



But even more remarkable is the fact that its production was interrupted by the infamous decree of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, expelling all Jews — including the owners of this manuscript — from Spanish and sending them to other lands. This Tanakh, with its owners, ultimately made its way to Constantinople (Istanbul), the capital of the Ottoman Empire, and it was finished there just five years after the expulsion.

But neither was that the end of the book's life story, as various later owners—whose claims are inscribed on this same page—claimed it for themselves. A book well-crafted, with a life well-lived, is now in The Library of JTS.

What does this teach us? That Maimonides's words were seen as “Torah” from the very beginning. Only this assumption can explain the care with which they were copied. Imagine: the words of a human as “Torah”—now, that's an idea worth exploring!

See the full page at www.jtsa.edu/the-life-of-a-book



Hanukkah 5778

חנוכה תשע"ח



The Hanukkah Story I Need to Hear This Year

Rabbi David Hoffman, Vice Chancellor and Chief Advancement Officer, JTS

You, God, who live next door—

If at times, through the long night, I trouble you

With my urgent knocking—

This is why: I hear you breathe so seldom.

I know you're all alone in that room.

If you should be thirsty, there's no one to get you a glass of water.

I wait listening, always. Just give me a sign!

I'm right here.

As it happens, the wall between us is very thin.

Why couldn't a cry from one of us break it down?

It would crumble easily.

It would barely make a sound.

—*Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*, Rainer Maria Rilke (translated by Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy)

Stories have great power. We tell stories about ourselves and about our communities because they give our lives meaning, and they help us navigate between the past and the future. We use stories to help us make sense of the world and our place in it. Not far behind the seemingly innocent plots of many of the stories we tell about our community's religious history lie profound cultural responses to our most pressing questions about what it means to be a human being and how to live life well.

The holiday of Hanukkah offers us at least two stories, which seek to explain why its observance may be compelling. Of course, there is the exciting and courageous story of the Maccabees' military victory and their role in reclaiming



a sense of Jewish national autonomy. What grade-school child or Jewish nationalist doesn't love to hear or tell tales about physical acts of heroism performed by our Maccabee brothers and sisters? Competing with this story of military achievement is the pious narrative of the oil lasting for eight days and the rededication of our holy Temple, a deeply inspiring moment in our people's history.

While each of these stories serves different aspects of our Jewish identities, I would like to share a slightly different recounting of the story of the miracle of Hanukkah, as expressed by Jacob Falk (1680–1756, Poland), better known by the title of his book, the *Penei Yehoshua*.

The true nature of the miracle of Hanukkah according to the *Penei Yehoshua* is not that one vial of ritually "pure" oil miraculously lasted for eight days. Indeed, even if they had not found this container of pure olive oil, the menorah in the Temple could still have been kept lit. The *Penei Yehoshua* reminds us that even open, ritually *unfit* containers of oil could have been used for the lighting of the menorah after the Temple was rededicated. There is a very interesting law which permits the use of things rendered impure provided they are used for communal needs (BT Yoma 6b). So, in truth, there really wasn't a need after all for the "miracle" where one day's worth of pure oil lasted for eight days. Given this understanding, the *Penei Yehoshua* asks us to reconsider the way we tell the story of Hanukkah and, consequently, to also reconsider its religious meaning.

The story of the oil lasting for eight days does relate a miracle. The question is: *How do we interpret the story, and where do we attach meaning?* The power of the miracle that God performed was not providing oil that we would not have had otherwise. Rather, God kept a small quantity of oil miraculously aflame for eight days in order to communicate to the Jewish people that God was present in their community. The miracle of the oil was that God gave the Jewish community, the very people who had suffered so greatly in their war against the Greeks, a clear sign that God had not abandoned this holy nation.

Despite God's silence, or even God's seeming absence, God is close. As a result of God's profound love for the Jewish people, God wanted to comfort us and not let us slip into despair because of a frustration at the inability to perceive God's immanent presence. The lit menorah is God's eternal sign to the Jewish people and all of humanity that God does hear

our "knocking," and God responds to our yearning to be in God's presence. God ultimately wants intimacy with us as much as we seek intimacy with God.

This Hanukkah story explicitly addresses our intense yearning to feel God's presence in our lives. Rilke, in the poem above, expresses this need and the pathos of the soul who seeks God. Yet the desire of the narrator to experience intimacy with God is never fulfilled. The pain and frustration generated by the poem is heightened by the awareness that God "lives next door"—so close, yet remaining hidden and alone. Rilke's words powerfully capture the raw emotions and frustration that are so often felt in the spiritual life of a religious person.

When we attach this story of the meaning of Hanukkah to the ritual of lighting our *hanukkiyot*, we affirm our conviction in the belief of the immanence of a caring God. In every generation, the Hanukkah candles are testimony that God is present and desires intimacy with us. The lights of Hanukkah and the story behind them are our bright light against darkness and despair. The flames dancing from our *hanukkiyot* announce our belief that there is not even a "thin wall" between us and God.

As I face the world this December, this is the story I need to tell to myself and that I will tell to my family.

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Speaking of Text

A WEEKLY EXPLORATION OF THE JEWISH BOOKSHELF

The Life of a Book

The Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary

Every book has a life of its own, sometimes mundane and sometimes astonishing. The life of the book in which this page is found has been quite extraordinary. The book is a Hebrew Bible. It was born of fine parchment and ink, shaped by craftsmen and scribes who spared no effort to make it the best of its kind. It was written for a wealthy family in Toledo, Spain, in the 15th century, in order that they "and their children and their children's children" might study it forever. Remarkably, it has survived to this day.