

“What did you expect?”

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
First Parish Unitarian Universalist
Cohasset, MA
December 17, 2006

Tonight is the third night of Hanukkah, the Jewish Festival of Lights. I could refer to Hanukkah as a holiday of hope, for hope surely drove the ancient Maccabees in their resistance to the oppression of their Hellenistic rulers. Yet Hanukkah itself means “dedication” and recalls the rededication of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem after Judah and his fellow warriors, the Maccabees, triumphed over their oppressors. Until then, they were not free to practice their faith. A scant portion of oil had been rescued from the original temple. In the aftermath of their triumph, the Jews were exhilarated. In the prelude to the rededication of the temple, they were humbled, for the oil that had been salvaged was only enough to burn for a single day. They kindled the lamp and waited. One day, two days, three, four, five days, then six, then seven, then eight full days the oil burned. The light that shone forth from the temple transcended all expectations.

Thirteen years ago in the town of Billings, Montana, an electric menorah twinkled in the home of young Isaac Schnitzer and his family. Four candles glowed – the *shammash*, known as the servant candle, and three of the other eight. They too were celebrating the third night of Hanukkah. Isaac was busy in the den doing his math homework. His parents had gone out and a babysitter was there with him, though at that threshold age of eight, Isaac probably thought himself too old to need one. Not so.

Suddenly, a “Crash!” sounded nearby. He and his sitter rushed down the hall to Isaac’s bedroom, which seemed to be the source of alarm. On the floor lay the menorah, still twinkling, next to a rock that had shattered the window and sent the target menorah flying. Isaac’s sitter wasted no time in phoning his parents. They came home at once and wasted no time in phoning the police.

Isaac was jarred as they all were. Police Chief Inman was known to be attentive to community needs to all who lived in Billings. Isaac was ushered into the safety of his parents’ bedroom as his Mom and Dad conferred with Chief Inman in the living room. With his ear to the door, Isaac heard the muffled sounds of early counsel to take down the Hanukkah lights. The refusal came swiftly from Isaac’s mother, Tammy. “Being Jewish is who we are – we’re not going to hide it.” With that, Isaac rushed into the living room, astounded. He couldn’t believe that someone would throw a rock through their window just because they were Jewish. Chief Inman explained that a small group of people had arrived in town in the past few weeks and had targeted the homes of Jews, Native-Americans, and African-Americans with acts of hate and vandalism. The Chief of Police stood ready to work with the Schnitzer family and with the entire community to resist.

What unfolded over the next several days recalls the solidarity demonstrated by so many in this unsuspecting town. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

Isaac was frightened. While his parents comforted him, they were determined to let their Hanukkah lights shine in the face of hate that had struck home. Tammy Schnitzer was already active in the community. Now was a time to be proactive. She quickly arranged a press conference on local TV. Young Isaac was first fearful, then embarrassed, then proud. A feature article ran in the *Billings Gazette*. Chief Inman called a town meeting, a reminder for us that New England doesn’t hold a monopoly on such gatherings!

Margaret MacDonald, a close friend of Isaac’s family and a woman who spoke her mind on par with Tammy Schnitzer, was there. As Chief Inman spoke with the townspeople about what

they were up against and asked for suggestions about what they might do, a light went on inside Margaret MacDonald. She rose and recalled for all present the story told by her parents of the resistance of the Danish people during World War II. In so many countries of Europe, including Denmark, the invading Nazis had ordered all Jews to sew Stars of David on their clothing so they could be quickly identified. Denmark's King Christian courageously and visibly sported his own Star of David on his outer coat, as he rode on horseback through the streets of the cities and villages of his country. Soon other Danes joined him. Because non-Jewish Danes stood in solidarity with their Jewish neighbors, many lives were saved.

What to do in Billings? Rather than taking menorahs out of our windows, why not place menorahs in all our windows, Margaret proposed. Why not? It was the minister of the local Congregational Church who came up with the specifics. A recent Sunday school lesson on Hanukkah lent further inspiration to Margaret MacDonald's epiphany. Pictures of menorahs had been given to all the Sunday school children. Why not just copy these pictures and adorn every window in Billings with them? Rev. Torney agreed to mobilize the local clergy. Others in the crowd agreed to follow suit.

Isaac became an instant celebrity in his third grade class. Once reluctant to identify as Jewish, Isaac grew proud of his heritage and found particular alliance in a Gentile classmate by the name of Teresa Hanley and through the readiness of his teacher to lead an open discussion about hatemongering and what to do to resist it. In the spirit of the adult town meeting, the children rallied at school and at home to post menorahs in windows all over Billings.

A few days later, when the Schnitzer family had finished dinner and Isaac's mind was again on his homework, his mother, Tammy, suggested that they first take a ride in the car. As she drove through the streets of Billings, Isaac's eyes grew large. Window after window shone with menorahs – some paper, some electric, some with candles. Suddenly Isaac hollered at his Mother to stop. Tammy slammed on the brakes. Isaac pointed to a home with a large picture window, all but filled with a crayon image of a colorful menorah, lights shining. Under the menorah was a carefully printed message: “ ‘For our friend Isaac, with love from Teresa and the rest of the Hanley family.’ ” Under the message was the likeness of a Star of David on one side and a Christian cross on the other. Mother and son returned home, glowing.

Isaac soon hatched his own idea. Whoever passed by the Schnitzer home the next evening was privy to a front window restored and renewed with Isaac's menorah, glowing brightly, and just above it, a hand-printed sign with the message: “ ‘Happy Hanukkah to everyone in Billings! With love, Isaac.’ ”

In the days ahead, the courage and solidarity of the people of Billings proved stronger than the will of that band of hate-mongers who had arrived confident that their violence would intimidate. Resistance won out.

Upon hindsight, we might easily muse, “What did you expect?” Consider the will of any of us who are not Jewish to post menorahs in our windows. Would we overcome our reluctance to endanger our children? Would we overcome our reticence to solidarity with neighbors targeted because they were Jewish or African-American or Native American or a same-sex family or whatever might easily present itself as “other?”

Let's go back, back 2200 years, and consider what was expected when the ancient Maccabees lit their spare portion of oil as they rededicated the temple. What did they expect? A day, a single day's worth of light. What happened?

Well, we don't really know what happened. We do know that for years and years Hanukkah wasn't celebrated by Jews. It wasn't until a conclave of rabbis many centuries after the beginning

of the Common Era decided that the religious meaning of these days must be inscribed in historical memory, that Hanukkah should be so celebrated. According to my colleague, Rabbi Shira Joseph of Congregation Sha'aray Shalom in Hingham, it was the Vulgate, the 5th century edition of Christian Bible, that preserved the books of the Maccabees among the Apocrypha, the so-called "hidden books" of the Canon. Hanukkah wasn't originally celebrated by the Jews because, according to Shira, it was deemed a "war victory" event and not considered worthy of celebration alongside Passover, Sukkoth, Rosh Hashanah and other Jewish holidays. That Christian scripture preserved the story of the Maccabees is a strong dose of religious irony.

Lest another assumption go unchallenged, the legend of the Danish King Christian and his fellow countrymen rising in solidarity with their Jewish neighbors by sporting the Star of David didn't quite happen. My friend Janice Cohn, who authored the story of *The Christmas Menorahs*, reports that the Nazis were well aware that the Danes and their king would not cooperate with the Star of David proclamation that took hold in other European countries, so the Jews of Denmark were never ordered to wear the Star.

You're surely wondering about the factual basis of the story of Isaac and the townspeople of Billings and the Christmas menorahs that adorned the windows of this small Montana city thirteen years ago. Yes, it all happened. Nine years ago, I met Isaac and his mother, Tammy, and Isaac's friend Teresa, and several other children and parents from Billings who came east at the invitation of my friend Janice. Among their hosts were the children of the Unitarian Church of All Souls in New York City, where I began my ministry.

What is true and what is false during this season of legend and story? Was the babe really born in a manger? Did the angels really sing their songs of peace? Did a people called the Maccabees actually overcome their Hellenic oppressors? Was a desecrated temple rededicated? Did the paltry flask of oil actually burn for eight long days?

How variable is our truth, religious, historical, political, prophetic. Like the Apocrypha, much is hidden. It is ours to plumb the depths of legend and story.

It is ours to tell the stories and bear witness to deeper truths. How the courage of Isaac and his friends speaks to "the wonder and mystery of each child," affirmed in our morning dedication of little Haley, affirmed in our celebration of light and birth and re-birth, affirmed in the candles we kindle and the lives we live together, affirmed in our faith that draws on many sources, among them:

"Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves."

It's not an easy matter. None of us can do it alone. Together we are called as Unitarian Universalists, as Christians, as Jews, as members of the human family to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves. So may we live and love and light our candles of Christmas and Hanukkah.

[Light the menorah.]

Shalom. Amen.

Sources

Janice Cohn, D.S.W., *The Christmas Menorahs: How a Town Fought Hate*, Illustrations by Bill Farnsworth, Albert Whitman & Company, Morton Grove, Illinois, 1995.

Conversation of December 12, 2006 with Rabbi Shira Joseph of Congregation Sha'aray Shalom in Hingham, MA