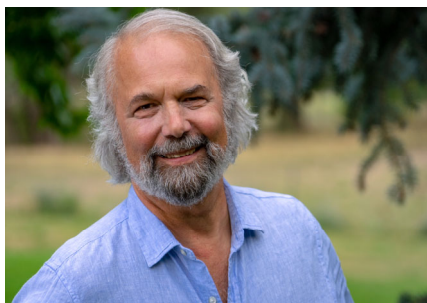


THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY OF HANUKKAH

PULSE OF SPIRIT
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Tonight is the last night of Hanukkah. As someone who wasn't brought up in Jewish culture, I became curious about the deeper meaning of the holiday.

Growing up, I remember how, in elementary school, there were these few days—usually somewhere in early December—where a quarter of the class was missing. They were up to something. And there was the story of how the oil in the lamp lasted for eight days. I had a general sense of the history of Hanukkah. But I got curious about the rest of the story. So I looked into it more deeply.

The event celebrated as Hanukkah took place only about 165 years before Jesus was born. The circumstances surrounding the event proved to be critical for the world into which he was born. In fact, they were a critical factor for the future of Western culture.

The story is essential to our understanding of our

cultural and spiritual history. It is also an allegory for the story of our lives and our service in the world.

Really, the story begins five thousand years ago when there was a man who felt a great calling. His name was Abraham and, as we know, he became the father of many peoples and many faiths. Abraham felt a tremendous spiritual urge. And when he opened himself to that urge, he learned that the urge was to be a blessing to all families on Earth. That was the calling and the promise that he felt, and it was the reason why he went on the journey that he did. He left his familiar surroundings and came to what we now call Israel.

From that time to the first Hanukkah, there was a great journey for Abraham's descendants and those who joined them. That played out in a geopolitical context. We do not usually think of the Bible as a study in the geopolitics of the ancient world, but it is. The world powers then

were not Russia, China, Germany, or the United States. But there were powerful geopolitical entities of that day: Egypt, Persia, Syria, Babylonia, Greece, and Rome. The story of Hanukkah takes place in that context.

The nation that grew out of Abraham's descendants had become weakened. From the zenith of their culture, at the time of King Solomon, they split into two kingdoms. From both kingdoms, a substantial number of their population were carried off into servitude.

The people of the southern kingdom became the Jewish people. Many of them were captured by the Babylonians and taken to Babylon in modern-day Iraq. About 48 years later, Persia (roughly located in modern-day Iran) conquered Babylon.

This was during the life of Zarathustra, who founded Zoroastrianism, a monotheistic religion that was influencing Persian culture. The Persians tolerated the religious practices of conquered peoples, and the Jewish culture continued and developed within the political authority of Persia.

The Persian king, Cyrus II, installed the Jewish people back in Jerusalem and sponsored them to rebuild the temple. And he returned to them the vessels of the temple stolen by the Babylonians.

If you are familiar with Greek history of the day—even if only from movies like *300*, or Oliver Stone's *Alexander*, you will remember that Greece's world influence was rising and Persia's diminishing. The Greeks successfully fought off the Persian invasion. And then Alexander the

Great conquered Persia and much of the known world.

After Alexander's death, one of his generals ruled Egypt, and another ruled modern-day Iraq and Syria. Israel became a political football between these two entities. And that is the background for the story of Hanukkah.

For about 100 years, the Ptolemaic Empire in Egypt controlled Israel and allowed them to practice their religion. But then the Greek empire in Iraq and Syria, the Seleucid Empire, prevailed, and they dominated the Jewish people in Israel and sought to exterminate their religion.

If you look on a map, you will see that Israel is in between these two great empires—Egypt to the west, and Iraq and Syria to the east.

That was what the Maccabees were facing. Their spiritual practice was attacked, and they wouldn't have it.

The Maccabees were a family—father Matthais and sons—and those who joined them. The one most famous is Judas Maccabee. The word *Maccabee* means “hammer” or “hammerer.” So in English, perhaps he would be known as Judas the Hammer. His *nom de guerre* is a tribute to his ferocity as a warrior.

Three of Matthais's sons gave their lives to preserve their spiritual practice: Judas, Jonathan, and Simon.

The story of Hanukkah takes place while all three

of them are still alive. It is a celebration of the re-consecration of the most holy place for them—the Second Temple, as it is called. Their Greek conquerors had profaned it. But it was cleansed and resurrected, to be used once more.

The First Book of Maccabees tells this story in great detail. This is from the fourth chapter:

Then all the people fell upon their faces, worshipping and praising the God of heaven, who had given them good success.

And so they kept the dedication of the altar eight days and offered burnt offerings with gladness, and sacrificed the sacrifice of deliverance and praise.

They decked also the forefront of the temple with crowns of gold, and with shields; and the gates and the chambers they renewed, and hanged doors upon them.

Thus was there very great gladness among the people, for that the reproach of the heathen was put away.

1 Maccabees 4:55-58

This is the historical event that Hanukkah commemorates. I recently read the entire story in the First Book of Maccabees. It is hard to miss their zealotry, passion, and commitment. As things turned out, their descendants created an uneasy peace, and the Jewish culture prospered in Israel for a time under the leadership of the descendants of the Maccabees. And then, in 38 BC, the Herodian dynasty begins under the

rulership of the Roman Empire. More geopolitics, and a familiar name. This dynasty begins with King Herod, a key figure in the Christmas story.

So much of what transpired from the time of Abraham and that great promise came through a thin line of legacy preserved by the Maccabees. We can wonder what the world would be like if not for that family and those with them. We cannot really know what might have happened without them. But we can be sure it would not be the same.

It would not be the same for the lineage of the Jewish people. It would not be the same for the history of Israel. And it would not have been the same in terms of the context into which Jesus was born. He was born as a Jew into Jewish culture. And the people who gathered around him were primarily Jewish.

We can only conclude that the roots of what has become our modern Western culture were held in the balance by the Maccabees. We can only imagine how the awareness of their part in that fragile thread must have stirred Judas Maccabee and his brothers. In some part of their being, they must have known that the whole lineage depended on them. Other Jewish people were scattered through the Persian Empire, perhaps most significantly in Alexandria. So, it was not as if the entire lineage was only in Israel. And yet, if that part of the lineage had not been there, all the rest of it would have been much more diffused and diluted.

It is easy to see how, for a person or for a culture, when survival is threatened, as it was for the Maccabees, how much passion and commitment there is about that survival. What else would happen? If an individual's survival is challenged, life revolves around sustaining that survival. And the same with a culture—where people value their culture and feel it is threatened, so much energy goes to perpetuating the culture.

It is understandable that, for a person or a culture, when that happens the original vision and reason for the culture or for the person's life can become dim in their awareness. In this case, the original vision was to be a blessing for all families. All families across the Earth! That is indicative, actually, of the purpose of anyone's life. Our lives are to be a blessing and without restriction. A gift to the whole planet! We incarnated for *that*—to bring happiness and joy to this planet.

This is exactly what the Christmas angel declared:

*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth
peace, good will toward men.*

It sounds like a blessing to all families, to me. All men, all women, without restriction, without restraint—not just to Jewish people, Christian people, Islamic, or Hindu people. *All people.*

Looking back on the Maccabees, for me, it is hard not to have compassion for the position they found themselves in and for the ferocity that became important for the survival of their culture. I can well say *I understand*. And yet today, we are here to realize that this lineage that

we are a part of, however we trace it, is not just about survival.

Our lineage is ultimately the lineage of humankind. Today, it seems, at least to some, that the survival of our lineage is at risk. But we are not here just to survive; we are not here just to have a particular culture survive. If we do not survive, there is not much else on. So I am not saying that survival is unimportant. But we did not come here just to survive.

We are here for a larger purpose as human beings. We are called to enjoy something of larger significance, beauty, and wonder. We are here to know and experience that, not to be lost in the issues of survival—as a person, culture, or as the human race.

And perhaps it works the other way around: the survival issues become clearer when we remember why we are here—that we are here to bring something of great moment, beauty, and wonder that is bigger than we are as a human being and is bigger than our culture. It is bigger than any race, creed, or nation. We are called to the original promise given to humankind. That promise was felt and heard by Abraham so powerfully that it moved him. He left his home, seeking to fulfill that destiny. But the promise of humanity did not begin with him. It is lodged deep in the heart and soul of humankind.

Every human being is born with that urge and that promise. So often, it degenerates into survival mentality. For some, that survival is very real at a physical level. For others, the issue is the

survival of culture or wealth. At another level, it is emotional survival or ego survival.

All the old patterns of survival mentality can kick in. And then, where did the wonder of the great promise that is in our hearts go?

We are here to let the great spiritual lineage of humankind continue. But not just for the sake of its survival, as if that were an end and aim of itself. And certainly not to try to re-create anything out of the past. The reason for the great spiritual lineage of humankind to continue is so

that the full promise of the line can be fulfilled through us and those who come after us.

Every human being has the right and the honor to claim that for themselves. As a Hanukkah song says, there may be some struggle and tears along the way. But it is not about the struggle, and it is not about the tears. It is about the fulfillment of the promise.

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