



Jewish Community Center of Paramus
Congregation Beth Tikvah
304 E. Midland Avenue – Paramus NJ 07652- 201.262.7691

A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Arthur Weiner

Friday, November 26, 2021 ~ Parsha: Vayeshev
The Gifts of the Maccabees

Dear JCCP/CBT family,

Let me begin by wishing you all a Happy Thanksgiving. As you may recall from previous sermons and articles that I have written over the years, I love Thanksgiving. The very idea of Thanksgiving, that is to say, stopping our daily routine and offering thanks and demonstrating our gratitude is at the heart of the Jewish tradition. The Hebrew word for Judaism is Yahadut, which is a noun form of the word L'hodot, which means to thank. This reminds us that regular expressions of gratitude are an important part of our religious responsibilities.

There are those who have tried to tie the original observance of Thanksgiving to the Pilgrims' understanding of the holiday of Sukkot. Though this idea has been around for years, if one is looking to root this great American holiday to something in the Jewish tradition, a better explanation is provided by recent scholarship that I shared with the congregation last year. There is reason to believe that William Bradford, an early leader who would later serve as governor of Plymouth Colony, possessed a Bible which contained the annotations of the influential Puritan scholar Henry Ainsworth, which added a practice codified by Maimonides in his law code Mishneh Torah, which obligates those who have completed a perilous journey to offer Thanksgiving for their deliverance. Indeed, the reference to Maimonides is actually written in the margins of Bradford's Bible. That's not to say that Thanksgiving is a Jewish holiday. But it does prove what we all know to be true: if you look hard enough you can find a Jewish connection to anything!

What I really want to talk with you about today is Chanukah. This may not be 2013, when the first night of Chanukah and Thanksgiving coincided, as you may recall. But this is still pretty early in the secular calendar to celebrate Chanukah, and rather than try to draw some connection between the two holidays, let's just say that this is a

festive time for both our American and Jewish identities. I want to talk about those two identities this Shabbat.

Chanukah occupies a very important place in Jewish history. How many of you know that Chanukah was the first Jewish holiday that was not ordained in the Torah?

Today, we have many holidays that were ordained after the canonization of the Bible. But the Maccabees were the first to add such holidays to the calendar.

You know that the Maccabees fought for religious freedom for the Jewish people.

They resisted the edicts that Antiochus Epiphanies and his Syrian Greek empire imposed that banned the practice of Judaism in Israel. The history books, and even our religious liturgy seemed to imply that this battle was a struggle between the Greeks with their Hellenized Jewish allies and traditional Jews who shunned any and all things Greek. There could be no compromise between them.

That reading of history is wrong. The truth is that while the Maccabees hated Greek oppression, and resisted their restrictions on the practice of Judaism, they were not opposed to all things Greek. Far from it! Indeed, several of the Maccabees themselves had Greek names. They were actually quite immersed in the larger Greek culture and life that pulsated throughout Israel since Alexander the Great conquered the Middle East 150 years earlier. Rather than being religious separatists as they are commonly understood, what the Maccabees did was to incorporate certain Greek practices into Judaism without sacrificing Judaism. The creation of the holiday of Chanukah, which celebrated the rededication of the Holy Temple after it had been defiled by the Greeks, imitated the practice of the Greeks to commemorate great military victories. The Maccabees, however, transformed it into a Jewish religious observance. This ability to take foreign practices and at times incorporate them into Judaism as we understand it, first introduced by the Maccabees, would characterize Jewish life in the Diaspora for 200 years. Even the restoration of the Temple after the Babylonian exile was not established as a holiday as we understand them. The establishment of Chanukah was an innovation without precedent. In essence, the Maccabees imitated a practice of their enemies, but incorporated it into Judaism. This was the historic contribution of the Maccabees: the introduction of Hellenic practices into Judaism without sacrificing Judaism.

In that sense, American Jews living in the 21st century are a lot more like the Maccabees than we might realize. We also live amidst a culture filled with amazing

ideas and exciting opportunities. We are also a small people within a larger diverse nation. And though the conditions for Jews in our time are far more benevolent than anything faced by the Maccabees, we too are challenged. Do we choose to assimilate and give up our Jewish heritage? Should we build high walls to insulate ourselves against contact with the larger currents of American life? Or do we, like the Maccabees, work to strengthen our Jewish identity even as we recognize the large influence that American life and culture play in our lives, and acknowledge that the way we understand our Judaism is also influenced by our full participation in American life. We understand that when it comes to Jewish life in America, it is not an either/or choice. Our Judaism is a judicious blending of both. We share much with the larger culture. And when necessary and wise, we make the best of the larger American culture a part of our Jewish identity as well.

This synthesis that we take for granted remains the great gift of the Maccabees. Let's remember that as we celebrate Chanukah this year as proud Jews, and proud Americans, fully comfortable with both of our identities.

Chag Urim Sameach—A happy Chanukah to you all.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Arthur Weiner