

Living With Uncertainty  
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December 13, 2009

With a tradition that affirms many different sources of wisdom and insight, and that draws from people who themselves come from many different religious backgrounds, we are offered the opportunity to dive deeply into the stories and traditions of many of the world's great religions and holidays. This month is rife with such celebrations – Chanukah, just begun this Friday night, Solstice, Christmas, even Kwanzaa – three of which will mark our celebrations and worship of the next three weeks.

We find ourselves right now in the days of Chanukah. Chanukah is a fairly modern Jewish holiday as Jewish holidays go. It was created to commemorate a revolt by Jews against oppressive powers more than 2,000 years ago.

The story begins, I imagine, when Alexander the Great took Palestine on his way through Asia Minor toward Egypt. From that moment, that part of the world found itself under foreign rule. In Alexander's case, and for the Syrians and Egyptians who followed, that meant the influence was Greek.

Most often, however, it was a tolerant Greek influence that sought to attract rather than compel followers, and indeed many Jews found themselves adopting Greek ways – assimilating in their choice of clothing and food, intellectual influence, and other cultural trappings. In fact, books of the Hebrew Scriptures, in particular the wisdom literature like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, are written by Jews clearly shaped by classical philosophical concepts and methods. Rabbi Irving Greenberg, in his book *The Jewish Way*, speculates that had this gradual peaceful assimilation through attraction not been interrupted, it is likely that Judaism, over time, might have largely disappeared (p.259). But of course, that is not what happened.

The simple version of the story of what did happen is that a less patient king took over the Temple in Jerusalem and set up an altar to Zeus, forced Jews to abandon Sabbath, forbade circumcision and demanded sacrifices be made to Greek gods. That is partly true. Antiochus Epiphanes, whose last name means “God (in this case Zeus) made manifest,” did take over the Temple in Jerusalem, put in power Hellenistic high priests with names like Jason, asked them to sacrifice pigs – and even then historians tell of the sacrifices being left half-burned as these priests rushed to the amphitheaters to not miss the local games, so tied up were they in Greek life and its ways.

But that's not the whole story. The whole story is less clear-cut. It turns out it was *Jews*, ones who were deeply steeped in Greek culture, who *paid* Antiochus IV to *put* Jason in power in the Temple in Jerusalem, hoping for a little less stringent application of Jewish law. *And* it was another, similar group who paid to have *their own*, even more philhellenic priest *replace* Jason. The two factions were at odds, and so when Antiochus went to war with Egypt and rumors spread that he was dead, Jason and his faction tried to overthrow his successor at the Temple.

Antiochus returned from that war very much alive, but angered at the insurgency of the priests *and* at the Jewish infighting that was, at best, an annoying distraction, and so he set out to punish Jerusalem. He sacked the Temple and began his campaign of forced assimilation, the details of which every Chanukah retelling enumerates.

The full story, then, is much more complicated than the version we normally hear, more layered. And that layering, for me, has the effect of muddying the waters, making it all seem less black-and-white, less good-versus-evil, *less pre-ordained by God*. Which, it turns out, is exactly how it felt to many Jews.

How Jews and their faith and culture were going to respond to Greek culture and its influences was up for grabs at the time. How different factions interpreted the persecution under Antiochus IV was also varied: Was it God using Antiochus to punish the Jews for their assimilation, or was it the just punishment of an unreasonable and poorly behaved people by a reasonable ruler? Nothing was entirely clear-cut, and the faith was in a fertile time of change, with all kinds of uncertainty about its future, more so than ever once the persecutions began. No one was sure how to respond to Antiochus. The very pious, the Chasidim, who you might imagine would be most likely to revolt, actually thought God was bringing about the end of time, the Apocalypse, and so the persecutions should just be submitted to to speed the end along. Many assimilationist Jews were happy to watch their old faith get watered down or even die out. In the end it was *moderate* Jews, Jews from the country, not extreme in their faith but concerned with *keeping it*, who ultimately fought back.

It was the village priest Mattathias in the town of Modin who refused to participate in a sacrifice to Zeus, killed the commissioner who asked for it, and raised the call to revolt. Then he and his five sons, later dubbed “The Maccabees” or “hammer boys,” fled to the nearby mountains with all who would follow. There they would fight a much larger enemy, with their knowledge of the rough mountain terrain giving them the *only* advantage they had.

In these events too, nothing was certain. There was uncertainty that attended their fighting, uncertainty that attended the victory that followed, uncertainty even that attended their sense of what it all meant in Temple life and God’s role in this drama. They actually waited months to rededicate the Temple, waiting for signs of God as they debated God’s role and the implications of all of this. *Uncertainty*, layers of it, doubts and best guesses about what awaited them and how to make sense of what had happened attended them at every turn of this story.

However, that isn’t the way the story gets told. The way it gets told, as stories do over time, is as a myth, with all frayed edges and shades of gray stripped away and made sharper and clearer than they were, like some Photoshopped version of real life. The way the story gets told now, the villain is simply cruel and intolerant, Hellenization is an abomination with no mention of the human flourishing even for the Jews during these years. Moreover, the story ends with the Maccabees winning decisive victory, at least morally decisive, and life in the Temple being restored. We end our telling of the story with no mention of the defeats to come, or the Maccabees’ own cruel forced conversions of the peoples they later conquered. The story is full of certainties, clarity and inevitability that no one who lived the story must have felt.

There is a comfort to a story told this way. We tell them like this all the time, in our religious traditions but also in our nation's histories and even our personal lives. How many times have you heard things like: "I saw her and knew she was the one I was going to marry," or "We always knew you were going to be a doctor and Grandma said the week before she died, 'This kid's going to be a surgeon' "?

It feels good when the stories of our nation, of our faith, or of our own lives feel pre-ordained in important ways. It can help us feel like our lives are on track and where they are meant to be. However, when we write such versions of our stories, what we write out is the truth about how often our decisions were made when everything felt and looked, for us, far less sure or obvious. There were other girls who caught our eye while we were courting; we thought long and hard about the school for foreign service before we sent in our acceptance to medical school.

Often we leave out, and perhaps over time also forget or obscure, that dimension to our stories ... which is interesting, because so much of life is *steeped in uncertainty*.

Mary Catherine Bateson, the daughter of anthropologists Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead, wrote a book titled *Composing a Life*. In it she follows four women's lives and her own and talks about how the events of their lives and their response to them shaped a narrative. She challenges the notion that the best life is lived with some unwavering clarity of purpose, or even that this is possible. "Often," she writes, "continuity is only visible in retrospect" (p.223). She concludes her book about these lives and the narratives that tell of them by saying, "of course these lives do not look like parables or allegories. Mostly, they look like ongoing improvisations" (p.241). Of course they don't look like *parables*!

Chris Hedges, a reporter who wrote *War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning*, writes in it of his and other people's attraction to war. First among the attractions is the sense of clarity of purpose that men and women have in the midst of war. "War makes the world understandable, a black and white tableau of them and us. It suspends thought, especially self-critical thought," he writes (p.10). In that environment, for soldiers at war, life is about staying alive, and if it is "Kill or be killed," the answer is often clear, and *just being in the war*, "fighting the good fight," is the right decision, no matter how the story ultimately plays itself out into victory or defeat. We human beings crave that kind of clarity, and so it is no wonder our stories enshrine it.

So much of our life, however, happens in shades of gray, with those frayed edges, and choices carefully weighed, and decisions made in the face of huge unknowns. We make best guesses, hopeful assumptions all the time. We live that way far more often than with some sense of ordained direction or crystal clarity.

Rachel Naomi Remen, doctor and writer, in her book *My Grandfather's Blessings*, writes about the walkway to her front door she needs to construct. Remen debates how to take folks to that door. Should she take them directly or have their journey weave through her property, at each turn opening up another vista, the garden from one turn, the mountain from another, until ultimately they arrive, surprised and delighted, at her door?

The architects who advise her tell her it is standard theory that the journey to a front door should be direct and clear. “[One] of the basic principles of the architectures of front entrances,” they tell her, “is that people need to see where they are going from the start. They agreed that the uncertainty of the second approach would create unease in any guest coming to the house for the first time. Despite the uniformity of the expert advice,” she writes, “I ultimately chose the second way.”

Remen goes on to explain why:

Thinking about it now, it seems to me that knowing where we are going encourages us to stop seeing and hearing and allows us to fall asleep. In fact, when I find myself on such a direct path, a part of me rushes ahead to the front door the moment I see it. As I hurry to overtake this part, I usually am not seeing anything that I pass. Not seeing or knowing where you are going creates more than uncertainty; it fosters a sense of aliveness, an appreciation of the particulars around you. It wakes you up much in the same way that illness does ... The truth is that we are always moving toward mystery and so we are far closer to what is real when we do not see our destination clearly (p.289).

Right now I know that members are sitting with diagnoses that have probabilities associated with them and with choices of treatments to make with all kinds of side effects. I know there are people in relationships that feel like they could go either way; children who seem lost, and for right now may well be. I know there are folks deciding career paths and making important financial decisions. I also know that right now there are senators and Assembly people in their homes weighing arguments for marriage equality, not knowing which way to vote, and wondering how history will read their decisions. Perhaps there are even religious leaders in the hallowed halls of authority writing drafts of edicts, still debating where to fall on fine lines of theological difference, before they write it into *infallible* law.

We are *all* almost *always* making a life amid doubts, questions and uncertainties. Maybe it deserves mention that the fact that our lives are attended by such things is not a curse, or a sign of our unfavored status with the universe, or even a test. It is just life, the bricks and mortar of it. You and I are builders working for an often elusive architect. We are like people on the path to Remen’s house, awake and alive at each turn in part *because* we cannot see our destination clearly, wondering where we are headed until the last turn, or maybe only knowing what it meant in retrospect.

Why can’t we enshrine this in our stories, tell our nation’s history, our religious myths and our personal histories with all of this uncertainty as a part of it? Why not tell stories about the limits of our knowing and the beauty and courage we lived and made of these lives in spite of that uncertainty, or perhaps because those limits kept us so awake to life’s possibilities? We should tell *these* parables to one another when we need courage. For surely we can be honest with life and find strength in stories that tell of what uncertainty and doubts truly attended all great moments of human venturing into places of heroism and grace, as they will our own.

Happy Chanukah, everyone. Amen.