Messiah Thoughts

by Michael Gordon, Ph.D.

Not to sound like the beginning of a joke or anything, but four Jews went to a magnificent cathedral to hear a rendition of Handel's "Messiah." One of them desperately needed to use the restroom prior to the performance. He was confronted with long lines of others waiting to use one of the two commodes available for the over 800 concert goers.

It was a tense wait but he/I made it to the front of the line before Handel's Water Music Suite would have been better suited to the occasion. As it was, I launched into a premature, inside-my-head rendition of the Hallelujah chorus when I finished my turn.

At intermission I asked a priest standing at the entrance how it was that such a large facility had so few bathroom stalls. He smiled and said, "Our services only last 50-55 minutes and most people can hold it at least that long." All I could think about was how our synagogues were built with much larger bathroom facilities because services are just gathering steam after an hour.

Back at my pew, I marveled at the grandeur of the building, the perfection of the acoustics, and the awe-inspiring glory of the music – and once again I realized how we Jews don't have all the marketing and production values just right in comparison. Our religion has generally gone for more modest and portable gathering spots for worship, even though we ask people to pray in them for far longer periods of time (except perhaps for funerals and weddings, which can be uncharacteristically and mercifully brief).

Some of the reasons for the contrasts are obvious. Once organized Catholicism got rolling, they have far outnumbered us in most places in the world. Even now, 23% of the U.S. population is Catholic versus 2.4% for Jews. They have needed more space because they have had more people to serve. Except on the High Holy Days, we don't often need more room for congregants to sit. Most of our shuls would cry with joy if their Shabbat services were overcrowded. And to maintain a cavernous facility for two or three services a year would be impractical.

Of course, for much of our history, we didn't exactly want to broadcast to the world where to locate a large gathering of Jews. It would be like feeding targeting information to our enemies. We also haven't fared well when the rest of the population has had reason to envy our accomplishments. That dynamic has sometimes gotten us relegated to ghettos or worse. Maintaining a low profile has often accrued to our advantage.

I therefore understand the reasons we've opted for more modest architecture, even when we haven't had to plan for a hasty departure. I can also see how, for many, the intimacy of a smaller space and emphasis on congregant participation is more appealing, albeit less grand.

I'm less sure why we need so much more time to pray. Is Jesus a better listener? Does he need less proof of devotion? Is our God simply more demanding? Less trusting that 55 minutes would do the trick? Or it that Catholics have generally been more focused on marketing their religion by making it easier to worship (not to mention foregoing that whole circumcision requirement).

We Jews seem to be more intent on making sure lessons are learned and rules are followed. We might also be a bit more on the obsessive side of life. Do we really need to repeat the Amidah at least three times? Why isn't once enough?

As always, for most of us it comes down to what feels soothing, evocative, and worthwhile. If that's three hours of prayer on a Saturday, so be it. But many of us are fine with services that are accessible, inspiring, and under an hour's time.

Channuka TRIVIA

1. How many blessings are said on the first night of Hanukkah?
2. Are the Hanukkah candles lit from right to left or left to right?
3. What is the name for money given as presents during the Jewish festival of Hanukkah?
4. Which Hanukkah toy was used as a decoy after learning the Torah was outlawed?
5. What is the shamash?
6. Where is the best place to put a chanukiya?
7. What is the name of the courageous Jewish woman who defied the Greeks and killed one of their generals?
8. What do the four Hebrew letters on the dreidel (nun, gimmel, hey, shin) stand for?
9. In what month on the Jewish calendar is Hanukkah?
10. What is the most popular Chanukah fried food in America?
11. What is the most popular Chanukah fried food in Israel?
12. What's the difference between an Israeli dreidel and an American dreidel?
13. What does the word "Hanukkah" mean?
14. What's the difference between a menorah and a chanukiya?
15. Why is food fried during Hanukkah?
16. What is a highlight of the Hanukkah festival in contemporary Israel?
17. What's another way to say Chanukah Sameach?
18. What holiday within Chanukah celebrates women and girls?

ANSWERS

1. 3
2. Right to Left
3. Gelt
4. The dreidel
5. The tall candle used to light the other candles
6. In the window
7. Judith/*Yehudit*
8. *Nes gadol hayo sham*/A great miracle happened there
9. *Kislev*
10. Latkes
11. *Sufganiyot*
12. *Nes gadol hayo po*/A great miracle happened HERE
13. Dedication
14. 7 candles vs 8 candles plus shamash
15. As a symbol of the miracle oil that burned for eight nights
16. The annual relay race from Modiin to Jerusalem
17. *Chag Urim Sameach*
18. Chag HaBanot