

It Is Better To Light A Candle

By Rabbi Bernard S. Raskas

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Rabbi Bernard S. Raskas is rabbi of Temple of Aaron, a congregation of 1300 families in Saint Paul, Minn. He has written several books and contributes a regular column to the American Jewish press. He is also a member of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council.)

In a recent issue of a magazine entitled *The Biblical Archaeology Review* there was a survey of digs in Israel. The article began by asking the reader to guess which object turned up most in the excavations conducted in Israel. I wonder if we might take a moment to ask you in the community what object would you think would be the most common in these digs? The answer is a menorah. The reason is obvious. They did not have electric lights and, therefore, they needed at least one in each room to provide light during the evening hours.

Now, I want to make something very clear at the outset. A menorah is any instrument that provides light. It comes from the Hebrew *min* or, something that brings out light. A Hanukah menorah is a special kind of lighting instrument which has eight candles and a ninth candle serving as a *shamus* and it is called a *hanukiah*. A *hanukiah* is a menorah with the largest amount of candles or wicks.

Then consider how we Jews have taken light and formed a ritual out of it or, if you please, hallowed it. There are the *shabbat* and holiday candles which include a minimum of two. There is the candle that we use on the eve of Passover for *bedikat chometz*, the ceremony for the search for leavened bread. There is the *yahrzeit* candle lighting the memory of the departed whose life continues to lighten our own. Then, of course, there is the *havdalah* candle whose twisted joined wicks provide the guiding light for the new week. All of them have special meanings and give us an

opportunity to express our feelings about one another, about the world and about God.

Light is also the source for many wonderful stories in Jewish literature. One of the most inspirational is the following:

A man was once wandering the streets of a shtetel deeply troubled by a problem. He had done something that was not quite proper and he was wondering how he could mend his soul. He happened to pass a tailor shop and through the window he saw a tailor bent over a flickering candle repairing a garment. The man went into the tailor shop and said to the owner, "It is late at night and the candle is almost out and you are obviously very weary. Why don't you stop?" And the tailor replied, "As long as the candle is burning, we can still mend." "Ah," the man thought, "that is really a spiritual message. As long as we live, we have the opportunity to mend our ways."

As long as we live, we have the opportunity for reconciliation, for changing our ways, for adopting better standards of behavior. As long as the fire of life burns in us, there is hope.

It is very revealing that in Israel the term for Hanukah is *hag haurim*, the Festival of Lights. What this refers to is the ancient legend that Hanukah is eight days because of a miracle of light. After the Maccabees had defeated the Assyrian Greeks, they came to rededicate the Temple. However, when they began to kindle the Eternal Light, they found they had only enough pure oil to last one day. They did not know what to do but they did have faith. So they lit the Eternal Light and, behold, a miracle occurred and it continued to burn for eight days.

Now modern scholars give other explanations for the eight day celebration of Hanukah. But the miracle still contains a basic truth and that truth

is the miracle of Jewish survival throughout the ages. Not only on Hanukah but on Purim and on Tisha B'Av and the remembrance of the Spanish Inquisition and upon recalling the Crusades and upon remembering the Holocaust...the important fact to remember is that we survived. That is the real miracle of Jewish existence. By all the laws of logic, of history and of sociology, we should not be here, but we are! We are the real miracles and each Jew is a candle whose light proclaims that Judaism continues to survive and will continue to survive.

Hanukah occurs near the time when we mark the shortest day of the year. But, if you reverse that statement, we also mark the longest night of the year. This is the time when we are enveloped in darkness, with cold, with all kinds of feelings about the blackness around us. But along come festivals whose celebration centers about lights. It is a way of saying; we do not give in to darkness; we create our own light. The light of understanding, the light of knowledge, the light of good will.

Once a rebbe was teaching and a wind came in and blew out the candle. The students were frightened by the darkness. One student said, "Let's get sticks and beat out the darkness." They did so but there was no light. Another student said, "Let's curse the darkness." And they all shouted but it was still dark. Finally, the candle was lighted and its warm glow brightened the whole room. And that is why it is written: "It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness."

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