

## Which Candle Will You Light?

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### Readings

from Zechariah 4:1-3

The angel who talked with me came again, and wakened me, as one is wakened from sleep. He said to me, “What do you see?” And I said, “I see a lampstand all of gold, with a bowl on the top of it; there are seven lamps on it, with seven lips on each of the lamps that are on the top of it. And by it there are two olive trees, one on the right of the bowl and the other on its left.”

from “The Prophetic Green Menorah” by Rabbi Arthur Waskow, director of the Shalom Center

...the Green Menorah can become the symbol of a covenant to renew the miracle of Hanukkah in our own generation: Using one day's oil to meet eight days' needs. By 2020, cutting oil consumption by seven-eighths.

If this seems overwhelmingly hard to accomplish against the entrenched power of our own oil empires, Hanukkah also reminds us of the victory of the guerrilla band of Maccabees over the great empire of their generation: Small groups of seemingly powerless human beings can face huge and powerful institutions – and change the world.

But let us not stop at the economic, political, or even ecological levels of meaning. At the spiritual level, since "eight" is the number of "Beyond," the storied eight-day miracle reminds us that the Infinite is always present in the One. It reminds us that conserving oil, or coal, or our planet, is not just a political or economic or even ecological decision. It comes when we take into our hearts the knowledge that addiction to material possessiveness, hyper-ownership, is likely to be a form of idolatry – not of our well-being.

Beyond "every thing" is the Infinite – and the Infinite is always present when we choose to light the Light.

### Sermon

A prisoner in Camp Six at Guantanamo languishes without charges, without hope that he will ever be released. From his isolation cell he asks his lawyer to tell his wife that he will always love her, but that she should move on with her life – because he believed he would never leave Guantanamo.

The CIA destroys tapes of harsh interrogations. What are we not supposed to see and hear and know?

Our new attorney general, presidential candidates, the president and vice-president seem to be unsure if subjecting a prisoner to near-drowning is torture or not.

What have we come to? What kind of society are we? What kind of people are we?

In the Book of Maccabees, the source for most of what we know about the story behind the Jewish festival of Hanukkah, the tortures of Jews under the ruling Greek King Antiochus are recounted in graphic detail – seven sons, for example, dismembered and burned, all in front of their mother.

Well, some might say, we don't do *that* sort of thing. We're not *that* bad.

Just as we say, and truthfully, that whatever the military and the CIA and who knows what other shadowy agencies may have done to prisoners under their control, it is nothing like the beheadings and other horrific crimes for which Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups are responsible.

But what kind of measure is that? Don't we hold ourselves to a higher measure of decency than comparisons with ancient despots and modern terrorists would suggest?

As Sabin Willett, the lawyer for that Guantanamo prisoner, wrote in an Boston Globe column (September 27, 2006):

When, I wonder, did we become such a small people? So panicked by foes that we lash out at friends, so terrified by those who hate freedom that we abandon the very institutions that make us free?

Who *are* we as a people, a nation, as human beings? Who do we want to be?

Which candle do we really wish to light? A flame of war or a gentle candle of peace?

Which candle do we wish to light? A flame that strikes fear into the hearts of others, or a light of justice that gives hope to others?

Isn't there enough suffering in life that comes simply with being alive, being human, being mortal, that we shouldn't add to that suffering gratuitously, needlessly through choices we make about how to treat one another?

As you know, we are near the end of the festival of Hanukkah. Perhaps most of you know that traditionally Hanukkah is a relatively minor festival on the Jewish calendar. Indeed, at one time in Jewish history the rabbis wanted to do away with Hanukkah altogether. They were uncomfortable with its historical roots in the story of a military victory of the Jewish Maccabees against their Greek rulers.

Well, the rabbis found that they couldn't do away with Hanukkah, so instead they did their best to infuse the festival with spiritual meaning. First, by asserting that it was not human might that led to the victory of the Maccabees, but rather it was through God's intervention. We heard the words in the second hymn: "your word broke their sword when our own strength failed us."

And whatever your religion or theology, perhaps we can agree that the root of many of our problems is a kind of ego-driven belief that its all about us and our strength and power. Whereas the truth of the matter is that we are part of an interdependent web of life. We can't control everything; indeed we get into trouble when we try. So... letting go of over-weening pride would be worth lighting another candle for. (That would be our third candle.)

In a related spirit, the rabbis put increasing emphasis on the legend of the oil, the story as you know that only one cruse of oil miraculously lasted for the eight days of the festival of re-dedication of the Temple. The rabbis taught that each day's additional light represented increasing spiritual illumination.

Well... whether or not you believe in literal miracles like the miracle of the oil, it would be hard to argue with our need for increasing spiritual and moral illumination – in our shared life in community and for each of us. This is surely worth lighting yet another a candle for.

Now I'm determined to get to eight candles. So here's another one: My old friend Steve Karol, the former rabbi at Congregation Sha'Aray Shalom here in Hingham described Hanukkah as a celebration of the right to be different. After all, that was what the Jews under Antiochus wanted – the right to continue to be observant Jews. Today, all these centuries later in our contemporary American culture, overwhelmingly Christian, yet at the same time increasingly diverse culturally and religiously, what more relevant message could there still be – particularly

at this time of year? We all have the right to be different. There's a sentiment, a right, worth lighting a candle for!

And – a related candle – how appropriate it is that this celebration of religious freedom takes place each year at about the same time as International Human Rights Day, December 10, this year marking the 59<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the adoption by the UN General Assembly of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights? There's something else worth lighting a candle for!

Six candles.

Seventh?

With thanks to Rabbi Arthur Waskow, I would invoke what he calls the Green Menorah, and light one candle to inspire the greening of our culture and our world. This may at first seem like a leap, a very different sort of candle, maybe not particularly related to the message of Hanukkah or to these other candles... but not really.

As we heard in the reading, Waskow points out that the simple image of one cruse of oil lasting for eight days can inspire us to find ways to manage with one eighth the fossil fuel energy we currently use, thereby not only reducing global warming and healing the planet but reducing the supposed need for wars (and the related injustices and cruelties) to secure increasingly scarce fossil fuel energy sources. That is surely worth a candle! Worth a candle particularly as representatives from most of the world's nations are gathered in Bali to try to forge an agreement to deal effectively with global warming and climate change.

Seven candles.

What about the eighth? What could possibly be left?

Well, the entire menorah, with all these meanings interwoven suggests to me a different way of living – as individuals, as nations, and as a world. And as we also heard in the reading, the number eight Waskow tells us traditionally represents that which is... beyond (think of it: one more than seven, the number of lamps on a non-Hanukkah menorah, one more than the number of days in a week).

Waskow tells us that “beyond” suggests the Infinite, and we might think in terms of how the “Infinite” – the divine, the Spirit of Life, God – informs our lives and our choices. We could in this spirit experience the eighth candle as illuminating the “beyond” of a different kind of world. We could experience the eighth candle as leading our way to a world beyond over-consumption, a world in which power over others is replaced with power shared with others, a world in which adherents of each faith are tolerant of those of other faiths or of no religious faith, a world in which spiritual and moral values are embraced as more important than ego and greed, a world in which human rights not only of freedom and democracy, but rights to health care and adequate food and shelter, trump the struggle for oil and other scarce resources – quite simply a world in which we are kinder to one another. A world beyond this one... yet perhaps within our grasp.

Altogether an integrated vision worth a candle!

Actually, worth a whole menorah! Because it is all there – the world as we would want it to be represented by eight simple candles...

And though for us 21<sup>st</sup> century folks it may seem a world apart, Zechariah's vision of a menorah which we heard in the first reading, a vision of a menorah and two olive trees, offers us in symbolic form this same integrated vision of life. Picture it in your mind's eye if you can. Two olive trees feeding a continuous supply of oil (bio-fuel!) to the bowl and the lamps of a large menorah, itself a tree-like shape. For though we might usually think of a candelabra of any kind as a purely human artifact, it also offers a visual echo of a tree with branches, echoing in turn the ancient universal symbol of the tree of life, an image of life in its wholeness and interdependence.

Surely worth all eight candles! Peace, justice, humility, spiritual and moral growth, our many and universal human rights, our quest to conserve and use resources more wisely, our vision of a world made whole, a vision of shalom (which means peace and wholeness) – a world, certainly our American nation, in which prisoners do not languish without charges or hearings for years, a world in natural balance.

With all this in your mind's eye, I hope you will never see a menorah in quite the same way...

Yet all this said... I'd like to conclude on a more personal, close to hearth and heart note.

For though there are surely all manner of social justice and ecological and political candles to light... in other words there are things we can do with our voices and our votes in relation to these huge issues – we also and at the same time live our lives closer to home, daily with one another. In other words, the lights are personal too, not just social and political. And our personal lives aren't always easy. Our own lights – or the lights of those we love, or the lights of our neighbors – may sometimes feel weak and dim. What then?

Well, Albert Schweitzer once wrote, "At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person."

In turn, sometimes we are the one who rekindles the light of another. To put it in Hanukkah language, sometimes we are the shammas candle, the helper, the ninth candle that lights the others. And sometimes we are the candle that needs lighting. It's a good thing there's more than one of us!

I was thinking of this sort of thing during Merrie Market last Saturday. There we were, wreath-makers and bird-makers, bakers and cooks, the Alliance, treasures, books, the very young and the very old... there we were doing what needed to be done to make Merrie Market happen, there we were eating lunch, there we were buying a special gift, there we were... yet though the scene was festive, it was also true that many in the room were carrying great burdens of loss or challenge of all kinds – personal, psychological, medical, financial...

So, yes, on the face of it a festive community event. And at the same time this interweaving of lives... and lights, some perhaps nearly out, some rekindled by another, some burning bright, each necessary for the others.

There *are* so many candles we can light, for peace and justice and the earth... and for each other... during this season of lights – Hanukkah, Solstice, Christmas. There are so many candles we can light

The good news is... there is light to go around. For the light of love and kindness is not a scarce resource.

There *is* light to go around.

May we use it wisely.

May we be lights, one for another – for our world, our nation, our community, for one another.

May we accept the gift of light from another.

There is light to go around.

This season. Always.

Which candle will we each light?

For there is more than enough light to go around. So may it always be.