

Reflection on a GLBT Chanukah

Rabbi Denise L. Eger, Dec. 15, 2006

Chanukah is known as Chag Orim—The Festival of Lights. We light up the darkness of a winter's eve with the many branched candelabrum known as a menorah or chanukiah. For each of the eight nights of Chanukah we light an additional branch of the chanukiah as a reminder of the great miracle of the Maccabees—that they, against all odds, were able to rededicate and reclaim the ancient Temple in Jerusalem from the hands of the Syrian–Greeks. A small band of the faithful against the mightiest army in the world, was able to cleanse the Temple of the idols that had been erected there and dedicate the holy altar once again.

For GLBT people at this season, the story of the Maccabees should provide us with great inspiration. The Maccabees (whose name means hammer) were able to overcome the great oppression of their day. The Syrian Greek powers horribly oppressed the Israelites. They did not let them worship freely and did whatever they could to desecrate the ancient Jewish worship spaces. They murdered and tortured Jewish families who would not bow down to their idols. And yet, the Maccabees prevailed and were able to cleanse the Holy Sanctuary in Jerusalem and restore and rededicate it to the Divine. They re-lit the ancient Menorah, symbol of the Jewish people, bringing light and joy at this season.

In our day and time GLBT people are still oppressed in many corners of the world and in our own country. Our equality is not secure and there are those who do everything in their power to wage war against GLBT people. We battle on many fronts—equality in the workplace, in school and in our churches and synagogues. We battle for parenting rights and the right to adopt. We battle for marriage and the right to serve our country openly. The story of the Maccabees' dedication to liberty and freedom should inspire us that although the odds seem overwhelming at times, that the few can overcome the many. The Maccabees' dedication to justice should give us hope that we too can successfully bring justice and equality to GLBT people both here and abroad. When we work together as a community, we are stronger and strengthen one another. We are doing this work together, bit by bit!

So at this season of light, let the light of the Chanukah menorah remind us of our journey to freedom from oppression and let that light inspire us all to work for the day of triumph, glory and justice when GLBT individuals will be truly free and equal.

Rabbi Denise L. Eger is founding Rabbi of Congregation Kol Ami in West Hollywood, CA (www.kol-ami.org) and a member of HRC's Religion and Faith Council.