

Chanukah and the Middah of Humility/Anavah Shabbat Chanukah 5776

The *Middah*-of-the-month is *Anavah*/humility. I regard humility as the lynch-pin for the entire system of *middot*, the trait of character around which all of the other *middot*, all the other traits, revolve, upon which all the others depend. Or, to put it with better precision, without a sense that one's humility is at stake, one's ability to enact the other traits (such as respect, trust, patience, lovingkindness) will be hampered, if not doomed. Chanukah, the Festival of Lights, teaches us a lesson in humility. How so?

Almost everyone knows the story of the oil. In groups of both non-Jews and Jews, whenever I ask why we Jews celebrate the Festival of Lights for eight days, someone will recount the tale. After the Maccabees drove the Hellenizing Greeks from the Jerusalem Temple, a single vessel of dedicated oil was found, enough to keep the Temple's menorah burning for only one day. Miraculously, the menorah when rekindled, continued to burn for eight days, sufficient time for the production of more oil to keep the menorah aflame.

The events recalled by the festival took place in the second century before the common-era. Almost everyone knows about the miracle of the oil even though the story about it appeared hundreds of years after the events themselves. Rabbis recorded the story of the oil in the Talmud, sacred repository of ancient wisdom. But few know the version of the Temple rededication found in the Books of Maccabees, versions set in writing only a generation or two after the historical events. Those more contemporaneous versions describe how the Maccabees beat back the mighty Assyrian army, cleaned up the Temple, got rid of the statues to Greek deities, and then celebrated their victory for eight days beginning on the 25th of Kislev; according to the Second Book of Maccabees, the initial celebration served as compensation for missing out, two months earlier, on the eight days of Sukkot and Shemini Atzeret while they were still engaged in battles and lacked access to the Temple.

That is to say, hundreds of years following the events themselves, the rabbis of the Talmud offset the recollection of military victory, a strictly human accomplishment, with a different kind of memory, a memory that reframes the story as one with primarily spiritual dimensions, a day's supply of oil lasts for eight. In the reframed story, heroic soldiers move to the margins while a small light occupies the center. By de-emphasizing the Maccabees, their bravery and their cunning, and by elevating to prominence the minor miracle of long-burning

oil, the rabbis invite us to recognize the extent to which Providence, luck, and good fortune control events and outcomes, even when we humans imagine that we are in charge, that we can determine our own fate. That is, the rabbinic reframing invites us to move ourselves to the margins even of our own stories, to cultivate the quality of humility that undergirds all religious sensibility.

The practice and cultivation of humility, as with the practice and cultivation of all the middot, requires a recognition of the scale upon which the trait resides and where one will find the point of balance. Practicing humility obviously requires one to guard against arrogance. Less obviously, perhaps, it also requires one to guard against drifting to the other end of the scale, the place of self-abnegation. Regarding the quality of humility, Alan Morinis suggests we consider the amount of space we occupy, the amount of air time we take up, that we cultivate a mindful aspiration to occupy [in his words] **“no more than my space; no less than my place.”**

No less than my place: I have a right to my place in the scheme of things – as do you -- and I have a role to play and I may even have special talent or skill or yearning that calls for expression. In the words of the old Gospel song, “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine.” Every human has light; every human being deserves the opportunity to let his or her light shine forth.

But on the other hand, if I determine to occupy **“no more than my space,”** I must recognize that the world does not revolve around me, that others have as much right to their place in it as do I. Moreover, the ultimate recognition animating a desire for balance in the quality of humility is that although we humans have strength and power and understanding, we are limited in every area and ultimately subject to forces greater than us and to that unity which lies beyond our capacity to comprehend. That is to say, a deep sense of humility grows from and points to an awareness of one’s position as a spiritual being within time and space.

During Chanukah, Jewish tradition has us insert into the Amidah words that suggest a yearning for balance in the quality of humility. We say *“Al Hanism ...V’Al Hagevurot* – for the miracles and for the bravery.” We acknowledge both the Maccabees and God, human capacity, human assertiveness but also the divine hand operating even when our field of perception does not detect it. No more than my space; no less than my place. May the Festival of Lights shine light on the path we take toward the balanced practice of humility.