

Torah Thoughts Miketz

This Shabbat falls during Hanukkah, a celebratory time on the Jewish calendar.

Hanukkah is filled with wonderful rituals, as well as a lesson about the relationship between what is fleeting in Jewish memory and what is enduring. The historical events that we remember on Hanukkah were the Jewish rebellion, led by the Maccabees, against Greek rule, and the defiling of the Temple in Jerusalem. Having defeated the larger and more powerful Greek army and rededicated the Temple, Jews celebrated their military victory and the reestablishment of traditional Jewish culture in ancient Israel.

But, over time, the victory of the Maccabees faded in significance, and the memory of the miraculous nature of Hanukkah began to supersede it. Jews have always remembered the might of the Maccabees and their achievements, but the miracle of the cruse of oil, sufficient to burn one day in the Temple but lasting eight, took precedence in rabbinic thought and in the popular imagination. There are many reasons that contributed to that shift, but the practical result is that the symbolism of light such as the Hanukkiah (the Hanukkah menorah) and popular customs reminding us of the oil, such as latkes and sufganiot (jelly doughnuts), commemorate the role of God rather than the role of the Maccabees.

The shift from commemorating the original historical events to remembering God's role in Hanukkah reflects our tendency to focus on the values that an event symbolizes rather than the particulars that gave rise to it in the first place. We need only consider the Fourth of July, when we honor our country's fight for freedom with fireworks and patriotic songs, rather than a military victory over the British. On both Hanukkah and Independence Day we celebrate freedom won in war, but focus on the lasting values they have bequeathed us rather than the

means by which they were won. On Hanukkah those values include the freedom to worship, and the pride in maintaining our Jewish identity in a time and place where assimilation is an attractive and easy choice. We remember the Maccabees, but we celebrate the lasting value of Jewish identity within a larger culture.

Hanukkah same'akh and Shabbat shalom