

## **“War, Peace, Grace, and the Meaning of Hanukkah”**

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Shabbat Hanukkah-Parashat Mikeitz 5783

December 23, 2022

Hanukkah has an interesting history as a holiday.

Originally, it was all about the Maccabees’ improbable military victory over King Antiochus and his mighty army.

The books of the Maccabees, which were written at the time the events actually happened, recount how Judah and his small band of brothers waged guerilla warfare against the Seleucid forces and recaptured the Jerusalem Temple from them and rededicated it to God on the 25th of the Hebrew month of Kislev.

To celebrate their triumph, the Maccabees threw a big party down at the Temple.

And at the party, they lit lights because, well, that’s what people did back then for the winter solstice.

There’s no mention in the book of Maccabees of the miraculous oil. In the original telling of the story, the miracle was that the underdog had defeated the mighty empire in war.

It’s only later, during the Talmudic period, when the story about the oil lasting eight days became popularized.

By that time, the Jewish people were no longer sovereign in the Land of Israel. Instead, they were living under the yoke of the Roman Empire.

They had tried to throw off Roman rule a couple times without success and at great loss of life, and the rabbis who led the community were in no mood to inspire another rebellion.

So, they decided to tell a different story about Hanukkah: not a story of victory in war—which might rile people up into thinking they could fight Rome again—but rather, a story of peace.

Unlike the Maccabees’ tale of conquering warriors, the rabbis’ version of the story only mentions the Maccabees’ victory in passing. Here’s what the Talmud says:

“When the Greeks entered the Sanctuary, they defiled all the oils that were there. And when the [Maccabees] overcame them and emerged victorious over them, they searched and found only one cruse of oil that was placed with the seal of the High Priest. And there was sufficient oil there to light the menorah for only one day. [But] A miracle occurred and they lit the menorah from it eight days.”<sup>1</sup>

That’s it. No glorious battles. No guerrilla soldiers launching surprise attacks from the mountains.

The miracle in the rabbis’ version of the story is that the tiny amount of oil lasted long enough for them to get more and keep the eternal light burning in the Temple without interruption.

Rather than glorifying war and the power of the sword, as the Maccabees did, the rabbis emphasized the virtues of peace and waiting for God. “Not by might and not by power, but by spirit alone”: that was their motto.

Ever since then, we’ve teetered back and forth between the two versions, sometimes focusing on Hanukkah as a veneration of the Jewish people’s might and courage in fighting the power, and sometimes emphasizing faith and light and hope instead of war.

In some ways, it's a choice we face all the time in the course of living life:

When it comes to challenging situations with family, or friendships, or business, or community politics, or workplace relationships, are we going to approach them on a war footing, or are we going to try and be peacemakers?

Consider the story of Joseph's encounter with his brothers in this week's parashah.

Remember back when they were kids, the brothers hated Joseph because he was an annoying little show-off, and they threw him in a pit and left him for dead.

Well, a lot of time has passed since then, and now Joseph is a big muckety-muck in Egypt.

When famine strikes the Land of Israel, the brothers come to Egypt looking for food. But to get it, they have to go through the gatekeeper of the food supply, who just happens to be Joseph—although they don't realize it's him.

But Joseph recognizes them instantly, and all those bad feelings come right back to him. Clearly holding a grudge—and who can blame him? —he decides to use his power to torture them for a while.

He makes them go through all kinds of shenanigans, including forcing one of them to say as his captive while the others go home to fetch their youngest brother Benjamin and bring him back to Joseph.

It's clear that, through all of this, Joseph is getting his bile up. He's ready to rumble.

But when the brothers finally show up with Benjamin, something changes in him. He's overtaken by emotion at the sight of this brother he never knew he had.

In this surreal moment, the mighty officer of Egypt can muster only words of blessing for the boy before he excuses himself to a private room, where he breaks down crying.

The blessing he offers to Benjamin is simple but very poignant (and here's where we have to do a little Hebrew): "*Vayokhn'kha b'ni*," he says. "May God be gracious to you, my boy."<sup>2</sup>

The Chasidic teacher Me'or Einayim points out that Joseph's blessing for Benjamin—*Vayokhn'kha*, may God be gracious to you—shares the same three-letter word root—*chet, nun, chaf*—as the word "Hanukkah."

Same as we say in the priestly blessing: "*Ya'er Adonai panav eleicha vichuneka*" – *vichuneka*: meaning: "may God deal graciously with you."

So, embedded in the very name of this holiday, "Hanukkah," is the word "grace."

Hanukkah is a time to be gracious; to let kindness and mercy and peace and human feeling take over.

And this is exactly what Joseph does.

He comes to the situation on a strong war footing, ready to fight and vanquish his enemy, eager to smack down his brothers who treated him so badly as a kid.

But when he sees Benjamin, his heart opens, and all that bile and anger and vindictiveness melts away. And all he can do is bless—and cry.

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There's a great book that deals with navigating challenging situations like this called *The Anatomy of Peace*.

The basic idea of the book is that in any situation or relationship or encounter we have in life, we come to it with either what the authors call "a heart at war" or what they call "a heart at peace."

When our heart is at war, we're itching for a fight because we see the other person or people we're engaged with as out to get us.

And we see it this way because, subconsciously, we've already put them and our self into a box.

Inside that box is where we tell our self things like: "I'm a victim here." "This person hates me." "They have all the power, I have none." Or: "I'm smarter than they are; they don't know what they're talking about." "This is unfair."

And, whether we realize it or not, these attitudes we hold inside the box will shape the way we interact with the other person.

As the book says, "A heart at war needs enemies to justify its warring. It needs enemies and mistreatment more than it wants peace."<sup>3</sup>

Does that resonate with you?

Do you ever find yourself almost *needing* the fight—like you're addicted to it, or it feeds something dark inside you?

Do you ever feel like, with some people, you just can't figure out how to step off your war footing?

I have definitely felt that in my life—and it doesn't feel good. It's stressful and uncomfortable and exhausting.

By contrast, when our heart is at peace, we're able to see the other person as a human being—someone with feelings and needs and challenges, just like us.

And that leads to empathy instead of judging, and opens the door to collaboration instead of antagonism—working it out together instead of battling to win a zero-sum game.

The good news is that, although it may not feel like it sometimes, we *do* have a choice of whether we're going to approach people and situations with a heart at war or a heart at peace.

Moving from war to peace is a mindset shift, and it's not an easy one to make.

It starts with showing grace toward the other person—which means being kind and open to them, not because they've done anything to deserve it, but only because they are a fellow human being.

And when our heart is truly at peace, we're willing to give every human being the benefit of the doubt.

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The Me'or Einayim offers another word play on the word "Hanukkah" that, I think, puts a fine point on all this.

If you divide "Hanukkah" into two words you come up with, possibly, "*chanu*" and "*kah*—the letters "*kaf hey*."

"Chanu" means "they rested."

And because Hebrew letters also have numerical value, *kaf-hey* can also stand for "25."

So "Chanu-kah" can also mean: "They rested on the 25th"—the 25th of Kislev, which of course is the first day of Hanukkah.

Whew. I know that's a lot of mental gymnastics.

But here's the point of these word plays:

Hanukkah is a time to *give it a rest*—time to check yourself and acknowledge whatever spiritual-emotional need we have to constantly be at war with certain people, and then make the conscious choice to stop it.

Time to let our hearts soften up, and *open* up, and let the anger and vitriol melt away, and be at peace.

We're all proud of the Maccabees for standing up and fighting against the wicked king, to be sure.

But the rabbis taught us that it's better to live with a heart at peace than with a heart at war.

So, let's maybe give that a try.

After all, 'tis the season.

1 Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 21b

2 Genesis 43:29

3 The Aringer Institute, *The Anatomy of Peace*, 107