Thoughts for Shabbat Mikkets-Hanukkah, November 30, 2013

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After their glorious victory and rededication of the Temple, the Hasmoneans established the holiday of Hanukkah to be celebrated by Jews for all future generations. The festival of lights is an occasion for thanksgiving to God, celebration of Jewish pride, remembrance of the importance of religious freedom.

It wasn't too long, though, before this great spiritual and military victory lost its luster. The Hasmoneans--a priestly family--set themselves up as kings. Once they centralized so much power in themselves, corruption soon set in. Their "kings" became ruthless despots; the high priesthood became a political prize going to the highest bidder.

Although the original spirit of Hanukkah managed to survive, the actual state of Jewish religion and spirituality was severely compromised under Hasmonean rule.

There is an ongoing lesson in this story. When authority is centralized in a few hands, this often results in corruption and spiritual deterioration. The few in power become arrogant and greedy. They feel that they can do what they want and force others to comply. They come to think that they are above the law.

This lesson applies not merely to the world of politics, but to the world of religion. It is especially poisonous when religious and political power become intertwined. How painful it is to read of the ugly political maneuvering of "religious" parties in Israel. How frustrating it is to read of "religious" authorities--who are quick to assert their own power and who delegitimize others--who betray the ideas and ideals of Torah through their perverse, illegal and immoral behavior. How unfortunate it is that the "rabbinic establishment" in Israel and the diaspora is viewed by so many as being insensitive, obscurantist and even hypocritical and dishonest.

The lesson of Hanukkah is that religion and spirituality need to rise above petty politics. The light of Torah is not spread through arrogant, self-righteous authoritarianism; it is not spread by those who usurp power and who think they

are above the law. As the prophet Zechariah taught (and as we read in the haftarah on Shabbat Hanukkah): "Not by might, nor by power, but by My spirit, says the Lord of Hosts."

We need to re-focus on the spirit and righteousness of Torah, on the light of Torah that enhances life and reflects love and compassion. We need to resist religious coercion and authoritarianism, and to understand that the power of Torah is in its wisdom and mitzvoth.

As we observe Hanukkah, let us remember that true religion is not found among those who seek might and power; but in those who sincerely seek the Spirit of the Lord. Let us be sure that we are among the latter.

Angel for Shabbat