

Generally speaking, while the commercial culture in which we live has raised Chanukah to the level of one of the “big deal” holidays, religiously speaking, we know that it isn’t. It’s not mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. We don’t spend hours worshipping in temple. There is no fasting. All in all, according to the rabbis of tradition, Chanukah is listed as one of the “Minor Holidays.” Still, though, all commercial considerations aside, I believe firmly that in times like today, when there is so much chaos and threat to civilized life, we would do well to focus a little more thought, and a little more weight, on our celebration.

Historically, the festival of Chanukah commemorates the victorious Maccabean revolt against Antiochus IV, whose troops had taken our Temple, barred us from using it, and desecrated it beyond imagination. Then, having liberated the Temple from the Greeks through battle, our Maccabean ancestors found enough oil to keep what was supposed to be an eternally burning menorah (to represent the eternal presence of God amongst us) lit for just one day. The miracle that we celebrate each year, of course, is that that tiny bit of oil kept burning until replenishment could be secured and brought back to the temple. That is, one day’s worth of oil kept burning for eight full days.

Our Chanukah celebration focuses on that miracle. In a wonderful spirit of joy and play, we light candles, give gifts, eat delicious oil-fried latkes and sufganiyot (donuts) . . . eight days of Happy Chanukah Hoopla. I suggest, though, that there’s more for us to do.

Chanukah comes from the Hebrew root נ-ח-נ) Chet-Nun-Chaf), which means “to dedicate,” or “to consecrate.” Named thus, the thrust of the commemoration is not on the oil that lasted so wondrously, but on the consecration of the holy sanctuary we managed to reclaim. Indeed, Judah sent his forces into the Temple and had it rebuilt and cleaned, so that we could resume the holy work we so desperately yearned to do.

So, yes, let’s celebrate miracles this year, but if we really want to honor the essence of Chanukah, I would say that we should be thinking about how we can rededicate the sacred spaces in our lives, and in our hearts. Perhaps there are spaces that we have handed over to others unwittingly, or inner gifts we’ve let go to waste. This is a perfect time to take pause, reclaim our sanctuaries (at both 115 Youmans Avenue, and elsewhere, too) and rededicate our focus to all that is good. And then . . . let’s go ahead and eat some donuts.

Chag Chanukah Sameach (Happy Chanukah),

Rabbi Dubin