

## POINTS OF VIEW

## Miracle of Hanukkah offers modern lessons

Two thousand years ago, the great religious leaders of the Jewish people described the miracle of Hanukkah in astoundingly concise terms: *During the occupation of the Holy Land by the Greeks the latter entered the inner sanctum of the Jerusalem Holy Temple and defiled all the oils.* (Jewish law recognizes states of "spiritual impurity" and "spiritual defilement." The olive oil used for the daily lighting of the Temple candelabrum, or Menorah in Hebrew was required to be utterly pure.) *When the Hasmonians defeated them, one small jug of oil was found which evidently had not been touched by the Greeks.* (The touch of an idol-worshipping pagan would defile the oil and render it unfit for Temple use.) *The little jug contained enough oil only for one day. The Menorah was rekindled and the oil miraculously lasted eight days, until new oil could be prepared.*

From the text of the Talmud it is

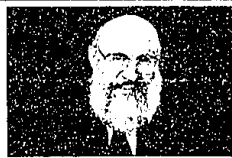
clear that the defilement of the oil was not accidental, but intentional and systematic. A question begs to be asked: If the purpose of the Greeks was to extinguish the light of the Menorah and prevent its rekindling, why did they merely defile the oil; why could they pour it all out?

Choosing their words with exquisite care, the great Talmudic sages were clueing us in as to the true objectives of the Greeks, not to prevent the rekindling of the Menorah, but rather that it should be rekindled with defiled oil.

Like oil from an olive, we can extract from the above the essential meaning of Hanukkah, as follows:

One of the most common words in Jewish religious parlance is the "Torah." This Hebrew word, meaning literally "the Teaching," refers to the overall body of G-dly wisdom given to the Jews, beginning with the Bible.

The Greeks were willing to recognize the Torah, or even accept it as a



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perfect and beautiful literary creation, a work of poetry, wisdom, profound philosophy, etc. — provided it was considered as a human creation — like their own mythology (for sure a human invention — with the deities represented in human shapes and forms, with human characteristics and passions.) As such, the essential core principles of the Torah could be and ought to be changed and modified from time to time, so as to be politi-

cally correct, to harmonize with the character of the ruling class and the novel ideas of the period. Such an approach, as planned by the Greeks, would gradually do away with the permanence and immutability of such well-known Jewish religious practices as the Sabbath, circumcision, and other commandments.

In a word, the Greeks did not aim at the suppression of the Torah, but at its acceptance as the G-d given word, as G-d's Torah.

Similarly, the Greeks were not adverse to the moral and ethical values contained in Torah, but they prohibited the so-called "supra-rational" precepts — such as keeping kosher — which, more than any other, distinguish the Jewish way of life and make it specifically Jewish, holy and pure.

Hanukkah reminds us that the greatest danger to the Jewish way of life lies not in the threat of extinguishing its light completely, but rather in the tendency to defile it by

feeding contaminated "oil" to its "Menorah." This tendency expresses itself in many ways: in the worship of materialism and material success; in the presentation of one man-made ideology after the other as the panacea of all human ills; in the idolatry of science and technology; in the tendency to measure everything by the yardstick of human reason.

Such attitudes do not necessarily rule out "religious experience," but either confine it to a narrow domain or worse still, produce a sort of pseudo-religiosity, where consecration and commitment are sacrificed to convenience and compromise.

Hanukkah teaches Israel and us that the sanctity and purity of Jewish life must, can, and will be preserved at all costs.

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## Messiah's magic found on the road with strangers

The bus pulled out of New York City's Port Authority 10 minutes late. It was a cold, wind-swept Christmas morning with no traces of snow to cover the litter-strewn city. The streets were virtually empty, a rare sight at any time of the year in New York.

The bus, too, was nearly empty. An elderly couple in the front who would later get off in Westchester County; a young man, military looking, who immediately fell asleep; a middle-aged woman and her young daughter, who did not seem to belong on a Greyhound bus at 8:10 a.m. on Christmas.

The driver made no acknowledgment of my entry. He, in fact, made no sound until another driver relieved him in Rochester. Even the little girl was remarkably quiet for the entire trip.

It was the first Christmas in what was then for me 24 Christmases in which I did not awake in my childhood home. I must confess a part of me felt free and very adult. Another part, however, felt very alone. Christmas dinner was a hamburger and some cardboard-like French fries in the bus station in Albany. The waitress was cheerful. She was in her late 40s or early 50s and widowed, she told me. Her only child was a son who could not get home for Christmas. That is why she decided to work. Everyone who comes in today will be my family, she said.

She gave me a big hug when I left and wished me a Merry Christmas. It was a genuine, motherly hug.

Between Albany and Rochester, I struck up a conversation with the middle-aged woman. She too was headed for Buffalo and her family



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home. She had to work Christmas Eve and hated that her daughter would spend Christmas on a bus, but she had no other choice.

We spoke of past Christmases, our best and our worst. We weren't sure where this one would fall, but we knew it wouldn't be the best.

It was a 12-hour bus trip. Somewhere on the journey I realized I was both connected to and now disconnected from my family in a new way. I would, in fact, spend only one more Christmas Day in the home of my birth. While something was lost on that trip, something new began to emerge. As I stared at the miles of frozen upstate New York farmland, I began to feel a unique sense of my own identity.

Rather than alone and forlorn, I

began to feel peacefully present with Christ. It is a feeling I would later identify as Immanuel: God with us.

What I will never forget about that trip is that for the first time I saw Christmas as being transcendent of time and place. Christmas was not only in family, trees and presents. It was also in strangers, aloneness and memory. While circumstances may vary and one may say this Christmas was better than that, the real power of Christmas is not in the circumstances. It is the inner experience of the God who is with us.

Peace to all, the angels proclaim. For unto you is born a Messiah. Peace to all.

The Rev. Richard Martzolf is the pastor of Christ the King Lutheran Church on Farmington Road in Livonia. He is a Livonia resident and a former newspaper reporter.

## Traditions of yuletide endure

When I was growing up, way back in the pre-television days of the '40s and '50s, the favored entertainment for my parents and their circle of friends was to get together and sing Christmas carols.

Each Christmastime, they would gather at a different house, sing for an hour or so, have a drink, sing again and finally break for a buffet supper.

And everybody had favorites. My mother's was the dramatic tale told in "The Coventry Carol." Mine was and still is "Lo, How a Rose E're Blooming," calling up such intense associations of the burning faith of the Middle Ages. Who could resist that soaring tenor line from "The First Noel?"

One family in the group was German in origin, so at the end of the evening we always sang a verse of "Silent Night" in German, "Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht" ringing in our ears as we walked through the snow to the car.

Everybody knew the words; most knew the parts.

Why? Because they were taught to every kid in elementary school. Back when I was in school, we always had Christmas trees and the Creche, complete with animals and Wise Men.

Nobody thought much about whether kids who were not Christian were made to feel uncomfortable by the practice. Most people back then simply assumed that Christian observances of Christmas were the appropriate expression of the dominant culture of America. And if Jewish kids who celebrated Hanukkah or black kids who followed Kwanzaa felt left out or put down, that was just too bad.

Of course, it was precisely that unthinking assumption of a dominant religious culture that led to the wholesale application of the First Amendment to state-supported schools and to the consequent elimination of religious practices such as Christmas carols from the school curriculum.

And although some may regret the way the First Amendment has now been interpreted so as to ban entirely all forms of religious practice from the schools, that may be a satisfactory tradeoff in a diverse America that seeks to respect all forms of religious commitment.

I found myself reflecting on this over the weekend because my wife, Kathy, and I have resurrected the old practice of my parents' generation and make our big annual holiday party a Christmas sing. We invite lots of friends, Christian and not, with the clear understanding that we will be singing carols from 5-8:30 p.m., then we stop and have cocktails and nibbles.



PHILIP POWER

I suppose all this is politically incorrect, but I don't much care. It's a lovely celebration of the season. It's consistent with my family's culture. And if some people don't want to sing Christmas carols, they can come after 8:30.

In fact, it turns out that a lot of the people most happily singing at our party this year were Jewish.

How did they learn the carols? Just the same way I did — in elementary school back in the '40s and '50s.

But that mechanism certainly isn't available to our kids.

Does that mean that Scott and Nathan, our children, will never enjoy Christmas carols in the way my parents did and I do? Or that the only way they will learn them is through the pre-masticated Christmas pop culture propagated by radio and TV?

No. It means that Kathy and I will have to teach them, include them in our caroling parties, talk with them about how much the carols and our tradition mean to us as a family. It means that we will urge our church to include carol singing as a regular part of Sunday school.

It means that the ways by which the particular culture of our family will be carried on from generation to generation will be up to us to build and develop as a family. We won't be able to rely on the all-too-easy assumption of my parents' day that the schools are going to do it for us.

It's harder. But it's better. Because it requires us to go to the conscious effort of identifying those parts of our family culture that we feel are of such value as to take the time and trouble to pass them on to our children.

Including singing "Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht" at the end of caroling parties.

Phil Power is chairman of HomeTown Communications Network Inc. He welcomes your comments, either by voice mail at (313) 953-2047, Ext. 1880, or by e-mail at ppower@online.com.

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