

From Rabbi Cantor Sam Radwine - January 2024

Perhaps you're already tired of hearing about Chanukah? Usually, after the chanukiah is put away, and the wax drippings have been scraped up, we close the door on the "Festival of Lights" and move forward in the calendar. Please permit me one more word:

Earlier in my career, I would always teach that Chanukah had to be put into perspective. It was an historical holiday that happened long after our Tanach, our Hebrew Bible had been codified. The story, which is found in the Book of Maccabees is not even part of our Holy Scripture. Even the story of the miracle of the oil does not appear until several centuries after the Hasmonean Revolt and the rededication of the Temple. In truth the Rabbis needed to "elevate" the meaning of Chanukah to make it a "spiritual" happening.

However, I now find that my teaching about Chanukah has changed. Certainly, the previously mentioned facts are still true. However, the nature of the meaning of Chanukah has evolved, especially in the realities of our Jewish community of the 21st Century. Even before the events of October 7th and the Hamas War, the American Jewish Community has and will be confronting our identity in new ways. As we respond to the increase in Antisemitic occurrences, we are continually asking ourselves what it means to be a Jew at this time. Jewish identity cannot be assumed. I heard more than one family considering whether or not it was okay to set their chanukiah in the window as they had in previous years.

The historical back story of Chanukah has the Jews of Ancient Israel asking themselves many of the same questions. What does it mean to be a Jew when everyone around you is not? And how again do we respond to the questions from within and without?

This past Chanukah, you the members of the Temple Israel community have responded and you have answered in the greatest way possible. You said: "Hineini—here we are!" For our Friday night Shabbat Chanukah dinner and service, both rooms were full! There was comfort and joy (pun intended) in simply being with each other in these challenging times. And on Sunday, that joy was replicated in our Religious School's holiday celebration. Kudos to all who volunteered their energies for both events.

And for this reason alone, let us understand the Festival of Lights to also be the Festival of **Identity**. We don't have to wait till the next 25th of Kislev to embrace that understanding. Each time one Jew sits with another Jew, we assert the primacy of who we are, and together we can strengthen each other.

Wishing you all strength and wholeness for the coming year and always.