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Rabbi Mark Glickman

## The real story behind Chanukah illuminates its rich heritage

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**Rabbi Mark Glickman**  
*Special to The Seattle Times*

At sundown this Dec. 25, as millions of Americans begin winding down their Christmas celebrations, Jews everywhere will gather in their homes, light candles and begin celebrating the eight-day festival of Hanukkah.

The story of Hanukkah has enchanted and inspired Jews and non-Jews alike for many centuries. But many of us find the story of the story of Hanukkah even more inspirational. In about 165 BCE, the legend goes, the Assyrian rulers of the land of Israel tried to transform the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem into a temple to the Greek god, Zeus. A group of zealous Jewish fighters, the Maccabees, refused to cooperate and rebelled. In time, the Maccabees recaptured the Temple and prepared to rededicate it to God's service.

The rules said that to rededicate the Temple they needed to kindle a flame in it and keep it burning constantly as a sign of God's eternal presence. But the Temple lay in ruins, and there was only one small jar of oil remaining — a single day's worth — and it would take fully eight days to get any more.

Miraculously, their one small cruse of oil lasted fully eight days, until couriers could replenish the supplies. Every year since, Jews have celebrated Hanukkah (a Hebrew word meaning "dedication") as a commemoration of that great miracle.

That's the story. I first learned it when I was little, and still today we teach it to our children from a very young age. It's a story of courage, of religious freedom, of God's intervention on our behalf at a time when we really needed it. As epic tales go, it's pretty darn good. The only problem is that it's not true.

Yes, there was a Maccabean Revolt back then, and, yes, the rebels did reconquer the Temple, and, yes, they rededicated it afterward. But if you read the Book of Maccabees you will find that the story of the little jar of oil doesn't appear anywhere at all. In fact, the jar-of-oil story first appears in the Talmud, a work codified some 600 years after the events the story describes.

Why, then, is Hanukkah eight days long? Well, according to the book of Maccabees, it's because of another holiday on the Jewish calendar called Sukkot. Sukkot is an eight-day celebration that usually occurs in September or October, and during it Jews were supposed to have made pilgrimages to the Temple to offer sacrifices to God.

But during the Maccabean Revolt, the Temple was besieged, and the Jews couldn't get there to perform the necessary rituals. As a result, they celebrated Sukkot late that year — in December, during the Hebrew month of Kislev. In fact, the book of Maccabees doesn't even call the festival Hanukkah. Instead, it refers to the celebration as *Sukkot B'kislev* — December Sukkot.

Without the story of the oil miracle, what we now call Hanukkah is simply a military festival — a celebration of might and conquest that has very little to do with God. It's a celebration of the time when we Jews rose up and overthrew the ruling powers.

Well, as time went on, Jews often found themselves living at the whim of the local ruling powers. Often, if the local ruler simply got up on the wrong side of the bed one day, he could very easily — and often did — order that his Jews be expelled, tortured or even murdered. In such an atmosphere, it is easy to understand why Jews would be, shall we say, a bit *reluctant* to celebrate a time when we rose up and overthrew the ruling powers. And that's why we have the oil story.

The story of that miraculous little oil can transform what was once a holiday celebrating the trouncing of our enemies into a celebration of God's miraculous presence in our lives.

"Rabbi," people often respond upon learning this, "do you mean that the Hanukkah story I've always heard isn't true? You ruined it for me!"

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into a religious epic, of how a people sees in the heroic acts of human beings the vast power of God's presence, too, of how a people refuses to celebrate a military victory even when we would have every right to do so ... if this ruins it for you, then there isn't much I can do to help.

But for me, the story of the story of Hanukkah doesn't ruin it at all.

Instead, it teaches some fundamental truths about what it means to be a Jew, and it makes me even more eager to celebrate once again this beautiful festival of light and miracles.

*Rabbi Mark S. Glickman leads Congregation Kol Shalom on Bainbridge Island. He and four other columnists — the Rev. Patricia L. Hunter, Aziz Junejo, Pastor Mark Driscoll and the Rev. Patrick J. Howell — take turns writing for the Faith & Values page.*

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