

From “Impossible,” the Hanukkah sermon given December 13th, 2009:

According to the Talmud, the commentary on Jewish law, culture, ethics, and history that is a central part of mainstream Judaism today, there's a little bit more to the story. Olive oil was needed for the menorah in the Temple, which was required to burn throughout the night every night. It seemed that there was only enough oil to burn for one day, and so the menorah was lit, even as more holy oil was being prepared. Everyone feared that it was impossible that the flame would remain lit, but it did. Miraculously, the menorah burned through the night for eight days, the time needed to prepare a fresh supply of oil for the temple. So, in the Talmudic tradition, Hanukkah is an eight day festival of lights that continues to this day to commemorate the miracle.

Imagine for a moment that you are tending to the rededication of the temple, reconstructing the altar, scrubbing the stones, hanging the curtains, all the while watching the lamps closely, hoping beyond reasonable measure that they will stay lit, but fearing the worst. Imagine the anxiety that surrounded the question of whether there was enough oil to see the people through the rededication of their temple. What would it mean if the oil ran out? Could they rededicate it again? Would they be the same people? Would their covenant with God and one another be broken if the lamps guttered out? What would it all mean? What would they do? How would they go on?

In the face of these sorts of events, when questions like these come up, anxiety is a normal human response.

Anxiety is an emotion that arises when people face uncertainty about who they are, how they will continue to exist. Where fear deals with specific objects – heights, open spaces, animals, and so on – anxiety deals with existential uncertainty, or the possibility of non-being, of meaninglessness, of not knowing the foundations and parameters of one's world. Although they may be unpleasant emotions, fear and anxiety have their place in the world. Like pain, they let us know when there is something to which we need to attend, when something is not as it should be.

The theologian Paul Tillich speaks of anxiety and courage in his book “The Courage To Be,” stating that they both arise from the same place: how people deal when faced with some form of non-being. Courage is anxiety's complimentary virtue. If anxiety is the distress we feel when confronted with a change or threat to our sense of existence, courage is our ability to affirm our existence, to persist with hope, in spite of those things which might normally cause anxiety. “Courage,” he writes, “is the readiness to take upon oneself negatives....for the sake of a fuller positivity.”

Courage is what helps us to deal with an unfamiliar world. With courage, we have the willingness to look at what is different, what is difficult, what is unknown. Courage calls us to be our best, to hold to our ideals, to act with integrity and restore ourselves and our communities.

Restoring the temple is so important in the story of Hanukkah because the temple is part of what helps give shape to the world, provide some meaning, remind people of who they are, and help them maintain their covenants. Without knowing the complex and difficult story of the need for rededicating the temple, we don't really understand why it mattered so much to return the temple to its state of holiness. Rededicating the temple is the first step in attending to the anxiety of the community after the hardship, the first step in re-establishing a community that will grow into health and strength.