

Rabbi's Column

As promised, here is the column which appeared on the religion page this past Shabbat (I currently forget what title the editor gave it):

This year, the first light of Hanukkah was lit on Sunday, December 6 and the festival ends at sundown Monday, December 14. Just to get that out of the way.

If you don't remember the basic story, here it is: One of Alexander the Great's political heirs acquired the region which included modern day Israel. The people there were not completely in favor of acting like everyone else. Eventually the ones who were in favor of acting like everyone else stepped very far over the line, helped by the Syrian Greek leader who, in order to forestall rebellion, declared the Jewish actions of observing Shabbat, performing circumcision and studying Torah to be capital crimes. Rather than quelling any rebellion before it could take off, these decrees strengthened it.

We commemorate the momentary victory of the Maccabees by lighting candles, singing songs, playing games, eating specific fried foods, and remembering what happened. Oh, and many people give things to each other.

The reason for celebrating Hanukkah for eight days that most people know about is the miraculous oil from the amazing jar which burned for eight days instead of one; the reason I mentioned in passing last year is that the people missed celebrating the fall harvest festival at the appropriate time so they celebrated it for all its eight days once the Temple was back in their hands.

I came across a third reason for why we light our lights on Hanukkah in the fashion that we do. During the process of cleaning the Temple grounds, the group came across eight spears. They planted the spears in the ground, prepared them in some fashion to hold oil, filled them with oil and lit them, making the celebration that year an easily visible festival of lights.

The prophet Isaiah indicates that eventually we will switch the implements we use to fight with each other into implements meant to encourage the ground to yield its produce.

This story of the Maccabees goes a bit further. The spears, as items found on the Temple grounds (where implements of warfare are not allowed as a rule), must have belonged to the Syrian Greeks. As such, their function was to increase fear. Not reverence or awe, but fear. Having been transmuted into a candelabrum, fear is no longer the message. In place of fear, they symbolize hope and peace.

This year the festival of lights also coincides with Pearl Harbor Day, the day that will live in infamy. The leading enemy countries of WWII are no longer considered enemies of America. Some are even considered allies and possibly friends. The dark deeds that betrayal and wartime lead to have, for many people, become the impetus for increased cooperation and spiritual

growth for many. The spear like equivalents which pierced through justice and freedom for all, within this country and elsewhere, have been transmuted with time and understanding into points of light suggesting the hope for eventual peace.

The world needs a greater share of hope and peace this year than it might have needed (at least for many of us) during most of the previous number of years. We are often acting scared of what might be, and we can choose to spend a lot of our life trying to prevent scary things from happening to us. We can also choose to use the life we are given to make the world a better place for everyone. May we take whatever extra good will we feel during this season of lights and use it to do just that.