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Edah at the JCC in NYC- Dec 21st 7:30 pm

Be Safe this Chanukah - see our website for tips on burn and scald prevention

Chag Sameach!

A Passion for Life

By Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld

The remaining camp will survive Against Esav's will because I will do battle with him. Jacob prepared himself for three things, for the giving of a gift, for prayer and for war: For the giving of a gift, [as it says:] "The present passed on ahead of him." For prayer, [as it says:] "The G-d of my father Avraham." For war, [as it says:] "The remaining camp will survive." (Rashi to Genesis 32:9)

Martyrdom today is a dirty word. When we hear the word martyrs we think of suicidal terrorists who kill themselves and innocents in the name of their faith.

At the same time, there is a long tradition of praising martyrdom within Judaism. In some texts, martyrdom stands as a core expression of Jewish commitment to beliefs and as the epitome of service to God. In fact, martyrdom is known in rabbinic terms as Kiddush Hashem—sanctification of God's name.

Recently, many Jews have begun to downplay our historical respect for martyrs. For example, some have suggested that Israel's decision to no longer induct soldiers on the mountain of Masada arises out of an effort to distance itself from a culture of martyrdom. What are the origins of martyrdom within Judaism? In a world where martyrdom has become associated with fanaticism and murder, how should we approach our religion's glorification of the martyr?

Let us return to the origins of martyrdom. Although martyrdom appears prominently in the Yom Kippur and Tisha Be-Av liturgy, the earliest sources of the prominent role of martyrdom in Jewish history are related to the holiday of Chanukah. Chanukah seems to be not only the first holiday associated with martyrdom, but at its origins it was a holiday that glorified martyrdom.

For example, in 2 Maccabees: 6-7, two stories of martyrdom appear. In chapter 6, there was an attempt to force Eleazar to eat swine. "But he, welcoming death with honor rather than life with pollution, went up to the rack of his own accord, spitting out the flesh... Those who were in charge of that unlawful sacrifice took the man aside, because of their long acquaintance with him, and privately urged him to bring meat of his own providing, proper for him to use, and pretend that he was eating the flesh of the sacrificial meal which had been commanded by the king, so that by doing this he might be saved from death, and be treated kindly on account of his old friendship with them. But making a high resolve, worthy of his years and the dignity of his old age and the gray hairs which he had reached with distinction and his excellent life even from childhood, and moreover according to the holy God-given law, he declared himself quickly, telling them to send him to Hades."

Similarly, in chapter 7, we are told the story of a mother and her seven sons—seven sons who all undergo martyrdom, rather than worship idols.

These stories play a central role in 2 Maccabees. According to 2 Maccabees, the very nature of the Maccabean revolt appears to be a willingness to sacrifice life and limb in service of God. Martyrdom was thus a central pillar of the revolt. Moreover, the deep historical connection between Chanukah and martyrdom is strengthened once we realize that it is unclear whether the Maccabees acted at that time with the imprimatur of Halakhah. Halakhah formulates—and perhaps only first develops—its commonly quoted opinion on martyrdom

approximately three hundred years later in the second century. As it states in Sanhedrin (74a),

"They took a vote and decided in the attic of Niszah's house in Lod. All the transgressions which are found in the Torah, if someone says, transgress one of them and do not be killed, you should transgress and not be killed except for in the cases of idolatry, illicit relationships and murder."

The martyrs of Chanukah acted before Halakhah determined its position on this issue. They willingly gave their life even without the certainty that this was what Halakhah demanded. They acted with the passion of their hearts. They willingly gave themselves entirely over to Hashem. This was the historical essence of Chanukah.

And yet, when the rabbis discussed the holiday of Chanukah in the Talmud they chose not to emphasize this: "What is Chanukah? The rabbis taught... when the Greeks entered the Temple they contaminated all the flasks of oil that were in the Sanctuary. When the Hasmoneans vanquished them, they searched and found only one flask of oil that had the Kohen Gadol seal intact. It contained only enough oil to kindle for one day. A miracle was performed with the oil and they kindled the lights with it for 8 days." (Shabbat, 21b.)

Not only did they not emphasize martyrdom, they seemed to specifically negate it. As the rabbis taught, "In a time of danger light the candles on your table and that is sufficient." (Shabbat, 21b.) In other words, the rabbis explicitly taught, "Do not risk your life to observe Chanukah!"

Where is the martyrdom that played so prominently in Chanukah's origins? Perhaps the rabbis were cautioning us not to become a cult of martyrdom. To be sure, under certain very discrete circumstances we must give our life rather than sin, but those circumstances must be carefully circumscribed by law.

Instead of emphasizing the death of the martyrs, the rabbis emphasized the zeal of the martyrs. This, after all, is the essence of the miracle of oil. When the cruse of oil was found, some might have suggested, "Let's light a little bit of oil for eight days." But the voices of passion won out. They said, "Let's light it all today. We'll worry about tomorrow, tomorrow."

The great pietistic work, Mesillat Yesharim (chapter 6), calls this the attribute of *zerizut*—zeal. "If a mitzvah presents itself to you, do not permit it to go stale." Or, "The zealous advance themselves towards a mitzvah." And, "A man should always run to perform a mitzvah."

In response to the martyrdom of Chanukah, the rabbis did not tell us to become a religion of martyrs. Rather, they taught us to become a religion of people with the passion of martyrs; a people that runs to know God (Hosea 6:3) and do His ways.

In today's world, let us hold this teaching close to our hearts. When we see people passionately martyring themselves in the name of religion, let us respond with just as much passion—but with a passion for good.

It is true that martyrdom is called *kiddush Hashem*—sanctification of God's name. But there are plenty of ways to do that without getting ourselves killed. We can sanctify God's name through the positive performance of commandments that bring more light and goodness to the world. Perhaps that is an even higher level of *kiddush Hashem*.

This is summarized by a teaching of the Chassidic master, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev. The Talmud famously teaches, "*Hadlakah osah mitzvah*." The most basic part of the mitzvah of lighting the Chanukah flames is through the actual lighting of the flames, as opposed to the seeing of the flames; the mitzvah is to light the fire more than it is to see the fire.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak adds that this is the essential teaching of Chanukah: We must try to light the fire in people, to instill people with passion and energy for service of God.

Ultimately, this is how we will defeat the murderers who intimidate and scare people with their passion for God. Our passion must be even greater—not for hate, but for love; not for war, but for peace; and not for death, but for life!

Rabbi Shmuel Hertzfeld is Rabbi of Ohev Sholom Talmud Torah--The National Synagogue, the oldest Orthodox synagogue in Washington, DC. He is National Vice-President of Amcha, and co-founder of Lishmah.

LET'S NOT BE AFRAID OF MERRY CHRISTMAS By Dr Gil Troy

"Happy holidays," an oh-so-politically correct colleague very earnestly wished me last year. "Merry Christmas," I responded, relieved that he had not showered me in spittle by saying "Chappy Chanukah" with a mangled guttural "ch."

While I appreciated my colleague's sensitivity, it was a charade. Last year, Chanukah ended ten days before Christmas began. Ours was a Christmas vacation, not for some generic holidays. Similarly, it is equally absurd to call an ornament-festooned evergreen topped by a big bright star of Bethlehem a "Holiday Tree." Newsflash: Most Americans are Christians and they celebrate Christmas. While Christianity, thanks to the Founders' wisdom, is not America's established religion, it predominates, shaping our society in many ways, for better and worse.

We cannot pretend that Christmas is some generic American holiday or get distracted debating which Christmas symbols are seasonal and which represent the birth of their lord. For starters, it offends Christians who take Christmas seriously. I am happy to watch them celebrate, and for once, be the one enjoying a guilt-free day off without ritualistic demands or familial obligations.

The secularizing wave prompting this holiday makeover risks washing away good values. Jews have thrived in an America filled with practicing Christians who celebrate Christmas while respecting the separation of church and state. Many pious Christians are good friends to Jews and seek alliances among those sharing common values.

Christianity has often had a positive impact in developing American ideology. I honor the religious grounding which shaped Abraham Lincoln's merciful nationalism, John F. Kennedy's collective idealism, and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s liberal activism, let alone Ronald Reagan's muscular Americanism. I reject the secularist caricature treating every believing Christian (or every Orthodox Jew) as a raving, fundamentalist lunatic eager to impose one religion on everybody. Shrewd, open-minded, conscientious believers have long understood that separating church and state benefits the church or synagogue or mosque, by insulating religion from politics. Having judges or politicians decide which Jewish or Christian symbols are minor or major is a step backward not forward.

We don't need to banish any religious symbols or religiosity from our public spaces to get along and we should fear the soulless consumerism that runs rampant and unchecked when we abandon our faiths. The December gift-giving frenzy demeans both Christmas and Chanukah. It is not coincidental that Walmart has become the flashpoint between those who treat the year's defining retail period as the "Holiday Season" versus those who call it the "Christmas Season."

Jews should beware what they wish for. If American culture bowdlerizes Christmas, if consumerism trumps Christianity, imagine what it can do to American Judaism. In fact, mindless multicultural areligious consumerism has already done great damage. We see it in the limp, diluted, ethnic posture most American Jews and now most Americans mistake for Judaism today. We see it in the spread of "Chrismukah," which reflects this modern tendency to suck out the essence of a religious celebration and just leave the shell of an excuse to shop, ornamented with some empty symbols from quaint traditions. This superficial

Judeo-Christian hybrid, spawned from a December 2003 episode of the glitzy TV show "The OC," now yields 151,000 hits on Google.

Looking over the vast spiritual and moral wasteland of most modern American popular culture makes us appreciate the rabbinic emphasis on the Seven Noachide Laws. Judaism respects people of faith and ethics and especially appreciates those who root their ethics in faith.

This year - as usual - the White House has hosted many Christmas parties. And the White House also throws a Chanukah party, which was completely kosher for the first time ever this year. The attention to Jewish sensitivities was so great that the military aide introducing the guests on the receiving line asked whether they touched members of the opposite sex or not, so that the President and Mrs. Bush could greet them properly. This is the America that I cherish - an America of authenticity not posturing, of respectful diversity not compulsory homogeneity, of sensitivity to differences not an empty generic uniformity. It is an America where Judaism and Christianity and secularism and a host of other approaches to profound questions can flourish side by side, accepting each other, not simply tolerating each other.

So, no, when someone wishes me a "Merry Christmas," I don't take offense. If I wanted most people on the street to wish me "Happy Hanukkah" I'd spend December in Israel. And when I wish my Christian friends and neighbor a merry Christmas, I genuinely hope they have as deep, spiritual and meaningful a Christmas as they want to have. And yes, I hope they get some great presents too.

Gil Troy is Professor of History at McGill University, and the author, most recently of 'Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s.'

Edah

45 West 36th Street, 10th Floor
New York, NY 10018

www.edah.org

1-212-244-7501