

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

“Mystery: Of the Light”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore December 2, 2018

Sermon

Inconsistent stories and instructions are troublesome in Judaism that is steeped in thousands of years of tradition. If Unitarian Universalism lasts that long, and I hope it does, maybe we'll have that problem too! The problem is the earliest texts we have of the Maccabean revolt against the Syrian Greeks around 168 BCE does not describe the miracle of the oil lamp lasting for eight days. When you consider the great detail found in Leviticus about dietary laws and how other holidays have detailed instructions about how they are to be celebrated, it is a little surprising that the lamp story is missing.

We do have texts that the Protestants dropped out of their Bibles describing the Maccabean rebellion. There are four books that describe this war that were written not long after it happened. Historians tend to give these texts a lot of credibility because of that. In these texts, at the end of the war when the temple was cleansed, they celebrated for eight days but no miracle with oil was recorded. Here is a description from Second Maccabees 10:5-9

It happened that on the same day on which the sanctuary had been profaned by the foreigners, the purification of the sanctuary took place... They celebrated it for eight days with rejoicing ... therefore, carrying ivy-wreathed wands and beautiful branches and also fronds of palm, they offered hymns of thanksgiving to him who had given success to the purifying of his own holy place. They decreed by public edict, ratified by vote, that the whole nation of the Jews should observe these days every year.

I wonder what the big deal about the oil is anyway. Since they had been banished from the Temple during the war and the altar had been profaned by sacrificing and roasting pigs on it, *did it really matter* if they had to wait another eight days for new oil to be prepared and sanctified? Or why not just light a wood fire and keep it burning? A new altar had to be constructed to replace the desecrated old one after all, and that must have taken some time too.

In those days however, there were very strict rules about how everything in the temple was done. They may have just decided to light the sacred lamp with whatever sacred oil they could find as soon as possible and hope for the best.

Now being the reality oriented person that I am, who likes rational explanations for things, I wondered about this story and cooked up a few ways it might have gone down. These priests might have liked really big flames on their eternal lamp to show how big and powerful their God was – whose presence the lamp represented.

Maybe they just trimmed the wick back so far that the flame was just a tiny light that indeed was able to last the full eight days. Another idea I've had is someone snuck in and added more oil as they were making it – so it was sanctified oil but they didn't wait till eight days were up to replenish the oil – just no one saw the deed being done. And of course if the story is made up in the first place, it doesn't need any explanation at all.

There is an argument for why the oil miracle story might have been introduced without much historical evidence or support or at least fudging a little on the length it burned via exaggeration. Chanukah began as a celebration of a military victory against a ruling empire, the Syrian Greeks. The last rebellion of the Jews in the Second Century ended very, very badly. The Temple was completely destroyed as was Jerusalem. The Jews were banished from the city and a new Roman city was planted on top of the ruins. The Romans were very angry at the time and bent on exterminating Jewish culture and traditions.

So the celebration of a military victory against an empire by Jews, which I remind they were commanded to do, was asking for trouble while living in exile under the Roman Empire. But if the focus was a miracle rather than a military victory, though the military victory was embedded in the miracle story, it wasn't quite as offensive to the Romans. No one knows the answer here of course, but there is a little logic to this explanation of the evolution of the holiday that still conforms to the law.

So what, you might be asking at this point, does this have to do with Unitarian Universalism. Our religious roots are more Christian than Jewish. And commemorating a military victory so long ago doesn't fit really well with a congregation that seeks peace and harmony. The rebellion itself has a number of problems with it that go against UU values too that I've discussed [in a past sermon](#) (also [see this article](#) from NY Times 2018-12-01)

Yes, we are pluralistic in our faith welcoming people from every faith tradition and honoring the truth we find in each one. Yes, we can cherry pick the inspirational stories we like out of each religious tradition and discard the rest. Yet, I think we also have a responsibility to struggle with the challenging stories and see if we can find meaning there too.

In that spirit, I'd like to do a little interpretation of the Chanukah miracle story and see if I can find a UU angle that we can celebrate today.

Let us return to that Exodus command to keep the flame lit, that it symbolizes the presence of God in the holy space. There are echoes of that in our tradition of lighting our chalice on Sunday morning. We kindle fire, probably one of the oldest religious practices that date back before recorded history. Many religious traditions have kindled flames that burned constantly to be a ready source of fire for the community. I have a reverence for the beauty and power of a flame that leaves me in awe. That little tiny flame easily can turn into a massively destructive conflagration such as happened in Paradise, California.

I know how frightening it is to watch a house fire and see the mighty force of the flames rip through the building. A house burned next to the Fellowship I served in Florida. I saw it very early before the fire trucks arrived, worried that it might spread to our property through the trees. There was something both terrifying and mesmerizing about the huge flames leaping from the roof. That same powerful force is tamely burning in front of our eyes right behind me.

Fire must consume fuel to stay lit. In that way, we are like fire. We need fuel too that we burn to stay warm. We need fuel to provide energy for the many, many chemical reactions that happen inside our skin. Our lives are a slow burning flame that must be fed.

Playing with fire is serious business. It is understandable why the Jews would have many rites and rituals around fire and how to deal with it. Recognizing God in the amazing power of fire has logic to it. Following those rites and rituals religiously offers a sense of control in relationship with this powerful deity. Follow the rules God has given and no one gets hurt. Let the light go out and you might anger God. The smell of burnt offerings of sacrifice can please God. In trying to keep God happy with sacrifices and following the rites and rituals correctly, it sets up a bit of a materialistic relationship with God. Follow my rules and sacrifice at the right times and amounts and no one gets hurt.

In this story however, the amount of oil is not sufficient. There is not enough oil of the right sort. The priests are thrust into a situation where they can't obey the rules and satisfy a jealous God that wants every rule followed exactly right. Not enough oil, the light goes out and God will be offended! That might mean trouble!

But somehow there is enough oil. Somehow, some way, what is offered is sufficient.

What might *that* mean about our relationship with God? About the nature of God?

Maybe one way to understand the Chanukah story is to see it as a different way to relate to God, alternatively, a different way to relate to the life giving power of transformation.

If indeed there was not physically enough oil, no matter what the height of the flame or the way the wick was trimmed, to last eight days, it would mean that the light *wasn't dependent* on the material oil to stay lit. That suggests that God's power, the power of transformation, operates in a different realm than the material.

That power isn't dependent on material wealth. The transforming power of love can operate outside of material limits. It could be a model for how love works – independently of the material world, that it doesn't depend on conditions to be just one way or another; that the transforming power of love can operate *even when* the ritual isn't done the traditional way or with the traditional resources.

The barrier we must face, encountering this miracle, is how deeply bound we are by materialistic thinking. If there isn't enough, the light will go out. If I don't have enough, I will want. Without enough, I'll lose control.

We understand how things work *in this world* that follows the laws of nature. This much oil burns for this much time. When the rules are violated, we lose the ability to *control predictable outcomes*. Perhaps ... the transformative power of love *doesn't* operate on those rules. Perhaps God *doesn't* either.

Thus the Chanukah story becomes the story of the possible, *not* the predictable *nor* the controllable. Things can happen in our world that don't make sense yet perhaps follow a higher order.

How does it work? We don't understand it. We can't explain it. It remains mysterious.

In the mystery there is both *vulnerability* and *affirmation*. In the story of Chanukah, there is an affirmation of the Jewish tradition and their relationship with God. In our personal interpretation of this Jewish story, we can take inspiration from what is possible when we make ourselves vulnerable and become receptive to the transforming power of love.

So we light candles and we remember amazing things can happen that defy our reasoning. We can rest in the mystery that there is a lot we don't know and don't know that we don't know.

In stories like Chanukah we'll find clues that will bring us to life and keep the fire burning in our hearts.