HAPPY HANUKKAH!

Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam,
she-asah nisim laavoteinu,
bayamim hahaeim baz'man hazeh.
A Reflection on the Meaning of Hanukkah in Our Days...

The festival of Hanukkah celebrates the victory over Antiochus and of the liberation of Judaea. The Rabbis changed the festival from a celebration of military victory to a celebration of the rededication of the Temple. Hanukkah now celebrates a spiritual victory; the victory of Jewish culture over Hellenization and assimilation.

The Rabbis marked the festival with the lighting of candles. This is remarkable. December was the time of Saturnalia, a festival that marked the winter solstice. It was celebrated by lighting candles and giving gifts. In some places an additional candle was lit each night, and in some places, it was lasted 8 days!

This shouldn’t surprise us. The Rabbis frequently adapted surrounding culture instead of building barriers against it.

When different cultures live together, there is a tension between the wish to become part of the world around and the wish to preserve one’s own unique identity. We live in an age of cultural suspicion. There is a growing fear of the other; migrants, asylum seekers and those of different ethnic or social backgrounds. Many in the Jewish community consider building walls as the solution to assimilation.

As we light our Chanukah candles we should remember that the Rabbis considered cultural adaptation as a stronger tool than cultural exclusion. They believed that it was possible to add Jewish content to universal forms; to be broadly the same and specifically different.

As we celebrate this wonderful Greco-Roman Jewish festival, as we give gifts like everyone else but recite blessings that are uniquely ours, we should reflect on how difficult the balancing act the Rabbis tried to achieve was, and how successful the strategy of cultural adaptation has been in preserving Jewish identity through numerous challenges and over many centuries.

Rabbi Chaim Weiner
Kislev 5777
Hannukah – An invitation to reflect on time

There is a well-known argument in the Talmud (Shabbat 21b) between the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai, on how to light the Hanukkah candles. Shamai says that on the first day, we should light all the candles of the Hanukkah and to reduce by one each night. Hillel suggests lighting one candle on the first day and to add one more each night – as we do today.

One of the reasons given by the Talmud is that Shamai lights keneged yamim hanichnasim (it is not only what you did, but how much more potential you have), whereas Hillel lights keneged yamim hayotze’im (as the days that have already passed). On the fourth night, for example, Shamai lights five candles, as there are five days, whereas Hillel lights four candles, as four days have already passed. These two approaches, show us how the present is fleeting. To appreciate the present, Shammai looks toward building the future, while Hillel remembers the past.

In light of this argument, why do we light candles in the way of Hillel? Perhaps, because the only thing we have is our present, which is made up by the sum of our pasts; the future is a question, an opportunity and a challenge.

May God let us add Jewish life to our lives today; that is the way we celebrate Hanukkah, the festival that connects us and lights up our identity.

Rabbi Ariel Kleiner
Executive Director for Masorti Latin America
The Hannukiah – A Symbol of Confidence

Every year, shortly before Hanukkah, I think about the meaning of this holiday. And thinking about it, the main miracle is not a jar with oil, but rather that a small population won over a big empire.

In March 2012, immediately after I finished my rabbinical studies at the Schechter Institute in Jerusalem, my family and I were sent as Schlichim by Midreshet Schechter and Masorti Olami to Ukraine. A little over a year later, difficult times began in Ukraine: the Ukrainian Pride Revolution, the invasion of territory in southern Ukraine by a powerful nation and a war in east Ukraine (Donetsk & Lugansk) with Russia, causing a dramatic economic crisis.

These events in Ukraine are much comparable to those in the State of Israel. I hear from different people (not Jews) that Ukraine must use the State of Israel as an example, both financially and in terms of security, and learn from Israel to defend the country from an enemy much stronger.

Ukrainians are listening to this advice and they don’t yet know the story of Hanukkah!

Hanukkah is also named the Festival of Lights. Through the main symbol, the Hannukiah, we have to spread the message of the miracle and inspire more confidence in the Jewish people. Our Masorti community in Kiev thought that especially this year, the stories and symbols of Hanukkah will do the same for the Ukrainian people. We decided to build and install a Hannukiah of 4 meters in the main square of Kiev.

We hope, also, that the light of this Hannukiah will help to strengthen the relationship between the Jewish people and Ukrainian people.

Chag Orot Sameach! Happy Festival of Lights!

Rabbi Reuven Stamov
Masorti Olami and Midreshet Schechter Shaliach in Ukraine