

SACRED SOUNDS

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Hanukkah 2015

Some Thoughts on Hanukkah

By Cantor Richard Wolberg



I am created by Divine Light,
I am sustained by Divine Light,
I am protected by Divine Light,
I am surrounded by Divine Light,
I am ever growing into Divine Light.
(Ascent Magazine, Concordia College)

To temper seriousness with some levity I came across the following anonymous quote:

*In the beginning there was nothing. God said, "Let there be light!"
And there was light. There was still nothing, but you could see it a whole lot better.*

John Kennedy employed the well known adage, "Don't curse the darkness; light a candle", in his acceptance speech at the 1960 Democratic Convention (excerpted):

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"...but I think the American people expect more from us than cries of indignation and attack. The times are too grave, the challenge too urgent, and the stakes too high — to permit the customary passions of political debate. We are not here to curse the darkness, but to light the candle that can guide us through that darkness to a safe and sane future. As Winston Churchill said on taking office some twenty years ago: if we open a quarrel between the present and the past, we shall be in danger of losing the future."

"Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

- Martin Luther King

Perhaps we can find inspiration in the following quote by Martin Luther King, and seek light that endures far longer than eight days:

Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.

May the coming secular year of 2016 obliterate darkness in the deep recesses of our soul and may our good deeds kindle light in the hearts of all our brethren everywhere.

Cantor Richard Wolberg served as the spiritual leader of Temple Beth El, Fall River MA from 1976-2012. He also serves as chaplain of the Fall River Police Department.



Hanukkah: A True Family Observance

By Cantor Ken Richmond

I just blocked off Chanukah on my Google calendar-- I made it a 4 hour appointment, and made it daily, to repeat daily and end "after 8 occurrences". I do my best not to schedule meetings and classes during Chanukah, or to skip them or come late. We tend to be kind of "old school" with Chanukah in our family, and each evening looks something like this:

Each person-- we're blessed with three boys, so the minimum is 5 of us-- has his own menorah and prepares the candles. We light the *shammes* and chant the blessings. We light the candles while singing *hanerot halalu*. Then, while we sing all 6 verses of *Maoz Tzur*, we process back and forth from the kitchen to the front windows, bringing one menorah at a time to rest on the window sill or table near the window. When my wife was growing up they also sang all six verses in the English translation, but we've lost that tradition.

After candle lighting, we sit on the couch, or the boys may dance around the room, and sing Chanukah songs. Sometimes we go around and each person takes a turn picking the next song. We do our best to sing every Chanukah song we know, in Hebrew, Yiddish, English, and Ladino, including *Drey Dreydele* by Moyshe Oysher, *Ocho Candelikas*, *Mrs. Maccabeus*, *Lots of Latkes*, and a long, and progressively faster round of *Mi Y'malel*. We do our best to sing until the long-burning beeswax Chanukah candles are burnt out or very close to it. Friday nights, of course, we light early, and save most of the Chanukah songs for after we've lit the Shabbat candles as well, and Saturday night, of course, we begin with *havdalah*.

We try not to make a big deal about presents, but between us and the grandparents, there tend to be presents more nights than not, which get opened after the candle-lighting and singing-- we try not to open presents before we've exhausted our song repertoire. At this point we fry latkes-- if we're lucky, the batter has been made before, or we have leftovers from previous days. I grew up with latkes as a side dish, but my wife is from the tradition that latkes serve as the main course, and between the various vegetables that may be added to the latke batter and the sour cream and apple sauce, it becomes a well-rounded meal. I think last year we succeeded in eating latkes every night; once or twice we gave up the sour cream and instead fried the latkes in *shmaltz*!

There are nice Chanukah moments in shul as well-- a big Chanukah party, and the menorah-lighting in the Hebrew school windows at the end of Hebrew School, for instance. But for me, my favorite Chanukah moments are the simple ones at home, sitting together with the family, singing Chanukah songs, and watching the candles burn.

Ken Richmond is the cantor of Temple Israel of Natick, MA. He and his wife, Rabbi Shira Shazeer, are raising their boys with Yiddish as their first language.

The Text of *Maoz Tzur* By Cantor Sam Weiss



The traditional Hanukkah song *Maoz Tzur* has acquired a special place in the Jewish heart, much like the Friday night *Shalom Aleichem* or the Passover favorite *Dayenu*. By singing it during the candle-lighting ceremony at home we integrate our household with our religion. *Maoz Tzur* has indeed first sung only at home. It took several centuries after its composition for it to make its way into the synagogue ritual.

The original *Maoz Tzur* comprised five succinct verses written by a 13th century Ashkenazic poet. All we know of the author is that his name was Mordechai, from how he "signed" the poem in the first letter of each verse the letter *mem* in *Maoz*, *resh* in *Ra'ot*, etc. Following the initial general stanza, four paragraphs describe four distinct moments in God's involvement in our people's destiny: in Egypt, in Babylonia, and during the crises commemorated by Purim and Hanukkah. A sixth stanza was added in the 15th century, apparently during a similar existential crisis. It asks God to avenge the persecutions of the current evil regime. Considering all the holidays referenced in *Maoz Tzur*, why is it sung today only on Hanukkah? Perhaps due to the word *hanukat* ("dedication") in the first paragraph mirroring the final Hanukkah paragraph of the original poem.

You may not readily come across the complete *Maoz Tzur*, let alone its complete translation. In boxes of Hanukkah candle as well as in many Conservative Siddurim only the opening stanza is printed. Sometimes the fifth (*Y'vanim nikb'tzu...*), specific to the Hasmonean victory, also appears. Even the familiar first verse often loses its force in translation. In contrast, here is the first stanza of *Maoz Tzur* in a very literal translation taken from the *ArtScroll Siddur*:

*Rocky Fortress of my salvation, it is delightful to praise You.
Restore my House of Prayer, and there we will give thanks with an offering.
When You have prepared the slaughter for the blaspheming foe,
Then I will complete with a hymn-song the dedication of the Altar.*

Since Hanukkah celebrates a difficult and costly military victory, it should not surprise us to read such vehement lines penned in an era when daily Jewish survival was a constant burning concern.

The commonly sung English version *Rock of Ages let our song...* is a clear departure from the original. Authored in America at the end of the 19th century, it is based not on the Hebrew but on an earlier "sanitized" German adaptation. While *tzur* does mean "rock," the word *maoz* derives from "power" rather than "age," so the first words signal that we are not dealing with a straightforward translation—especially since our tradition has a different liturgical counterpart for the term "Rock of Ages" (*Tzur olamim*). As the opening phrase of a Jewish hymn, moreover, "Rock of Ages" may have misleading associations with the famous Christian hymn by that name.

Why not enrich your Hanukkah celebration this year by tracking down and savoring the complete Hebrew and English text of *Maoz Tzur*?

Sam Weiss is the cantor of The Jewish Community Center of Paramus/Congregation Beth Tikvah. He is a contributing editor of The Journal of Synagogue Music, and writes the notes for "The Spirit Series: Voices of the Conservative Movement" CD albums.



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Hanukkah: An Identity Crisis?

By Cantor Jeremy Lipton



Why is this holiday different from all other holidays in the Jewish year...or, is it? It is ironic that Hanukkah's commercial significance figures so prominently in the secular world when in fact, in the context of our liturgical cycle, it is one of our minor holidays. There are no work prohibitions during Hanukkah, as there are on Shabbat, the High Holidays, or the major festivals of Pesach, Shavuot, Sukkot, or Shmini Atzeret. We do not fast or, afflict our souls, or engage in self reflection as we do on Tisha B'av or on Yom Kippur. In fact, there are very few ritualistic requirements that our tradition asks of us during this commemoration of the religious victory we experienced in the 2nd century BCE, described in our liturgy as a miracle of triumph of the few over the many and the weak over the strong. It is through the communal memory of that *hanukat habayit*, that rededication of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem at that time and in that place (*bayamim hahem baz'man hazeh*) that we experience the real theme of the holiday, the affirmation of our right of self-determination in our worship and ritual practices.

Historical and rabbinic sources allude to the connection of the celebration of Hanukkah to the Festival of Sukkot. Some accounts suggest that in the midst of the rededication of the Temple—the Jews were not able to make pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate Sukkot during the month of Tishrei because they were engaged in their battle for freedom—Sukkot was simply delayed several months until the 25th of Kislev, and their victory was combined with the weeklong rituals of the missed festival. There are also liturgical similarities between Hanukkah and Sukkot: we find analogous readings from the Torah each day of both holidays; we chant a complete *Hallel* (Psalms of Praise) during each morning service on both holidays; and both holidays require that the performance of that holiday's particular mitzvah is done outside the house—the lighting of the *hanukkiyah*, the holiday's nine-branched menorah, was traditionally done in the courtyard outside one's home, which corresponds with our dwelling in the temporary, outside structure of the sukkah.

The single, unique paragraph that is added to our prayers each and every day of Hanukkah, the text *Al Hanissim* (“For the Miracles”), a jubilant acclamation of thanks and praise, is almost identical to the additional liturgy we find on Purim! Both holidays use the Hebrew term *neis* (“miracle”) when describing the historical events that in each instance ultimately resulted in our religious freedom. Both holidays use the formula of three blessings in the carrying out of the primary mitzvah associated with each of them—the lighting of the *hanukkiyah* and the reading of the Scroll of Esther—with the last two blessings for each identical: ...*she-asah nissim la'avoteinu, bayamim hahem bazman hazeh*, praising God as the creator of miracles during those days and at that time; and both conclude with the blessing of *Shehecheyanu*, thanking God for preserving us to be able to celebrate together.

There are special foods that we enjoy during Hanukkah, associated with the story of miracle of the purified oil that lasted for eight days. It is our ability to thank God for our bounties, to celebrate life together, and to worship freely in the traditions of our ancestors that is the true nature of the holiday of Hanukkah. Actually, when I describe it that way, maybe it sounds more like Thanksgiving?! I think Hanukkah is having an identity crisis! Enjoy!! Chag Urim Sameach!

Cantor Jeremy Lipton is the Vice President, Administration of the Cantors Assembly, and serves Congregation Agudas Achim's vibrant community in San Antonio, Texas.



A Hanukkah Message

From the Cantors Assembly President

As our Festival of Lights approaches, I find myself more and more conflicted about the tale of the Hasmoneans holding off the Greeks, recapturing our Bet Hamikdash (the Temple), and cleansing it of all the *tumah* (unholiness), and miraculously finding a vial of oil that should have lasted one day, but lasted for a full eight days! You may wonder, wherein is your conflict in this inspiring story?

My grandparents were from Turkey, while my parents were born and lived in Greece, where I was born. Immediately, this sets off alarms every morning (or was that my Samsung Note 3 going off at 7AM) as I awaken to my first contradiction of the day.

Who am I, what is my life, where do I go, why me.....but I digress. The real conflict each morning is, can I live with myself? Am I really Greek, or is my blood tainted by my Turkish ancestry? I sometimes find myself slapping one side or the other of my face, depending on what choice I have made that day! Is life worth living? Again, I digress, and must leave these matters to my as yet undiscovered therapist.

Not being able to ever resolve these conflicts, I guess it is better to remember the wonderful hours spent with our daughter, Belina, in her formative years. Besides her being awestruck by a performance of a televised Tosca, from the Met, when she was four or five years old, some of the most inspiring moments of watching her grow were looking into her eyes as she gleefully took in the glow of the Hanukkah candles. Each night was more exciting than the next, until on the eighth night, all three of us couldn't help but feel awe, staring at the flames and all they represent, historically, emotionally, and aesthetically.

Yes, Hanukkah is a "minor holiday." But, as a time for family and historical introspection, it is only surpassed by Pesach. Living in a secular world, the values of Hanukkah and its message of the need for *g'vurah* (strength) and belief in *nissim* (miracles), can and does overpower the material message delivered by the mass media from even before Thanksgiving through New Year's Day.

Imagine living in a world with a *Medinat Yisrael* (State of Israel), and a *Yerushalayim* into which each and every Jew in the world can walk with pride. Imagine not having to imagine! May we see peace among all our people and the erasure of *sinat chinam* (causeless hatred) for which we paid a 2,000 year price. Let us pray for the strength and safety of, and never falter from, our love for *Medinat Yisrael*.

CHAG URIM SAME'ACH!
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