

Hanukkah is a festival of freedom

It's about more than light alone.

By Susan Schaefer | DECEMBER 11, 2020 — 5:49PM



JOE BURBANK • ORLANDO SENTINEL VIA AP

The sun sets behind Rabbi Tzviky Dubov of the Chabad of Greater Orlando as he lights the menorah, commemorating the first night of Hanukkah in Maitland, Fla., on Dec. 10.

Hanukkah represents a universal ideal — the freedom to celebrate one's own beliefs. As a secular humanist of Jewish heritage, I believe in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which, among other freedoms, guarantees that of safely practicing religious beliefs.

Like the majority of European Jews, my grandparents were denied religious freedom and harshly persecuted for their beliefs. Witnessing such baseless hatred continue into the 21st century motivates me to retell the Hanukkah story each year, highlighting its essential human rights message of freedom from religious persecution and freedom of speech.

This year, Hanukkah began at sundown on Dec. 10. Like all Jewish holidays, the Hanukkah celebration is festive, centering on remembrance, song and foods, featuring the well-known lighting of candles for eight nights, dreidel games and potato "latkes."

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Although the terms "festival" and "miracle" are commonly associated with Hanukkah, its literal translation is the word "dedication." Beyond the famous miracle of the bit of oil that lasted for eight days and nights, the act of lighting the candles represents the rekindling of the spirit of courage and dedication to preserving religious freedom.

According to the biblical legend, in the second century B.C. the Jews of Palestine found themselves in a familiar situation, once again being persecuted for their religious beliefs. Around 168 B.C., a Syrian king named Antiochus Epiphanes openly proclaimed his hatred of the Jews, intensifying his campaign to obliterate Judaism and replace it with Hellenism. His torture of Jews included forcing them to pay homage to Greek gods and perform blood sacrifices at the pagan altars of Hellenism.

Such practices struck at the very heart of Judaism. But the ultimate indignity was Antiochus' erecting a pagan altar in their most sacred Temple in Jerusalem. An aged Jewish priest, Mahathais Maecabaeus, living nearby Jerusalem in the city Modin, not only refused to engage in blood sacrifice, but also slew an apostate Jew who was about to do so. Mahathais' defiance was the first blow against persecution in those times. For the next three years, the aged rebel and his five sons led a revolt against Antiochus, Hellenism and religious persecution.

After Mahathais died, his third son, Judas, continued the revolt, finally defeating the well-fed, well-equipped army of Antiochus with his own raggedy troops. His ultimate triumph, however, was the restoration of the sacred Temple in Jerusalem. He and his followers cleaned and purified the desecrated Temple, expelling false idols and scrubbing the blood of heathen sacrifice.

And so, the legend goes, it was during this restoration that they discovered the precious vial of oil which had been used to fuel the Temple's Eternal Light. On 25 Kislew, in the year 165 B.C., Judas and his people rededicated the sacred Temple, and although there was only enough oil to burn for one day, it miraculously lasted eight days and nights.

Hanukkah represents far more than a miracle of lights. It represents the dedication of a people to the ideal of religious freedom. Given this wider significance, everyone can wish each other a happy Hanukkah in the hopes that we all have the freedom to celebrate our own customs in our own way.

Susan Schaefer lives in Minneapolis.