

From Rabbi Bronstein

“Light Not Heat”

In my computer files is a photo of our Bet Am Shalom tour group at Jerusalem’s Kotel plaza on one of the nights of Chanukah, 2005. We had lit Chanukah candles together at a different location each night of the holiday, starting on the shores of the Kinneret in the north, wending our way to the south end of the Dead Sea, and ending up in Jerusalem at the great central gathering spot of the Jewish people.

Above us, overlooking the plaza and the ancient Wall, the huge oil drum menorah shone forth its flames of Chanukah light. All around us, Jews from every corner of the world hustled and bustled past us. The atmosphere was festive, even electric.

What were we doing in that photo? We had already lit our candles and sung through our repertoire of songs, including our famous multi-part canon rendition of *Mi Y’malel*. Now, we were standing as a single group on the upper plaza, men and women together with our children, *davening the weekday evening service!*

No one stopped us. No one assaulted us or arrested us. No one interrupted us to correct our Reconstructionist version of the liturgy. No one protested against our praying without a mechitza. No one even looked at us. Everyone in that throng had his or her own reason for being at the Kotel on that night of Chanukah. We ourselves posed no threat, no challenge. We were of no interest to anyone at all.

Now, twelve years later, we would certainly find ourselves being interrupted if we were to plant ourselves at the back of the plaza and open our siddurim. Official Kotel police would rush over and tell us not to pray there. Self-appointed citizen guardians of our tradition would begin yelling at us, chastising us, castigating us for disgracing the Jewish people and its most sacred spot. Eventually the actual police would arrive. We would be asked to disband. And this would be the case if we were *not* using a Torah scroll, say, for a Chanukah morning service. How much the more so if we were.

This is neither the best of times nor the worst of times for us Jews. Ironically, the era leading up to the Chanukah rebellion (ca. 165 BCE) was much more fractious than the scene today. The division between “traditionalists” and “accommodators” was apparently quite stark. Violent fights were the norm among Jews over differences regarding their relationship to Hellenism, to the literal words of the Torah, and to the very meaning of Jewish identity in a fluid socio-political environment.

The Chanukah story we tell our children today was highly stylized by later generations already comfortable with the facts of Jewish life in a powerless, Exile-defined world. Chanukah became a poignant story of spiritual strength and resistance for a Jewish people who could only dream of re-inheriting the Land of Israel and governing themselves anew. Having actual power was beyond anyone’s expectations. The familiar verse from the Haftarah for Shabbat Chanukah, “not by might and not by power, but by My spirit” rang true, and more or less unified pre-Modern Jews around an idealistic cause that seemed both particularistic and universal. It is indeed a tale of light and inspiration.

But the actual historical Chanukah generated much more heat than light. Look carefully at the Chanukah story. The Maccabees were heroic, yes, but also intolerant and inflexible. Initially they had the majority of Judeans on their side. But they kept fighting long after their initial goal had been achieved. They continued their struggle for a singular vision of Judaism that would exclude any of the approaches we would now anachronistically call “modern.” Other Judeans abandoned their fight. The Maccabees fought on and prevailed. The result was the corrupt Hasmonean dynasty, which pushed “modern” Jews out of the picture, and which inevitably paved the way for the crushing dominance of Rome. And then exile.

Now, thank God (and I mean that expression literally) we Jews have self-determination in the Land of Israel. The extent to which we conduct ourselves there according to our own highly-developed ethical laws with respect to the population that shares space with us (and that is for the most part governed *by* us) is a long story for another time. The question at Chanukah is, how well do we follow our Exile-refined protocols when it comes to dealing with *one another as Jews?*

It's not that things are worse in the Land of Israel than they were in the time of the Maccabees. It's that they are not significantly better. The ongoing battle over the rights of non-Orthodox practitioners to pray at the Kotel in a non-Orthodox manner is the tip of the iceberg. Jews are still willing to go to the mats for their own exclusive vision of what it is that God wants and the Torah prescribes. We are still unwilling to make room for multiple visions. Israel's secular governing body still allows the Chief Rabbinate (a fabrication of the British during their mandate of Palestine) to regulate matters which in other countries would be considered "civil rights" (concerning marriage, divorce, burial, religious practice). Regulate? How about "strangulate?"

Now, seventy years since the Partition of Palestine that led to our creation of the modern Jewish state, it falls to us to remember how unifying that moment was for our people on the eve of Chanukah in 1947, and how the essence of that dream still lives within us like a tiny cruse of oil. When we celebrate Chanukah in our own day, we should think about what it means *to us* to be "heroes" of spirit-not-might.

We should light the candles in the spirit of re-commitment to a State of Israel that respects its citizens' differences in a way the Maccabees could never imagine; a State that welcomes the presence and practice of both Liberal and Orthodox Jews the world over; that allows civil law to protect religion rather than be harnessed by that same religion; and that extends its light of democracy and equality to everyone who stands beneath the umbra of its beam.