

## Rabbi's Column

Hanukkah has arrived once more. A brief synopsis: After Alexander the Great died, his empire was divided into three parts. Israel was overseen by the part headquartered in what is now Syria. These Assyrians were ruled by Antiochus who decided that one method of unification involved outlawing circumcision, Shabbat and Torah study. There were some other requirements which proved onerous to Mattityahu and his children along with their supporters, who militarily fought a guerrilla war for a while. They succeeded in making the area too difficult to control militarily, and so this minor Jewish holiday lasting for eight days commemorates the moments when the Jews were able to take their religious holy spaces back again for a bit from the Assyrian Greek oppressors.

The festival celebrates religious freedom of a surprisingly American bent (despite America not even being a glimmer at the time of the Maccabean revolt). It is not the freedom to decide the best religion for everyone. It is not the freedom to forcibly convert others to this optimum religion. It is not the freedom even to merely make all other expressions of religion illegal. It is the freedom to not be coerced concerning religion.

I feel it is important to focus on this freedom and how it applies to everyone.

Most Americans seem to agree that religious groups can worship as they desire and further that their religion should in some manner inform their daily activities. America also tolerates people who live in religious enclaves and limit how much modernity is utilized within the community. As long as the people in the enclaves (the Amish are the prime example that comes to my mind) do not request or require that the rest of us live life in their pattern, everything seems to be satisfactory.

We can think about Hanukkah as a cautionary tale, a reminder that even things that seem to make perfect sense are sometimes problematic. In the era of the Maccabees (and for some time afterwards, and possibly before), allowing the local gods equal placement with the winning gods was a religious innovation that was designed to help unify the region. This peaceful continuation of unification by force seemed a perfectly sensible religious tweak. It worked for the polytheists in the crowd. In our era, where there are few polytheists, we understand completely why such a reasonable suggestion did not work as well for the few monotheists.

Just a thought for a thought exercise. Take a given policy which affects religions in some manner, and see if somebody might look at it as Mattityahu and family looked at the policies of Antiochus. If somebody might, then a more difficult step is to find a tweak which maintains freedom from religious coercion as well as freedom from discrimination for any other reason.

May the lights in our lives increase during this Hanukkah season.