

THE PROFANE AND THE SACRED

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This evening at sundown, Jews around the world will begin their eight-day festival of lights known as Hanukkah. The story of Hanukkah begins in the fourth century BCE, when the Greeks under Alexander the Great invaded the Middle East and Asia. Once victorious, the conquerors attempted to impose their highly-developed civilization, a blend of Greek and Eastern influences known as Hellenism, upon their new subjects. Some Jews, intrigued by the culture of the Greeks, gradually assimilated themselves into Greek life.

Not all did so, however, especially after the Greeks began to worship their own gods in the temple at Jerusalem. Over time, an army of Jewish warriors known as the Maccabees — the word means “strong as a hammer” — began to fight back. Eventually, the Maccabees reclaimed the Temple in Jerusalem for Jewish faith and practice.

According to legend, the triumphant Jews wanted to rekindle the eternal flame which had burned in the temple, but they possessed only enough oil to burn for one day. Even so, the flame burned for eight days, until more oil could be found. This miracle became the basis for the eight-day Hanukkah celebration. The light of Hanukkah has come to symbolize freedom from religious oppression.

Both in ancient times and today, oppression takes many forms. It’s essential that we in our time fight back against all forms of oppression, as the Maccabees successfully did in theirs. But it’s also essential that we learn that oppression sometimes takes inward forms, and we need to fight back against those as well. Here too we can learn from the history of the Jews.

Several centuries before the Greeks invaded the land of the Hebrews, an earlier invader — the Mesopotamian King Nebuchadnezzar — had conquered Jerusalem. He forced about 10,000 of the most prominent Jewish citizens — mostly skilled workers, professionals, priests, and the wealthy — to relocate to Babylon, his capital city. This exile in Babylon lasted for about 60 years.

For the Jews, both the privileged Jews who were exiled in Babylon and the poor and unskilled Jews who remained in Palestine, the Babylonian exile became a crucible of despair and hopelessness. The book of Lamentations in the Hebrew Bible was written by those who remained in Palestine during the exile. Among other sufferings, the book chronicles a devastating famine that took place soon after the exile began. The Jews in Palestine felt abandoned by God and forsaken by their counterparts in Babylon.

The Jews exiled in Babylon also felt abandoned and forsaken, though for different reasons. The identity of the Jewish people had been founded upon God’s

promise to protect the Jews and to use them for good in human history. The Babylonian exile called into question God's faithfulness as well as the very self-identity of the Jewish people. This existential crisis eventually produced many of the Psalms in the Hebrew Bible, as well as the book of Job, which wrestles directly with the question of why bad things happen to good people.

Psalm 137 is one of the Psalms produced by the Babylonian captivity. We have heard magnificently-rendered settings of this Psalm today by Giovanni Palestrina, Leonard Cohen, and Caleb Burhans.

In the words of one translation, the Psalm begins:

By the rivers of Babylon,
There we sat down and wept,
When we remembered Zion.
Upon the willows in the midst of it
We hung our harps.
For there our captors demanded of us songs,
And our tormentors mirth, saying,
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion."
How can we sing the Lord's song
In a foreign land?

During this time of lamentation, it would have been easy for the Jews — both those exiled in Babylon and those languishing back in Palestine — to focus their distress solely upon their betrayal by God and their oppression by Nebuchadnezzar. Indeed, Psalm 137 ends with an especially horrific revenge fantasy against their oppressors.

Over time, however, the Jews moved from understanding their exile in strictly political and geographic terms to understanding it theologically and personally. Instead of blaming only God or Nebuchadnezzar, the Jews also came to see their own shortcomings. They had failed to remain faithful to the ways of living and forms of worship to which God had called them. Especially in the books of the Hebrew prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah, the focus is less on their judgment of others than on their own role in their eventual salvation.

This understanding of exile in inward rather than outward terms lies at the heart of Leonard Cohen's interpretation of Psalm 137. He invokes Babylon as a metaphor for all that is lawless, unholy, and spiritually foreign — as the inner temptations that lure us away and seek to make us captive. Cohen sings:

By the rivers dark
I wandered on.
I lived my life
in Babylon.

And I did forget
My holy song:
And I had no strength
In Babylon...
By the rivers dark
I panicked on.
I belonged at last
to Babylon.

In an interview, Leonard Cohen once described the theme of Psalm 137, and his own interpretation of it, as the reconciliation of the profane and the sacred. On these terms, the process of salvation begins when we recognize the areas in our lives where we have forgotten our holy song and embraced the profane — where we exiled ourselves from what is sacred, and good, and spiritually uplifting. Salvation begins when we recognize the ways in which we belong to Babylon and thus have no strength against it. It begins when we recognize that, in spiritual terms at least, the most treacherous terrain of exile lies within.

For some of us, Babylon may be a desire for professional distinction, or financial gain, or social influence. For others it may be a bad habit, or a pernicious addiction, or an unwillingness to deal with a difficult or destructive relationship. In any case, salvation comes, and our release from captivity begins, when we focus on the role we have played in our own captivity.

This recognition takes extraordinary courage. In his book *The Eternal Now*, the late 20th-century theologian Paul Tillich observes that all of us have the experience of being divided within ourselves, estranged from our capacity for goodness, and isolated from the deepest needs of our spirits. The courage to overcome this sense of estrangement and exile — to reunite ourselves with the fullness of our own spirits and the grace that lies in the world we inhabit — Tillich describes this courage as “the innermost center of faith.” Out of this courage, he says, our greatest strength emerges. “Be courageous!” Tillich enjoins. “Say Yes to yourselves in spite of the anxiety of the No.”

For the Jews in Babylon, their captivity eventually ended when the Babylonian Empire was overthrown by the Persian king Cyrus the Great, who allowed the Jews to return home. But they came to understand that the blessings of freedom — both their political freedom and their spiritual freedom — required them always to remember the lessons they had learned in Babylon. They needed to remain true to their convictions and faithful to their calling. As Leonard Cohen puts it, “Be the truth unsaid and the blessing gone, if I forget my Babylon.”

My prayer for all of us this day is that the light of Hanukkah will give us the courage to fight back against the oppressions around us, but also to release ourselves

from the captivity that lies within. As the song says, we live “by the rivers dark, where it all goes on.”

The profane lies both around us and within us, as does the sacred. Which prevails within our own hearts is up to us. Be courageous. Have faith. Say yes to the goodness that lies within you and the possibilities that lie around you.