

# “Better to Light a Candle”

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So, just what would you have done?

With only a night’s supply of oil, would you have used it?  
Would you have lit the eternal flame?

Especially knowing that it would be a full week  
before you could make up another batch of oil.

And fully aware of all the work to be done,  
just to press the precious fuel from those countless olives.

The question for each of us to ask of ourselves is:  
would you have spent the oil, or saved it for another day?

This is the question of Chanukah that most intrigues me.

Now, of course, there is much more to the story.  
Much of it, you may already know quite well.

Alexander the Great conquered Persia,  
ushering in the Hellenistic Period throughout the region.

Upon his death, his empire was divided among his generals,  
with the area of Judea going, after some thirty years of war,  
first to the Egyptians, and a century later,  
to the Macedonian kings of Syria.

Over the generations of being ruled by their empire-building neighbours,  
the Jews developed as a strategy for survival  
a “quiescent attitude” that served their interests well,  
given their circumstances—  
a careful balancing act between preserving their heritage and identity  
while being careful not to provoke the ire of the authorities without cause.

That strategy generally worked until Antiochus, the Syrian king, ordered the takeover of the Temple in Jerusalem, profaning it by erecting a giant statue of Zeus at its centre and encouraging, as a provocation, the sacrifice of pigs in its courtyards.

To make matters worse, he repeatedly compelled the Jews to violate the commandments of the Torah, demanding they participate in ritual sacrifices made to the gods of the Greeks.

When they could take no more, the resistance began, rebellion ensued, with the most prominent uprising being the Maccabean revolt in the year 167 before the Common Era.

Three years from the day that the statue of Zeus was erected, Judas Maccabeus, along with his followers, reclaimed the Temple, and promptly set themselves to purifying it, and restoring it to its original, sacred purposes in an eight-day celebration.

To commemorate this great feat, arguably the first recorded battle for religious freedom, Chanukah has been celebrated more or less continuously for 2,183 years.

After the Christmas pageant last Sunday, someone asked me, knowing that we would be honouring Chanukah today, whether we would be reenacting the battle during this morning's service.

Not this year, I was sorry to say.  
But there is always next year...

But, alongside this celebrated, and, I must say, complicated story of the Jews' victory in reclaiming their religious freedom and reoccupying the Temple, what I still find most remarkable is that once the battle had ended, once the bloodshed had ceased, and the temple was scrubbed clean, someone found the last remaining container of oil that had been consecrated by a Jewish priest many years before, and rather than privately hoarding it, rather setting it aside for another day,

rather than selling it in the marketplace,  
that person chose to reignite the eternal flame that had long burned  
as a sign to the Jewish people of God's presence in the Temple.

Of course, we all know the story of the "miracle of the oil."

That that small bit of oil—a single day's supply—burned steadily on  
for a full eight days, the whole length of the rededication of the Temple.

As surprising as this might seem,  
that miracle wasn't actually a part of the Chanukah story  
until the second century of the Common Era,  
when Talmudic scholars turned the tale of the great military battle  
into a story of God's sustaining grace to the Jewish people.

Now, the skeptics among us will, of course,  
wonder whether any or all of this actually happened.

It's a fair question—  
the kind we have a proud tradition of asking as Unitarians.

But there is another question to consider that is just as, if not more, important,  
the question of: just what does all of this mean?

While I hold a healthy skepticism toward most any miraculous claim,  
I side with Wendell Berry who says that,  
"To treat life as less than a miracle is to give up on it."

And, sure enough, when we do take to living our lives in this way,  
with wonder and awe at the amazing spectacle of it all,  
we do, indeed, begin to notice that miracles can take many forms  
and do, indeed, abound all around us.

We witness such miraculous moments  
when love overcomes hate and resentment,  
when people break free from self-absorption and reach out,  
when hope leads us on to create futures we only once dreamed.

Having seen enough of these moments around me,  
I'm willing to be open to the possibility  
that the oil burned longer than was ever predicted.

And I think that's an important story to recall  
whenever we find ourselves down  
to what may seem to be our last bit of hope.

As one commentator describes it, that:

“single bottle of oil symbolized the last irreducible minimum  
of spiritual light and creativity within the Jewish people—  
still there, even in [their] worst moments of apathy and idolatry.

The ability of that single jar of oil to stay lit for eight days  
symbolized how... that tiny amount could unfold  
into an infinite supply of spiritual riches.”<sup>1</sup>

But, as I said earlier, it is this aspect of the Chanukah story  
that most touches me: that somewhere along the way,  
the decision was made to pour out that last supply of oil,  
without knowing that it would be enough.

It was an act of faith, the kind that we are called to make  
with each day we are given.

But how hard that can be, in actual practice.

My spiritual director, Sarah,  
a retired UU minister with whom I meet regularly  
to reflect on the health of my own spiritual life, tells of a time  
when she was visited by her niece, who was home from university.<sup>2</sup>

The niece interrupted her, while she was writing.

“Can I have this?” she said, holding up a rug  
that had been handed down in the family.”

“No,” [Sarah] said,  
“That is a genuine Navajo rug—it's very valuable.  
You don't put a rug like that on the floor.”

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Waskow, *Seasons of Our Joy: Modern Guide to the Jewish Holidays*, Beacon Press, 91-92.

<sup>2</sup> Sarah York, “What are you saving it for” in *Listening for Our Song: Collected Meditations*, Volume Four, Margaret Beard, editor, Skinner House, 46-47.

“How about this?” [the niece] asked,  
displaying a large piece of [fabric Sarah’s] husband  
had brought back...from a trip to India.  
“It would look great on the couch [in my apartment].”

“I really don’t want that to be worn out,” [Sarah said, again.]

“Well, what about [these]?”

“You don’t [use glassware] like that...”

“And these?”

“You don’t put old quilts like those on beds...”

Finally, [the niece] gave up.

“Why do you just keep all these things stored away  
in a closet where no one can enjoy them?”

“What are you saving them for?”

Sarah admits that it’s an excellent question.

And she admits that she has been  
“saving them for the sake of saving them—  
to hold on to something of the past.”

The question “what are you saving it for”  
is one we would do well to ask ourselves more often.

While we should endeavour to leave  
as small a footprint as possible on this planet when our time is done,  
there’s something to be said for using what is ours to use,  
especially when it comes to the time and energy and love in our lives.

There’s a snippet by George Bernard Shaw I have in my head that goes,  
“when I die I want to be thoroughly used up.”

I love that idea.

I'm so often inspired by those around me who I see living this way, and I want more and more to be like them—to hold nothing back.

To live in this way—into the fullest expression of our lives—can be just about the hardest thing that is ever asked of us.

And, while we may find ourselves overwhelmed by the enormity of such a great challenge, the simple truth is that living this way unfolds not so much in the grand gestures and work to the point of exhaustion, but in the little things, the thousand mundane decisions we make across a day about how we will spend our resources of time, and energy, and love.

It involves asking ourselves, “what we are saving them for,” and then opening our hearts to the great letting go—letting go of our control over the details and the outcomes, and of our petty insistence on knowing how the story will turn out before we take any action.

This can be an especially hard thing to do when we are determined to build with our lives a better world, to do all that we can to bend the moral arc of the universe toward justice.

Most, if not all, of us have strong views about the world we want to see.

And, it is surely a great source of frustration to us all that the onward, upward march of human progress is so often undermined by the very challenges that come with simply being human.

But, to hold out hope against the odds, to make whatever moves we can in whatever ways we can, is nothing less than an act of faith.

It's what Unitarian Universalist theologian Sharon Welch calls living with an “ethic of risk.”

As a worldview, it “begins with the recognition that we cannot guarantee decisive changes

in the near future or even in our lifetime.”

But we can choose to act anyway.

She says that this ethic requires of us vigilance,  
for if “...we lose the ability to imagine a world  
that is any different than that of [our] present [reality];  
we lose the ability to imagine strategies of resistance  
and ways of sustaining each other in the long struggle for justice.”

“We lose the ability to care, [and] to love life in all its forms.”

“[And] we cannot numb our pain at the degradation of life,” she says,  
“without numbing our joy at its abundance.”

This ethic of risk is a call to life, and life more abundant.

A call to hold out our small candle of hope,  
to pour out our oil of gladness,  
to use up our lives,  
all as an act of faith—  
that our work will, in the end, come to something.

It’s no small thing to make that leap of faith,  
especially against the backdrop of the present worrying state of the world.

The truth is that we may not live to witness  
the tidy fulfillment of our heart’s longing.

We can’t always control the outcome or the timing  
of how the story of the world unfolds.

But, we can always ask what we’re saving the gifts of our life for,  
and decide instead to use whatever small bit of oil we have,  
trusting that it will be enough to make some difference.

It’s not been more elegantly said than it was by the poet Adrienne Rich:

My heart is moved by all I cannot save:  
So much has been destroyed

I have to cast my lot with those  
Who age after age, perversely,  
With no extraordinary power,  
Reconstitute the world.

May we be such a people.

At this festival of lights,  
let us cradle the world in the hope of our faith,  
and rededicate ourselves to the cause of the well-being of one and all.

Let us know, in thought, word, and deed,  
that it is far better  
“to light a candle than to curse the darkness.”

So be it.