

What Hanukkah means for Jamaicans

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By **Dana Evan Kaplan**, Guest Columnist

The Jewish holiday of Hanukkah begins this year at sundown on Saturday, December 8. Hanukkah is an eight-day holiday commemorating the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem at the time of the Revolt of the Maccabees in the 2nd century BCE, about 2,200 years ago. One of the major observances is the lighting of the lights in an eight-branched Hanukkah Menorah, also called a Hanukkiah.

We light one additional candle each night using the shamash, a separate candle used to light all the other candles which is given a distinct location, usually above all the other candles. Hanukkah is, therefore, called the Festival of Lights. It stands for freedom - from oppression and freedom to build a just society.

What many people misunderstand is that freedom is not necessarily the right to act in any manner that we choose. While we hope that we can have a wide range of flexibility to do what we feel is personally satisfying, freedom means securing for everyone an equal opportunity for a joyful life. We need to have the right to think and speak, come together and move about, choose and choose not to choose, as we feel appropriate.

Right to free speech

One of the most important freedoms is the freedom of expression. We treasure our freedom of speech, the right to talk freely without being censured or having to censure ourselves out of fear of retaliation. This right is so fundamental that it is recognised as a human right under Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. That is what is so wonderful to observe in Jamaica today.

As the new rabbi of the Jewish community, I hear a variety of political viewpoints expressed. Fortunately, everyone that I have spoken to expresses these positions thoughtfully and respectfully.

Hanukkah also stands for the freedom of every person to worship God in his/her own way according to the ancient sources; King Antiochus III of the Seleucid Empire of Syria guaranteed his Jewish subjects the right to "live according to their ancestral customs" and to continue to worship in their great temple in Jerusalem according to traditional Jewish rites.

But when Antiochus IV Epiphanes took over from his father, he rejected this formula of tolerance. We don't know why he decided to deviate from his father's policies, but we do know the consequences of his decision.

The Temple in Jerusalem was looted and sacrifices stopped. In 167 BCE, Antiochus ordered an altar to Zeus erected in the temple, ordering pigs to be sacrificed to the Greek gods. The result was the outbreak of the Maccabean revolt. Mattityahu and his five sons led a rebellion which took advantage of their intimate knowledge of the geography of the land of Israel, leading the Greek Syrians into traps.

Grateful for religious freedom

As Jamaican Jews, we have been enormously appreciative of the religious freedom that we have been granted on this glorious tropical island. We came here as refugees fleeing the Spanish and Portuguese inquisitions where we were forced to convert to a religion against our wills and then persecuted for even the slightest suspicion that we were not zealously upholding the faith that had been forced upon us. As a consequence, we appreciate the freedom of religion that has been a cornerstone of the Jamaican civil religion for so many years.

We understand that freedom is based on the preservation of civil liberties for all. Civil liberties are rights such as the freedom from forced labour and slavery, freedom from unreasonable interrogation and torture, the right to defend oneself and have a fair trial if accused, the right to marry and build a family, and so forth.

If we can continually learn and grow, we can build a social contract between those of us who are leading and those of us who are being led. The results, we pray, will bring us both positive liberty and negative liberty, as Isaiah Berlin explained it. A negative liberty is a condition in which we are protected from the arbitrary exercise of authority (read: tyranny), while positive liberty means having the opportunity to grow and prosper independently without unnecessary restraints.

As Jamaican Jews celebrate Hanukkah and Jamaican Christians prepare for Christmas in a few weeks, we can all agree on the importance of freedom in the full sense of the term. May the Festival of Lights usher in a new secular year of peace and understanding, of cooperation and love.

Dana Evan Kaplan is a rabbi. Email feedback to columns@gleanerjm.com.