At Hanukkah, don’t take message for granted

Many years ago, after serving in the Israel Defense Forces, I moved to live on a kibbutz in the beautiful Israel Valley. My father, who lived as a teen in the 1950s in Hulata, a kibbutz in the shadow of the Golan Heights, inspired me (a city boy) to experience life as a kibbutznik. Everyone who joins a kibbutz is offered a host family and I was blessed to be adopted by a wonderful family.

Once during Hanukkah, Mikki Zimring, who was my adopted father while living on the kibbutz, invited me to his home for coffee and sufganiyot (jelly doughnuts eaten in Israel and around the world on Hanukkah—they are deep-fried, filled with jam and then topped with powdered sugar). We walked quietly side by side and I remember the sight of the kibbutz’s Hanukkiah on top of the tallest water tower, all lit up for the holiday.

The image of the electric lights against the dark, clouded sky was a visual representation of just how important Hanukkah was. In the kibbutz, Hanukkah was a national holiday of liberation, a festival of Jewish national pride. We celebrated the victory of the few against the many. When we arrived at his house, Mikki took out his family’s Hanukkiah and proceeded to light the candles. “Mikki,” I asked, “it’s the second night of Hanukkah—why are you lighting seven candles?”

Mikki explained to me that he and his family lit the candles according to the custom of Beit Shammai (the House of Shammai), starting with eight and ending with one; and not with the generally accepted custom of Beit Hillel (the House of Hillel), starting with one candle and building up to eight. They followed the custom of Shammai, he said, as a way to remind themselves that after the victory of the Maccabees, the country lost its purpose. It became corrupted and divided, without a vision for a better future. Seeing the candles dwindle in numbers strengthened their resolve that this must not happen again. “Ner Yisrael lo yishkach” (the light of our people will shine forever).

As long as people light candles and remember that the light needs nurturing and should never be taken for granted, the light will shine. So, however you light your candles — like Mikki or like the rest of us — remember to never take them for granted.

Chag Urim Sameach — Happy Hanukkah.

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