

The significance of Hanukkah for Americans

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By Rabbi Dana Evan Kaplan, Springhill Avenue Temple, Mobile

The Jewish holiday of Hanukkah begins this year at sunset on December 24 and ends at sunset on January 1. Hanukkah is an eight-day long holiday commemorating the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem in the second century BCE. One of the major observances is the lighting of candles or oil in a menorah--a type of candelabra. We light one candle each night, beginning on the first night with one candle and moving all the way up to eight candles on the final night. For this reason, Hanukkah is frequently called the Festival of Lights.

When we celebrate Hanukkah this year at the Springhill Avenue Temple in Mobile, we have a special service in which we have different people lighting each of the eight candles. Each candle represents a different value that we hold dear. At a time when Americans are more divided than ever before in our history--or so it sometimes feels--keeping our common value system in mind can be an important source of unity and strength.

The first candle is the light of reason. Reason allows us to see the difference between right and wrong. We reason when we try to rationally deduce what conclusions follow from a set of data. The conclusion must logically follow from our reasoning or it is nothing more than a biased opinion. There's nothing wrong with having biased opinions, but if we are going to elevate our civic discourse, we need to know the difference between the two and when it's appropriate to use one or the other.

The second candle is the light of freedom. Freedom allows us to take responsibility for our own lives. Freedom is the right to act, think, or speak as our consciences dictate without hindrance or restraint. But freedom has to be understood as part of a societal system which has to balance the rights of the individual with the needs of the community. We need to understand the responsible ways to communicate our positions and, under certain circumstances, our dissent.

The third candle is the light of courage. Courage gives us the strength to stand up for our principles. We have to remember that courage is a meritorious value only insofar as the values that we hold are themselves meritorious. You can be courageous in defending a despotic regime, but that is not a meritorious character trait because the ultimate goal is darkness and evil.

The fourth candle is the light of love. Love brings out our altruistic instincts. Love is a virtue that represents all that is high and noble in the human character--affection, kindness, and compassion. Love can motivate us to the most benevolent acts of good towards other people.

The fifth candle is the light of loyalty. Loyalty motivates feelings of allegiance to causes beyond materialistic pursuits. Loyalty is both devotion and faithfulness, although here again loyalty needs to be applied appropriately and for that we need to engage our rational faculties to the utmost.

The sixth candle is the light of generosity. Generosity allows us to transcend our narrow self-interest. According

to Aristotle's conception of friendship, many friendships are based on a fairly even exchange of benefits and Aristotle sees nothing wrong with this. However, the highest form of friendship is where we give willingly and selflessly with no expectation of receiving anything in return.

The seventh candle is the light of self-esteem. Self-esteem allows us to believe in ourselves. Self-esteem reflects our overall self-evaluation of self-worth and we need to feel that we are of value in order to have a stable ego.

The eighth candle is the light of hope. Hope leads us to a vision of a better world. In Reform Judaism we have taken a mystical concept called tikkun olam, which means "repairing the world." Acts of goodness can have a cascading effect that can transform our society and make it a kinder and gentler place in which to live.

This year, the beginning of Hanukkah coincides with the Christian celebration of Christmas. This is an infrequent opportunity for all of us in Alabama and throughout the country to thank God for the liberty and justice that we have been privileged to be the recipients of in this wonderful country. May this holiday season see the spread of love and the growth of hope.