

December Lights

Reflections on Hanukkah and Advent

In December both Christians and Jews hold candle-lighting rituals. Christian families light the Advent wreath candles on the Sundays leading to Christmas, while Jewish families light a candle for each of the eight days of Hanukkah.

Christians are familiar with Advent candles. But why do Jews light candles at Hanukkah, and why should we Christians be interested in this practice? Is it simply a case of building good relations with people of other religions (always an important task) or is there something more that speaks to us in our life of faith?

Hanukkah means ‘dedication.’ This festival takes us back to the 2nd century BCE and recalls the re-dedication of the Jerusalem temple following the Maccabean uprising. (See 1 Maccabees 4:36-59.) 1 & 2 Maccabees tell the story of the persecution of the Jewish population: forced conversions, brutal punishments, and defilement of the temple as a powerful Greek Hellenistic culture threatened to suppress Judaism. The text includes the gripping tales of Maccabean resistance and heroic martyrs, such as a Jewish mother and her seven sons who accepted torture and death rather than renounce the religious practices of their ancestors (2 Maccabees 7).

According to rabbinic tradition, when the Maccabees reclaimed the temple and lit the temple menorah (lampstand), a miracle occurred: amidst the ruins they could find only a small quantity of pure oil, enough for one day of light, yet the menorah stayed alight for eight days.

In the miracle of the cruse of oil, commentators note the courage of the Jews to attempt to light the menorah in the first place. Why bother when

it seemed that the oil would not last beyond a day? The act of lamp-lighting indicates resilient hope and persistent faith.

In Hanukkah there is much to inspire Christians. We might ponder the idea that were it not for the reality that Hanukkah represents, had not the Jewish people prevailed time and again in history in the face of forces bent on their destruction, there would be no Jewish communities to carry on the traditions of their faith, to be a light to the nations. There would be no child Jesus born and raised in the teachings of the Torah. There would be no Christmas.

At a time of year when we Christians remember the coming of Christ, the nearness of a Jewish festival (Hanukkah) can remind us that the little family in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago were faithful Jews who celebrated the festivals of their tradition according to the customs of their day.

Each in its unique way, Advent and Hanukkah engender a spirit of renewal. Remembering the re-dedication of the ancient temple, Jews today approach Hanukkah as a time for spiritual re-dedication of their lives. Meanwhile, Christians at Advent prepare their hearts to celebrate the sacred mysteries of the Christmas season.

Jewish-Christian reconciliation was a key teaching of the Second Vatican Council. To respect the significance of our Jewish friends lighting Hanukkah candles, while we Christians light Advent candles, is one expression of this ongoing call to renewal. •

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