

The holiday that presents the greatest challenge to the creativity of the modern Jew is Hanukkah. The reason is that unlike so many of the holidays of the Jewish past, which are relevant primarily to the simple pastoral and agricultural societies in which they were evolved, Hanukkah has a rich potentiality for the present. The problem is that Hanukkah is not good enough to be Hanukkah. By this I mean, there is a need in the psyche of modern Jews, and a place in the cultural, economic and natural rhythms of their environment for the celebration of a profoundly relevant Hanukkah. Yet the Hanukkah actually provided by Jewish institutional life is religiously trivial, often childish.

The reasons for the trivialization of Hanukkah can be traced to the past. Hanukkah is not a biblical holiday, and traditionally, in rabbinic Judaism, has been the least minor of holidays, both in form and content. Hanukkah has had no liturgy of its own, except for the brief menorah ceremony, and an insertion or two in the regular services. Neither was the work week interrupted for its celebration. Yet it is not the poverty of its ritual, but of its meaning that constitutes the true trivialization of Hanukkah. Hanukkah has been understood religiously as the celebration of a simplistic miracle story, in which, after the successful war for Judean national independence, a cruse of oil required to rededicate the Jerusalem Temple, that would naturally have burned one day, lasted eight days. Few modern Jews, scholars or otherwise, believe the miracle story of Hanukkah, so that aside from the experience of the "lights," it has practically no contemporary religious significance. For many it serves primarily as a buffer against Christmas, an opportunity to give Jewish children gifts when Christian children are receiving them. This vacuum of religious meaning induces many Jews to give Hanukkah political significance, as a celebration of Israel's independence, to which the Maccabean victory bears some resemblance. Still, such use of Hanukkah provides no religious meaning, and nationalist ideology is no substitute in our lives for religious ideology.

Required, then, is a transcendence and re-creation of the traditional meaning of Hanukkah, yet one that retains its relevant aspects, particularly the still potent symbolism of "lights." In the concept of Hanukkah as the Festival of Affirmation, such a new meaning is proposed. Although it is not possible within the compass of **Polydoxy** to provide other than a bare outline of Hanukkah as the Festival of Affirmation, its major points may be described.

The central theme of the Festival of Affirmation is that humans suffer a fundamental threat to the meaningfulness of their lives from the fact that they are finite and conscious of their finity, but that nevertheless, they possess the ability through personal existential action and relations with other persons and the world of nature to attain soteria (salvation), a state of intrinsically meaningful existence. Interestingly

enough, there is no occasion in the Jewish holiday year that is dedicated directly and primarily to finity as the fundamental concern of the human condition. The most serious holiday of the year, Yom Kippur, is related to guilt, which is itself secondary to and derivative from the problem of finity. As a finite being, there are limits that surround all human capacities: intellectual, emotional and physical. The capacities humans do possess within the boundary of their finite existence are not adequate to keep them from the negative states of nescience and melancholy, or the ultimate negation, death. Still, despite all, Hanukkah, as the Festival of Affirmation, maintains that humans can affirm life. The fact of finity, as every human consciously or unconsciously knows, produces negative moods that can and often do annihilate the meaning of existence. Nevertheless, humans can, by authentic, open confrontation with finity, and continuous rededication to the challenge it presents, respond to finity and attain soteria. Hanukkah celebrates the power of meaningful existence that resides in the enduring ground of being, although all persons ultimately must realize soteria for themselves, in their own ways. Polydoxy gives us choices, but in our time none is easy, if ever they were. There are two views of the ultimate soterial responses to finity, and at various times in the course of their history, one or the other has been chosen by the Jews. The first view is that humans possess the capacity to resign themselves to acceptance of their finity, and having done so, find meaning, even joy, within the limits of finite existence. The second view is that humans possess the power to believe the ground of being can provide infinite personal existence, an eternal afterlife, so that a state of faith can be reached, even within the apparent limits of finite existence, that overcomes the annihilation of meaning by finity and death. Accomplished with full being, either response brings a resolution of the ultimate problem of finity. Although resolution of the intrapersonal problem of finity is the central theme of Hanukkah as the Festival of Affirmation, it is evident that complete realization of the soterial state requires, in addition, productive and harmonious relations with other persons and the world of nature. These derivative aspects of Hanukkah will be dealt with in detail at another time.

Primary among the symbols of Hanukkah as the Festival of Affirmation is "lights," and Hanukkah, as it has been historically, remains the "Festival of Lights." The lamps or candles may be taken to represent the power of soteria in the ground of being; the fire that lights the lamps represents the existential action taken by the human person in response to finity; and the subsequent flame of the lamp represents the light of meaningful existence that is realized. Among other symbols of Hanukkah, perhaps the most potent (in the northern hemisphere) is the winter solstice (about December twenty-second). The darkness that increases as the solstice approaches represents the negation of meaning produced by finity; the gradual increase of light after the crisis of the solstice points to the

human potential for victory over meaninglessness. Similarly, the cold of the new winter season symbolizes human vulnerability to threatening forces within and without, a vulnerability with which we have the power to cope through community with other persons and in harmonious relation to nature. Gifts among persons, parents, children and friends point to the love and concern of the human community for one another, which makes soferia in the human world complete. Finally, a powerful symbol of the ideals of freedom and justice in interpersonal relations is the story of the Maccabean struggle for independence from tyranny. The Maccabean story, however, represents a derivative element in the Festival of Affirmation, and should be treated accordingly.

So far as celebration of Hanukkah as the Festival of Affirmation is concerned, a major temple service, certainly equal in profundity to the Yom Kippur, should be held, probably on the Sabbath of Hanukkah. Seeing that the solstice is so powerful a symbol of Hanukkah, there are those who may wish to participate in a special celebration of Hanukkah on that evening. If the solstice does not fall within the traditional days of Hanukkah, a "second Hanukkah" can be celebrated.

Alvin J. Reines

*The Hanukkah service of the Institute of Creative Judaism incorporates the points made in this article, and is intended for use as a family service. Also, the ICJ plans a new major Hanukkah service for future publication.*