



CHANUKKAH

If there is a festivity in the Hebrew calendar that children look forward with marked anxiety it is, without a doubt, Chanukkah. At least in the Northern Hemisphere it is so. Families decorate their homes, gather for the lighting of the Chanukkia and give presents to their sons and daughters on each night of the holiday. Who doesn't like getting presents?

Nevertheless, Chanukkah does not only generate a pleasant family and communal moment, but also begs the question about the meaning of that which are celebrating. As soon as we start prodding into the different angles of Chanukkah, we see that it was originally a festivity for the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem and the celebration of the victory of a small group that was not willing to come in contact with any other culture that was not their own. What do we celebrate when a new Chanukkah comes our way? Do we long for the rebuilding of the Third Temple? Do we defend the postulates of a Judaism that does not mix nor is interested in the teachings that other religious traditions can offer us? What does a Conservative Jew in the XXIst century celebrate when she celebrates Chanukkah?

Over a hundred years ago, the first thinkers of political Zionism grappled with the same questions. For them, the festivities were not about the miracle of the oil or about a tradition free from external influences. In fact, they saw a need to rescue the holiday articulating the centrality of the struggle. Removing all religious meaning, the Zionist rereading centered its attention in the Maccabean revolt. And under this postulate they posited that the glory of Chanukkah was rooted in the capacity of a few to proactively take control of their own destiny, fighting to achieve the ideals of independence and autonomy in one's own land. "A miracle was not wrought for us," wrote the poet Aharon Zeev. "A flask of oil we did not find, we dug in the stone until we bled, and then there was light."

Nevertheless, in their search to resignify the classical narratives of our tradition, these thinkers often left G-d out of the story. In view of maximizing the will of man, they disregarded of the divine presence and inspiration. And Chanukkah became a symbol of a secular festivity.

What do we do then? Do we make our peace with the divine miracle of the oil, which echoes the millenary longing and hope of our people to rebuild the Temple? Or do we disconnect from the religious aspect of the festivity to recognize that, like the Maccabees, we are the makers of a destiny in which G-d has no participation? What behooves us as XXIst Century Conservative Jews?

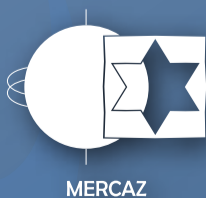
In my opinion, we cannot accept either of the two posited alternatives. We can drink from both of them, but it is our responsibility to resignify the festivity and to reclaim its meaning so Chanukkah will embody the values that we share as a people and as a tradition. This is the greatest of our challenges: knowing our history, to have the capacity to reread the text under the lens of a Judaism that is challenging, authentic and relevant. Hence, I believe that in Chanukkah we should recover the idea that each of us is born with the ability to transform into the Temple, through our actions and decisions becoming an abode for the divine presence. In this way we can rescue the centrality of the Holy Temple as a symbol of that which we are capable of becoming, and we connect to the idea that this does not depend on divine grace but on our own free will; recognizing that that which we do not do, no one will do for us.

As we light the candles of Chanukkah this year let us remember that, in accordance with our millenary tradition, we should not be afraid to reformulate, resignify and reread our traditions. Since it is in this way in which we recreate the world, taking ownership of our divine likeness which, not coincidentally, began the creation of the universe by whispering: "Yehi Or...Let there be light."

Chag Sameach,

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(Translated by Rabbi Juan Mejía,
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