated by the light of those candles. And, if you would **never** think of lighting or want to light a menorah, know that Unitarian Universalism is right there with you too.

In that wide freedom we grant each other, may an appreciation, even an acceptance, grow for the value of the diversity of beliefs here and outside these walls. Rather than a hardening of the heart, may this freedom inspire a respect for the value others may receive through their diverse beliefs and practices. And may the fire of this freedom we embrace **become** the light of guidance that helps each one of us find and be guided by the great universal truths in us and around us.

## **Benediction**

Religious freedom is a precious right  
     that can be won with might and power.  
 But might and power **cannot** bring us  
     the inner freedom that will lead us to inner peace.

May all of us seek that inner freedom  
     through a free and responsible search.  
 May we support each other and  
     encourage each other in that search.  
 May we all find that inner freedom so  
     we may all know for ourselves  
     a peace that passes all understanding.

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