

“Chanukah: Keeping the Light of Faith Burning”
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Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley, Boiling Springs, PA
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Invitation to Worship

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There’s a tempest in the town of Chambersburg. The controversy started with a request from atheist Carl Silverman to display a sign honoring atheist war veterans in the town square. The sign looks pretty innocuous to me: a big “A” for atheist, and a winter solstice sun. The sign would have joined the nativity, which has been displayed there at Christmas for many years. In an attempt to avoid controversy and please everyone, the counsel came up with a solution that nobody seems to like. Rather than allow both displays, council chose to ban all displays, and took the position that only patriotic flags and flowers could grace the square. This meant there would be no winter solstice display, and no nativity scene.

Ultimately, the nativity scene was displayed in a nearby church. As far as I know, the atheist sign is nowhere to be seen.

The whole incident spurred protests and emotions ran high. Many people took the view that they would have no problem with other religions displaying signs. Because of the U.S. Constitution, other religions should be represented, and it would have been better for council to allow the both the Solstice Sun and the nativity scene.

Others were angry and fearful, and felt that the solstice display would be an assault on their beliefs and a threat to their religion.

I didn’t understand that position until I remembered that, not long ago when I received this issue of *UU World* in the mail, I opened it and was shocked to find, right inside the front cover, a full page ad for “The Freedom from Religion Foundation.” I never considered that an inclusive, liberal religion, that covenants a “free and responsible search for truth and meaning” and draws from many sources, was in any way “free” from religion.

Was my reaction any different than the fundamentalist Christian's reaction to the Solstice sign?

Come let us worship together.

First Reading

Shemot/Exodus 27:20-21

Now you shall command the Children of Israel that they shall take pure olive oil, pressed for illumination, to kindle a lamp continually. In the Tent of Meeting, outside the Partition that is near the Testimonial tablets, Aaron and his sons shall arrange it from evening and morning before HaShem, an eternal decree for their generations, from the Children of Israel.

Second Reading

Antiquities of the Jews XII, Chapter 7, Verse 7

Flavius Josephus,

Now Judas celebrated the festival of the restoration of the sacrifices of the temple for eight days, and omitted no sort of pleasures thereon; but he feasted them upon very rich and splendid sacrifices; and he honored God, and delighted them by hymns and psalms. Nay, they were so very glad at the revival of their customs, when, after a long time of intermission, they unexpectedly had regained the freedom of their worship, that they made it a law for their posterity, that they should keep a festival, on account of the restoration of their temple worship, for eight days. And from that time to this we celebrate this festival, and call it Lights.

Sermon

“Keeping the Light of Faith Burning”

“In candle flames, I know faith’s power...”¹

Since the invention and ever-improved efficiency of the light bulb, we kind of take light for granted.

But as we are occasionally reminded during a power failure, light does more than merely dispel the darkness. In that moment of delightful comfort when we find the flashlight, or light a candle; it's easy to see why our ancient ancestors associated light with goodness.

And why it was so important that Ner Tamid, the eternal light be maintained in the Temple in Jerusalem. And why in synagogues around the world today; an eternal lamp shines on the ark, the cabinet that holds the Torah scrolls.

Chanukah is an eight-day festival, which just started at sundown on Friday, and runs through sundown next Saturday. Chanukah means dedication, and celebrates the re-dedication of the Second Temple after a dark time in Jewish history.

Antiochus was a Syrian Greek ruler, who fancied himself as a god. He also wanted to expand his kingdom by conquering Egypt and other regions of the Middle East. Having sent his generals to conquer Jerusalem, he proceeded to order the Jews to abandon their own traditions and religion; and to worship the Greek gods. He desecrated the Temple, extinguished the holy lamp, and set up an altar there to his favorite pagan god.²

Many Jews, in fear, complied with his decree; as many others who'd refused were slaughtered. Others fled Jerusalem to hide and worship in caves or in the hills surrounding the holy city. And some, of course, fought back, eventually overthrowing the invaders, restoring the Temple, and relighting the holy lamp.

Tradition holds that as they were repairing the temple, they found a small amount of pure olive oil, which had been sealed by the Kohein Gadol, the high priest, but only enough precious oil to light Ner Tamid for one day. But the light remained burning for eight days, allowing time for them to make more pure oil for the lamp.

Chanukah, therefore, celebrates this miracle of the light. But it also celebrates the victory over Antiochus. Chanukah is a celebration of religious freedom.

Judaism is a religion that over several thousand years has had to face many such challenges: wars with neighboring tribes and countries, invasions and exiles, the destruction of Solomon's Temple, the destruction of the Second Temple, the Dispersion, and the Holocaust.

What better role models could we find to teach us how to preserve our own religious freedom? To inspire us to keep the light of our own faith burning?

As the crèche controversy in Chambersburg illustrates, we're going through a holy war, or at least a holy tug-of-war here in America. On one side we have the Bill of Rights in our Constitution, guaranteeing us all freedom of speech and freedom of religion. On the other, a very vocal and determined minority, who are insisting that America is, and always has been, a Christian nation.

¹ from the song *Chanukah Lights*; Lyrics by Julie Ham

² *The Scroll of Antiochus*; from http://www.torahlab.org/calendar/article/the_scroll_of_antiochus

As recent events in Chambersburg show, we're still working on that "Peace on Earth and Good Will to All" part of the Christian story.

In one evening a few weeks ago, on the Salon.com website, I found three separate stories that deal with religious tug-of-war issues.

One was a story about hate crimes. The good news was that the number of racial hate crimes has declined. However such crimes due to sexual-orientation or religious bias are on the rise.³

Another story was about a Christian organization that was giving away free copies of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of the Species* on the University of California at Berkeley campus; albeit with a new introduction stating that the contents of the book are false based on Biblical texts and teaching.⁴

The third story was the most disturbing. It was about conservative Christian ministers, American ministers, leading their congregations in prayers for the death of President Barack Obama. They consider themselves justified in this abhorrent behavior by the wording of Psalm 109, which includes a passage calling for the end of current leadership, asking "may his days be few." And at least one of these ministers in the story had no qualms about admitting that he was praying for the President's death, stating "Nope. I'm not gonna pray for his good. I'm going to pray that he dies and goes to hell."⁵

There is very little hope, peace, or light in the conservative Christian message.

On a lighter and more hopeful note there's also a new atheist movement forming across our nation, apparently in response to the rising volume of conservative Christian rhetoric. In recent months, I've seen and heard stories of posters promoting atheism on display in New York subway stations, and accounts of fundamentalist atheists who are out to recruit fellow non-believers to their cause. And I feel better having the atheists enter this particular battle, because they are, at least, also fighting to keep religion out of government; which will benefit all Americans.

We don't have to imagine what might happen if the conservative heretics succeed in their political ambitions. We've seen it in the pages of our history books, and we see it today in newspaper and TV stories from the streets of Iran and the poppy fields of Afghanistan.

But even without their hoped-for coup, their influence is harming our country, and not only in debates about religion; or the abortion debate that's delaying progress on health care reform.

Their rejection of Darwin's theory of evolution, for example, has led to a disdain for all sciences; leaving us with many citizens who are scientifically illiterate.

³ *Anti-gay, Religious-motivated crimes up*, by Devlin Barrett; Salon.com, November 23, 2009; http://www.salon.com/news/2009/11/23/us_hate_crimes/index.html?source=rss&aim=/news

⁴ *Creationism vs. atheism: It's On!*, by Laura Miller; Salon.com, November 23, 2009, "http://www.salon.com/books/feature/2009/11/23/origin_into_schools/index.html?source=rss&aim=/books/feature"

⁵ *Praying for Obama's death*, by Lilly Fowler; Salon.com, November 23, 2009; "http://www.salon.com/mwt/feature/2009/11/23/praying_for_obama_death/index.html?source=rss&aim=/mwt/feature"

And this disdain is also stifling innovation at a time when we sorely need new ideas and new inventions for an uncertain future of climate change and other challenging global issues.

Last Tuesday morning, I heard a story on NPR about a company in Japan that has created a home hydrogen cell unit, that creates hydrogen from natural gas, and uses it to provide electricity, heat, and hot water for the home.

An American hydrogen-cell expert in this report, stated that America is at least a decade behind Japan in applying this new technology.⁶

Their influence hits us closer to home, as well. A few months after I began representing UUCV on CARC, the Carlisle Area Religious Council, I was saddened and horrified to learn that some of the more conservative Christian congregations had left the council when Congregation Beth Tikvah, our local Jewish congregation, joined the council.

CARC is an interfaith organization that serves the Carlisle community. They helped found, and for many years oversaw, Project SHARE, our local food bank. The council has also helped CARES, which serves the homeless in our community, and other local service organizations. These are projects and values that all people of faith would surely endorse. And with more volunteers, we could do so much more for our community. But with UU's as well as Jews on the council, these conservatives won't be coming back anytime soon. But it's their own lives, and their own congregations, that are poorer for their absence.

Because just as our candle flames need a breath of air to flare brightly, faith also needs to be open to the winds of change to flourish and grow stronger.

Those of us who practice minority faiths, such as Unitarian Universalism and Judaism, know this. We live with these challenges every day. And we've learned the value of diversity in our communities, and in our country.

In the parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus acknowledged that the outsider can be the good guy, a person of faith, just as our fellow believers might fall short of our expectations.

He also saw the value of separating our religious and secular lives, as he advised his followers to "render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and render unto G-d what is G-d's."

And let us not forget that when Jesus taught his disciples to "love thy neighbor as you love yourself" he didn't add but only if your neighbor looks like you, or worships in the same temple.

And Jesus, as a devout, practicing Jew, in first-century Jerusalem, celebrated Chanukah. It's even mentioned in the Gospel of John that Jesus walked into the Temple during "the feast of the Dedication in Jerusalem." The quote, from Josephus, another first-century Jew who became a Roman citizen, confirms that kindling the lights of Chanukah was a Jewish practice, "from that time to this."

And from that time to our own, we continue this celebration of religious freedom.

Our free faith shows that diverse religions can not only peacefully coexist; but can thrive and even nurture, inspire, and strengthen each other. And the best way to keep the bright light of our faith burning, on our altar and in our hearts is to keep the light of freedom shining for everyone, everywhere, everyday.

⁶ *Japan working toward fuel-cell reality*, on Marketplace, broadcast December 3, 2009, <http://marketplace.publicradio.org/display/web/2009/12/08/am-home-fuel-cells/>

“This is the burden. This is the promise. And this is why we will not fail.”⁷

In the Jewish tradition, let us add, Amen. May it always be so.

Community Prayer

Baruch ata Adonoy Eloheinu melech ha-olam

Sheh-he-che-yanu vi-kee-yimanu

Vi-hee-gee-yanu laz-man ha-zeh.

Blessed are You, Divine Spirit of the Universe, Who has blessed our lives, sustained us, and brought us to this season.

Please help us to remember your bright, nurturing, healing presence; as we come here today with hopeful hearts and worried minds; with our joys and sorrows, shared or unshared.

Please help us to remember, that as individuals, and as a faith community, we are have the power to bring love and healing to our world, just as the light of our candles can dispel the darkness in our souls.

May the light of your peace shine upon our community, our nation, and our world; and let us all say, Amen.

Benediction

from *The Gates of Prayer: The New Union Prayerbook*

And it had been written: “Fire shall be kept burning upon the altar continually; it shall not go out.” Our heart is the altar. In every occupation let a spark of the holy fire remain within you, and fan it into a flame.

⁷ from the song *Light One Candle*; by Peter Yarrow.