

The Mystery of Hanukkah ©

A sermon by Rev. Roberta Finkelstein

This month our Soul Matters theme asks us, “What does it mean to be a people of mystery?” That is a hard question for a faith community that claims the use of reason as one of our core values. We are skeptics at heart. So what do we do when confronted with the truth that there are mysteries embedded in our lives, and in creation itself? Mysteries that are not to be investigated, or, worse yet, solved. Mysteries that beckon to us, that invite us to leave our intellectual comfort zones, and even our physical comfort zones.

This evening our Jewish friends and neighbors will light the first candle on the menorah; the festival of Hanukkah begins. In a sense the lighting of the candles on the menorah is the ritual re-enactment of a holy mystery. One of many mysteries embedded in the narrative arc of Judaism. As the novelist and practicing orthodox Jew Herman Wouk wrote, “The tale of the Feast of Lights, with its all-too-sharp commentary on our life nowadays, is very colorful. The Hanukkah candles by law burn in the window so that the passer-by can see them. The sages call this ‘proclaiming the miracle.’ The legend runs that the Maccabees found in the recaptured temple only one flask of oil still intact under the high priest’s seal, and therefore usable in the golden candelabra. It was a single day’s supply. They knew that it would require at least eight days to get more ritually pure oil, but they went ahead anyway and lit the great Temple menorah. The oil burned, the legend says, for eight days. This Midrash is an epitome of the story of the Jews. Our whole history is a fantastic legend of a single day’s supply of oil lasting eight days; of a flaming bush that is not consumed; of a national life that in the logic of events should have flickered and gone out long ago, still burning on.”

But the mystery of the oil is all the way at the end of the story of Hanukkah, which is, by the way, a very minor Jewish holiday. Unlike other Jewish holidays,

Passover or Purim for instance, Hanukkah is not rooted in Biblical narrative; the story is recounted in the Book of Maccabees, which is not considered canonical by Hebrew scholars. According to Mary-Lib Whitney, Hanukkah was not even celebrated in its present form until well into the Christian era. “Jesus,” she wrote, “did not play with dreidels!” This minor holiday took on greater significance as the Christmas machine, particularly in America, pressured Jewish parents to offer their children a palatable alternative.

So in 21st century America, Hanukkah is recognized and celebrated, and the story has much to teach us about being people of mystery. Here is that story. Once upon a time, 168 BCE to be exact, there were Israelite people living in the Greek Empire, in a place called Judea. There was a modest community of merchants and teachers and farmers and shepherds. They had, over the years, endured wave after wave of conquerors, they had survived exile and restoration. You might say it is a mystery how they survived at all. Where did they find strength in the face of oppression? Resilience in the face of defeat after defeat? Why did they continue to practice their religion in the face of prejudice and repression? I would argue that it was the covenantal relationship between them and the God of their understanding, Yahweh, that made it possible for them to survive and sometimes thrive. There have been times throughout Jewish history when it took a huge leap of faith to do what needed doing to survive.

Richard Rohr says, “Many mystics speak of the God-experience as simultaneously falling into an abyss and being grounded. This sounds like a contradiction, but in fact, when you allow yourself to fall into the abyss – into hiddenness, limitlessness, unknowability, a void without boundaries – you discover it’s somehow a rich, supportive, embracing spaciousness where you don’t have to ask or answer the questions of whether you’re right or wrong. You’re being held, and so you do not need to try to hold yourself together.”

So these ancient Israelites, held in that faith covenant, just wanted to live in peace, practicing their religion undisturbed. They had built a temple in Jerusalem - nothing like the original temple of Solomon - but a place where they could worship God in the prescribed ways of the Torah. The Greek ruler at that time was Antiochus Epiphanes IV. Like every tyrant in every age, he considered non-conformists like the Jews a threat to his power and influence. Because he was well armed and well-funded, he decided that the easiest way to deal with this strange group of people was to wipe out their way of life. He marched into Jerusalem with an army and stormed the temple. The soldiers took the gold cups and dishes used by the high Priests, defiled the Temple, and attacked and killed anybody who tried to stop them. The army erected statues of Greek gods in the Temple, and ordered the Jews to bow down to them. They were told to stop studying the Torah, to stop keeping the Sabbath. Talk about living at the edge of an abyss.

But like many oppressed groups, the Judeans found ways to appear to obey while resisting. They had to save their own lives, after all. So they devised strategies for keeping their religion and culture alive in secret. When it became illegal to bring out the Torah to study, they made little wooden tops, and carved Hebrew letters into them. They kept the tops on the library tables, and when surprise inspections were conducted, they spun the tops and pretended to be playing a game. Yes, those dreidels that Jesus never played with were actually tools of the resistance. Today, the letters carved into their four sides are the Hebrew for "a great miracle happened there."

One morning the army arrived in the village of Modin, and set up a statue and altar in the village square. The villagers were forced to surround the square for the usual test of obedience. The village elder, Mattathias, was then ordered, on behalf of the entire village, to sacrifice a pig to the Greek god, and bow down. According to Jewish law, a pig is an unclean animal. To sacrifice a pig was to

defile oneself in a dreadful way. Mattathias was of the priestly Hasmonean family – his whole life and his family’s heritage was dedicated to carrying on the ancient worship traditions. He could not bring himself, even on pain of likely death, to obey the soldiers. He surprised both the villagers and the soldiers with his defiance, and some of the villagers were afraid of reprisals. One of them stepped up to make the sacrifice in his place, but Mattathias struck him down. He reminded his fellow Judeans of the commandment "Thou shalt make no false idols beside me." The soldiers, in fury, struck back at the old man. This galvanized his sons and the rest of the village into action. Judas, one of his sons, led the attack on the soldiers. They tore down the statue and chased the army out of town. This Greek army was so accustomed to obedience from their subjects that they had no idea how to respond to unexpected resistance. The villagers ran to the surrounding hillside, hid in caves, and planned their next move. And voila! Guerilla warfare. By using tactics of surprise, the Maccabees were able to resist the Greek army. Another mystery. How did a group of untrained and unarmed peasants outlast the empire? They certainly didn’t plan it out in advance; they didn’t calculate odds or do a SWOT analysis. When they spontaneously resisted and fled, they were essentially falling into mystery. The old way of life was gone in an instant. Their future was uncertain. They certainly hoped they would be held in covenantal embrace.

They fought courageously, and more Judeans joined them in their war of small battles, surprise attacks, and rapid retreats into the hills. It took three years, but eventually, the Maccabees won their war of attrition. The Greek army withdrew, and the Israelites were able to return to their homes. What they found when they entered the Temple grounds was a terrible sight. The doors had been burned, the altar was destroyed, and weeds grew in between the stones of the courtyard. Initially, they wept. Then they went to work restoring their holy site.

When the Temple was ready for use again, people came from all over Judea for a service of dedication - the word Hanukkah means Dedication.

The first miracle was that they survived at all. Now comes the second miracle. Judas Maccabeas searched for jars of sanctified oil to light the temple lamps. He discovered that they had only one small jar - enough for one evening only. They lit the lamp anyway, and it burned, miraculously, for eight days and nights. And here's where this sermon just falls apart. Soul Matters tells us that 'the roots of mystery point beyond the idea of a secret, hidden truth to an experience that renders us speechless. It comes from the Latin root *muo* – literally translated as shut the mouth or to be rendered silent.' But that isn't what happened to the Israelites. Rather than being struck mute by the miracle, they threw a party. For eight days and nights, they celebrated, danced, sang and prayed in gratitude for the restoration of their house of worship. Darn it all, this sermon writing can be a mysterious business.

But maybe that kind of response to a miraculous mystery doesn't ruin my sermon after all. For Soul Matters also reminds us of the Greek word *mystikos*: to shut one's senses and to enter the mysteries. For those eight glorious days of light and celebration, nobody asked, "Hey, did somebody mismeasure the oil? How come it is still burning?" In their joy and relief, they just gave their rational senses a little Sabbath, entered the spirit of holy celebration, and fell whole-heartedly and whole-souledly into the mystery.

The many holidays of December – Hanukkah, Solstice, Christmas – all have components of mystery in their narratives. Sure, I've seen the rational explanations for the Christmas texts. Spring, not December since shepherds only keep watch during lambing season. A comet. Yeah, yeah, yeah. But that's not the story we want to hear. Even here we retell the Gospel stories filled with angels and virgin births and strange gifts. Sure, the Solstice was born of originally of the yearnings

of ancient farmers and herders who needed to be sure that the warmth and light would return. But we don't celebrate Solstice by Googling meteorological data. We embrace the mystery of darkness and the mystery of light.

What does it mean to be a people of mystery? Perhaps this poem by UU minister Angela Herrera captures it best. It is entitled "Utterance of the Timeless Word."

You bring yourself before the sacred,
before the holy,
before what is ultimate and bigger than your lone life
bigger than your worries
bigger than your money problems
bigger than the fight you had with your sister and your aches and pains
bigger, even, than your whole being, your self who is
part of
and trapped within
and blessed with
a body that does what you want
and doesn't do what you want
and wants all the wrong things
and wants all the right things...

You stand at the edge of mystery,
at the edge of the deep,
with the light streaming at you,
and you can't hide anything—not even from yourself,
when you stand there like that,
and then...what?

Maybe you call your pastor and say,
What is this?
What am I looking at?
What do I do?
And your pastor comes and stands at the edge with you
and looks over.

She can't hide anything either, she thinks,
not even the fact that she doesn't know the answer to your question,
and she wonders if you can tell.

She thinks of all the generations who've come there before you
and cast words out toward the source of that light,
wanting to name it.
Somehow, she thinks to herself, the names stayed tethered to the aging world and
got old
while the light remains timeless and burns without dimming.

Meanwhile,
the armful of worries you brought to the edge of mystery
have fluttered to your feet.
Unobscured by these, you shine back, light emanating unto light.
You, with your broken heart and your seeking,
you are the utterance of the timeless word.
The name of the Holy is pronounced
through your being.