

December 18, 2009

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Chanukah!

During the recent weeks, columnists David Brooks and Christopher Hitchens set their sights on Chanukah in a way that focused on the immediate aftermath of the Chanukah event. The Maccabean/Hasmonean dynasty, they pointed out, did not feature the most benevolent of rulers (for example, they were not too fond of the rabbis/Pharisees, whose inquisitive approach to Jewish texts and traditions posed a religious and political challenge). Both Brooks and Hitchens, in one way or another, sang the praises of Greek culture and science while nearly whitewashing the negative costs of Greek military, political and cultural dominance.

Hitchens, especially, claimed that the Maccabees deprived Judea of the best (science, philosophy, and reason) that the Greeks had to offer. Rabbi Michael Lerner (Tikkun Magazine), in responding to both columns, noted that he and his fellow spiritual progressives would not have rejected the strides in science and reason offered by the Greeks. I am not certain that the Maccabees totally rejected Greek culture even after they had come to power, and they certainly did not totally curtail its influence. The next 200 years of Jewish life and thought following the rededication of the Temple by the Maccabees included interpretations of Judaism that reflected either a Greek/Hellenistic influence or, at least, a need to cast biblical figures (as Philo of Alexandria did with Moses) in terms that the Greco-Roman world could understand.

Lerner's best point was that what Chanukah – and Judaism – mean to us today is what is most important. As early as 1700 years ago, the rabbis shifted Chanukah's message from celebration of a military victory to marveling at a miracle. We see something very special in the lights of the Chanukiah that warms us more and more with each passing night. The values that Chanukah inspires in us were reflected in lists developed this past Wednesday by our 2nd-3rd Grade students (values and gifts to the world for the 8

days of Chanukah) and our 7th Graders (a “consensus” list of the fundamental values of Judaism)

Menorah/Chanukah of Gifts to the World 2nd-3rd Grade Class taught by Rhonda Karol, Abby Heisler and Lilah Cherim

**** Love * Reduce/Recycle/Reuse * Niceness * Happiness/Hope * Peace * Laughter * Joy * Health * Appreciation***

Ten Basic Jewish Values 7th Grade Class taught by Rabbi Larry Karol, Erin Sandler, Owen Shepcaro and Andrew McDonald (Thanks to Maria Rubinstein for assisting on Wednesday)

**** Monotheism * Peace * Education (including Torah study, Bar/Bat Mitzvah) * Selflessness (Tzedakah) * Freedom * Respect (of all religions, equality) * Responsibility * Hebrew (how Jews understand their history and each other) * Tradition * Music (expressing emotions and feelings)***

These are just some of the gifts and values that emerge from our study of the Jewish heritage and from building community together. May all of these special lights be with us in the year to come!

-- L'shalom, Rabbi Larry