December 7, 2012
Dear haverim,

Shabbat Shalom. In advance of tomorrow evening’s first candle of Hanukkah I share with you the following Hanukkah reflection to be read when lighting the “hannukiah.”

Tonight we feel so Jewish. Tonight we feel so proud. Tonight, embedded in a culture that is saturated by Christmas music, colors, trees, and cheer we feel strong identifying with those characteristics that make us different.

We light our “hannukiah.” We stand, together with family and friends as we recite the blessings. We sing Hanukkah songs while we spin our dreidels. We even exchange a few gifts as our American culture dictates to us.

Yet there are so many among us who feel excluded, who feel unconnected, who feel disenfranchised, who lack pride in their Jewish identity.

Hanukkah reminds us that twenty-three hundred years ago we faced a dilemma. How Jewish did our ancestors want to be? Did they want to mimic the Greeks with all of their pagan traditions or were our ancestors comfortable with their own identity?

We can hide behind the beautiful interpretations associated with the miracle of the cruse of oil. We can be enamored by the historical events codified by Hanukkah. We can choose to hold onto the insights expressed by various traditions associated with Hanukkah. But, the essence of this winter festival is whether or not you and I are proud to be identified as Jews.

Is there any contemporary question for the Jewish community that has more relevance? How Jewish do we want to be? How Jewish do we want our children to be? How Jewish should our grandchildren be?

Hanukkah begins this Saturday evening, “motzei Shabbat,” immediately after we make Havdallah. It appears on our calendars once a year for eight light-infused days. Shabbat descends upon us every week, giving us the opportunity to re-connect with our families, our communities, with our Jewish value system on a weekly basis.

The rabbis teach us that on each night of Hanukkah we are to add an additional candle. We strive to increase the holiness in our lives- “ma’alin b’kodesh”- finding ways to add meaning to our lives. May Hanukkah this year serve as an inspiration for you and your family. May each of us strive to find ways of making our homes more Jewish, our schedule more reflective of Jewish time, and our choices representing Jewish values. May each of us find ourselves ascending on the proverbial ladder, seeking ways of deepening our connection to our Jewish people and deepening our personal connection to God.

Wende, Danielle, Jordana, and Adina join me in extending our warmest regards for a festival filled with light- Hag Hannukat Sameah.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Stefan J. Weinberg

**The “hannukiah” is lit on Saturday evening immediately after making Havdallah. We light two candles- the "shamash," and the candle representing the first night. We recite three blessings this first evening, adding "shehecheyanu."**
December 8, 2012
Dear haverim,

I thank Jacob Ratner for selecting the following material to be used this second night of Hanukkah, highlighting our Scholar in Residence Rabbi Irving "Yitz" Greenberg. Rabbi Greenberg, our 2013 Arnie Sweet Scholar in Residence will be our host on the Shabbat of January 18-19. The program entitled, "Judaism for the Next Millennium," promises to be an exciting and inspiring weekend. Please remember to mark your calendars and plan to join us.

A selection of some of Rabbi Greenberg's comments about Hanukkah follows:

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Hanukkah lends itself to being a type of holiday Rorschach test. Every community and generation has interpreted Hanukkah in its own image, speaking to its own needs. When the early Rabbis asked, "What is Hanukkah?" their answer focused on the purification of the Temple and the miracle of the oil that burned for eight days. Medieval Jews also focused on the divine miraculous activity in Hanukkah, projecting their longing for the messianic redeemer.

By contrast, modern Zionists saw in Hanukkah a reflection of their own agenda; they celebrated the Maccabee military prowess and political achievement. For modern liberal Jews, Hanukkah became the holiday of religious freedom. The Maccabee fight was presented as the uprising of a religious community against suppression.

The question is: What model of Hanukkah can speak to this generation?

First, Hanukkah is a paradigm of the relationship between acculturation and assimilation. The victory was set in motion by the resistance of the most traditional elements to the growing encroachment of Hellenistic values. Hanukkah dramatized the positive strength of pietism and loyalty to Judaism. It challenges modern Jews to review their own easy acceptance of cosmopolitanism as superior to the tribal feeling of being Jews.

At the same time, it is not enough to simply ignore the surrounding culture, a tactic that only works when Jews are culturally isolated. The Chasidim of those days could not have won the battle alone. In the conflict, many Hellenizing Jews decided to stand with their fellow Jews rather than with the Greeks. A coalition won the victory of Hanukkah – the traditionalists united with acculturating Jews who decided in a time of crisis to come down on the Jewish side.

Today, when done with balance, acculturation (modernizing) is an alternative to assimilation. Since no one group can offer all the answers for all the life situations or cope with all the options in society, it becomes very important to form coalitions to cover the field, to correct one another, to give Jewry the strength of variety and numbers. The further lesson of Hanukkah is not to write off our fellow Jews, however assimilated they may be.

The battle of Hanukkah is being fought again, not in military engagements but through creating family ties, competing educationally, communicating values and messages, holding and deepening loyalties. Pessimists have more than once informed Jews that there is no more oil left to burn, but as long Hanukkah is studied and remembered, Jews will not surrender to the night. The proper response, as Hanukkah teaches, is not to curse the darkness but to light a candle.

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More information about our upcoming Scholar In Residence Program can be found on the synagogue website: http://anshaitorah.org/Scholar_in_Residence_2013.php

All levels of sponsorship opportunities are available. For information and donations, please contact event co-chairs Jacob Ratner and Warren Harmel at jaratner@gmail.com or warrenharmel@gmail.com.

Shabbat Dinner reservations & tickets are available by calling Anshai Torah at 972.473.7718 or emailing debbie.butvin@anshaitorah.org
December 11, 2012
Dear haverim,

Hanukkah is known in Hebrew as Hag Urim, the festival of light. Appearing on the calendar during the winter season, in close proximity to the winter solstice, it casts light during a time of considerable darkness. We have the capacity to translate the physical light of the "hanukkiah" into spiritual inspirations to uplift the spirits of those we cherish.

As we stand before our "hanukkiah" on this fourth evening of Hanukkah I encourage everyone to add a special prayer for Alan Gross. Imprisoned in Cuba on December 3, 2009 Alan's detention continues to weigh heavily on all those who love and cherish him. Alan Gross, the husband of Judy Gross, the son of Evelyn Gross, brother of Bonnie Rubinstein, and uncle of Neil Rubinstein is a dear member of our extended family, and we will remain diligent, praying for his release and reunion with those who love him. As a small token of our efforts to keep his cause before the world's political leaders I encourage you to sign the attached petition, adding your name to those who will not give up the fight for Alan's release. We pray that Alan will be inspired by the message of the Maccabees- to maintain his perseverance, demonstrating hope and courage while refusing to relinquish his faith.

Within our midst there are so many who are suffering the challenges of various illnesses, chronic or otherwise. Without hope the future seems so very bleak. May the light of the "hanukkiah" serve as an inspiration, reminding each of us that the human will, coupled with faith in God can provide promise and hope when despair seemed the only option.

Our challenging economic times continue to try our souls. So many in our midst continue to struggle. Far too many remain unemployed and incapable of caring for their loved ones. May the light of our "hanukkiah" cast a new glow of hope on the lives of those who see only disappointment.

Finally, as we stand before our "hanukkiah" this evening, ushering in the fourth night of Hanukkah may we realize the inseparable bonds that unite us as Jews throughout the world. It is our innate ability- taught to us by every generation of rabbis- to see the hope and promise of tomorrow. It is our Jewish tradition that compels us to continue to dream, to lift our spirits, to imagine a better tomorrow, and then make it happen. May this Hanukkah prove to the beginning of a better tomorrow for everyone.


Hag Urim Sameah,

Rabbi Stefan J. Weinberg

December 12, 2012
Dear haverim,

The year was 168 BCE. The Greeks had ransacked the Temple in Jerusalem. They had forbidden the study of Torah and the practice of circumcision. Greek culture- Hellenism- was introduced throughout the land of Israel. Greek thought, architecture, athletic events, etc., all became the norm. The goal was to marginalize the Jewish people and their practices.

Led by Mattityahu and, subsequently his five sons, this Hasmonean family was determined to preserve the Jewish way of life. Forming bands of warriors who took on the name Macabbee, they led the Jewish people in revolt against the Greek/Syrian oppressors. Their three year assault of the invading forces ended in a short-lived victory for the Macabbees. The Temple was purged, re-dedicated, and returned to its pristine condition.

As we light the fifth candle this evening we remember the sacrifices that many prior generations of Jews have made for us. Today, our Israeli family members continue to sacrifice for you and me, risking their lives to defend the Jewish people. We, who live outside the land of Israel, in the "Galut," are compelled to do our part. We must defend the pride of the Jewish people. We must defend Israel's right to live in peace and determine its future. We must educate ourselves so that we can become the most literate generation of Jewish people, enjoying exceptional blessings in the United States of America.

May we peer into the candles on this fifth night, acknowledging our responsibility to keep the fire of Jewish passion and Jewish pride alive and well in our generation. Jewish schools, Jewish camps, Jewish youth groups all assist us in our mission to ensure the fact that our children will become the next link in the Jewish people. Am Yisrael Hai.

Hag Urim Sameah,

Rabbi Stefan J. Weinberg
Dear haverim,

The Macabbees were successful. They purged Israel of the debilitating Greek presence. They restored the sanctity of the holy Temple in Jerusalem, and reminded the Jewish people they were capable of determining their own future. No longer need they be considered pawns of every invading people.

Regrettably, the story has an ugly twist. The victory of the Macabbees was short-lived. Within a short time the Macabbees succumbed to the forces they were attempting to combat. Not only were the Macabbees attempting to rid the land of Israel of the invading Greeks, they sought to destroy the will of the Jewish sector that welcomed the Hellenizing practices into their lives. Led by the Priesthood, a civil war developed within the Jewish community between the pro-Hellenizing Priesthood and its followers, and the Macabbees with their dedicated adherents.

Soon, the Macabbees having occupied powerful positions in the reconstituted land of Israel became as corrupt as the former High Priesthood. Wooed by the power and intrigue of their new positions, the Macabbees allowed themselves to lose sight of their original goal to ignite a passion for the return to traditional Jewish practices.

As we light the "hanukkiah" this evening let us recall the plight of the Macabbees. Just as they struggled for their causes and enjoyed victory, so have many Jews in our contemporary world. Yet, like the Macabbees it seems the rarity when power, authority and success are attained without the sullying of one's value system.

So many of us are involved with various enterprises that lead us along a path of personal gain. We strive to reach higher plateaus, more seniority, greater exposure, more responsibility, and greater prestige. Far too often our success is accompanied by a skewed ethical compass that translates into callousness, diminished sensitivity, greater ego, and less humility.

As we prepare to light the sixth candle on our "hanukkiah" this evening, may we accept our mission as bearers of the Macabbees' touch of purity. May the light of the flickering candles guide us on a journey that always prods us to rise above unethical and inhumane tendencies. May the value of each human being never be compromised by the seemingly pure imperatives of those who strive to lead at every level of society.

Hag Urim Sameah,

Rabbi Stefan J. Weinberg

December 14

Dear haverim,

Today is a special day on our Jewish calendar. It is Erev Shabbat; it is Rosh Hodesh Tevet (the first day of the new month of Tevet), and it is the sixth day of Hanukkah. We recited the full expression of Hallel this morning, reflecting the wonder of this day and all of its potential. (Zeh hayom asah Adonai nagilah v'nismicha bo- This is the day the Lord made, let us exult and rejoice on it.)

And, then, without warning the wonder of the day was shattered. We heard about the tragic shooting in Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut- another school, another community, another group of children, another set of families' lives overwhelmed by chaos.

What can we say? What can we do? How shall we respond? Perhaps there will be another round of discussion on gun control. How many times must we hear the arguments that it is not the gun's "fault" but the individuals who use the guns?

We are all at risk. Everyday we leave our homes and pray we will return to our families, able to relive the challenges of the day, welcoming smiling children into our homes, embracing spouses after a long day- everyone is blessed with dreams yet to be fulfilled. Today, all those dreams are decimated for the families associated with Sandy Hook Elementary School.
Hanukkah is our holiday of light, casting light at a dark, dreary time of the year. When we view the glowing candles our spirits are uplifted as we realize the capacity of light to infuse our lives with meaning and hope. This afternoon we have to channel our thoughts and prayers to the grieving families in Newtown. This afternoon we have to recite a prayer for every child and adult who continues to cling to life. This afternoon we have to join together as we express our deepest expression of sympathy for the precious lives that were snuffed out this morning.

May this be the final time we face the tragic loss of precious lives in a school shooting. May children be returned to a world of naïveté. May parents enjoy the security that used to be the norm when children were dropped-off at school. May grandparents never again have to experience the tragic loss of life we encountered this morning.

Shabbat Shalom, and Happy Hanukkah,

Rabbi Stefan J. Weinberg

Dear haverim,

Yesterday afternoon I spent an hour with one of our high school students at her after-school religion club at McKinney Boyd High School. For an hour and ten minutes I was questioned about Judaism. I was asked everything from, why Jewish people have such a strong affiliation to the Democratic Party, to why the Jewish people understand certain Biblical passages about good and evil, and about the Messiah in such a different way from the Christian community. It was a wonderful opportunity for me to expose a group of non-Jewish students to Jewish ideas and our Jewish tradition, while, hopefully enhancing the respect they will have for a different way of seeing the world.

A couple of weeks ago at our morning minyan Dr. Mike Pincus informed me that he had been visited by his neighbor who was a student at one of the private parochial schools in our community. This young woman wanted to know everything Mike and Jeanette could tell her about our Jewish festival of Purim- that was the festival they were studying in school. One night later Wende received a knock on our door from our neighbors who attend the same school who had the same set of questions about Purim!

As I reflected about these few moments I realized how much we are all in the spotlight. Each of us is a representative of the Jewish people. Some of us thrive on the attention directed toward us and some of us prefer to escape any and all focus. Such is the nature of the human condition.

As a shul we strive to infuse a sense of Jewish pride in each of our children, as well as our adults. Throughout our school system, from Preschool to ATID we attempt to give our children the tools to navigate our non-Jewish world with a keen sense of Jewish identity and Jewish pride. Like the December Dilemma confronted by every parent of young Jewish children in a non-Jewish environment we need to be prepared for those moments when our children suffer from the pressure of being a minority. Most important we need Jewish parents who are proud of their Jewish identity and will pass that down to their children with passion.

That is the story of Hanukkah. The Macabbees felt threatened about their ability to pass their Judaism down to the next generation. Compelled to address the political conditions of their time they felt as though they had no choice but to wield instruments of war to defend their ideals and our people.

The choices today don't appear to be as extreme but, in fact they remain just as critical to our future. Is the level of our assimilation providing our children with a sense of Jewish pride? Is the extent of our assimilation able to convey to our children the Jewish values we hope they will receive? Is the level of assimilation we practice a result of our laziness or our commitment to a set of values for which we remain proud?

As we light the seventh candle on our "hanukkiah" this evening may we remind ourselves that not only are we being watched by our children and our peers as we make choices, but God, too is watching how we navigate the choices that characterize our lives.

To our shul family this afternoon I say, Shabbat Shalom, Happy Rosh Hodesh (the new month of Tevet) and Happy Hanukkah!! It is a very busy day.

Rabbi Stefan J. Weinberg

***Remember: On Friday night we light the "hanukkiah" before lighting the Shabbat candles, while on Saturday night we make Havdallah first, and then light our "hanukkiah."
Dear haverim,

Hanukkah has become a gift-giving holiday for many of us. As we prepare to light the eighth candle this evening I share the following reading with everyone. Perhaps we spend too much attention on the gifts we purchase and not enough attention on the invaluable gifts we can give everyday.

Shavua tov, and Hag Urim Sameah,

Rabbi Stefan J. Weinberg

EIGHT GIFTS THAT DON'T COST A CENT

This simple checklist can help measure how we are nurturing our relationships. The author of these thoughts is unknown, but deeply appreciated.

The Gift of Listening But you must really listen. Don't interrupt, don't daydream, don't plan your response. Just listen.

The Gift of Affection Be generous with appropriate hugs, kisses, pats on the back and handholds. Let these small actions demonstrate the love you have for family and friends.

The Gift of Laughter Clip cartoons. Share articles and funny stories. Your gift will say, "I love to laugh with you."

The Gift of Solitude There are times when we want nothing better than to be left alone. Be sensitive to those times and give the gift of solitude to others.

The Gift of a Favor Every day, go out of your way to do something kind.

The Gift of a Written Note It can be a simple “Thanks for the help” note or a full sonnet. A brief, handwritten note may be remembered for a lifetime.

The Gift of a Compliment A simple and sincere, "You look great in red," "You did a super job," or “That was a wonderful meal” can make someone's day.

The Gift of a Cheerful Disposition The easiest way to feel good is to extend a kind word to someone.

These are eight important ways we can contribute toward whole and healthy relationships. They cost nothing, yet they may well be the most valuable gifts we can ever offer another.