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Author, Judaism and Justice: The Jewish Passion to Repair the World

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Hanukkah and Interfaith Dialogue: Increasing Our Shared Light

On the first night of Hanukkah this year, I found myself in an unusual place. I was supposed to be at a Jewish communal event hosted by Israel's Ambassador to the United States, Michael Oren. But at the last minute I was asked by the Indonesian Ambassador, Dino Patti Djalal, to participate in an interfaith panel which included one of the leading Muslim clerics of his country, Dr. Din Syamsuddin. Dr. Syamsuddin is the president of Muhammadiyah, an organization of 29 million Muslims that sponsors a wide range of social and educational programs in Indonesia and more than a dozen universities. Also on the panel was Rev. Michael Livingston, a Presbyterian and former president of the National Council of Churches who is now heading up their initiative to fight poverty.

The fact is that I only accepted the invitation because of a remarkable speech I heard given by Ambassador Djalal a week earlier as part of an international conference sponsored by the Center for Interfaith Action on Global Poverty (CIFA). The organization was unveiling a new initiative to increase the engagement of faith communities in health and development efforts around the globe.

The Ambassador, who hosted a dinner for the delegates, shared his concerns about the extent to which the world was witnessing an increase in religious extremism. A Muslim himself, Djalal bemoaned the fact that in his own country religious communities that had lived side by side in harmony for centuries were set against each other because of the actions of a handful of religious zealots. He called upon the faith leaders gathered to engage in "militant moderation," by which he meant that those of us who believe that religions can bring healing balm to a world beset by war, disease and poverty must be far more assertive than the voices of religious extremism. He called for a new "technology of peace" which would be based not on rehashing the prejudices and grievances of past generations but rather on the more positive model of interfaith collaboration to address the most pressing issues of the world.

So committed was Ambassador Djalal to advancing this kind of interfaith understanding that he arranged to bring a TV crew in from Indonesia in a matter of days to tape the conversation between

Dr. Syamsuddin, Rev. Livingston and me. The program will air in prime time on one of Indonesia's most popular programs the week before Christmas. He wanted to model for his country the ways that religious leaders from different faiths could sit together and find common ground.

For those acquainted with interfaith dialogue, the conversation covered familiar territory. We discussed how people could be loyal to their respective faiths but still be open to and respectful of those who were adherents of another faith. And while this particular dialogue took place only between representatives of the Abrahamic traditions, the nature of the conversation sent a message to the broader community of the faithful. No responsible representation of God's will, from any faith perspective, could possibly sanction hatred or violence against another child of God.

Hanukkah is called "the festival of lights." It marks the victory of the Jews against their Hellenized Syrian oppressors in the land of Israel during the second century BCE. The Jews had none of the weaponry of their occupiers. Yet the Maccabees would not succumb to the demands of the Syrians to give up their religious beliefs and practices. The fact that the Maccabees ultimately prevailed is recorded as the first war in history fought for religious liberty. Appropriately enough, the annual Jewish cycle of Scriptural readings assigns to the festival of Hanukkah a selection from the Book of Zecharia (4:6): "Not by might and not by power but by spirit, says the Lord of heaven."

Two thousand years later, we are still fighting the same battles. In a world that is changing so rapidly, religion provides comfort, continuity and timeless certainty to millions of the faithful in the world. But often that religious package also includes heavy doses of triumphalism, chauvinism and intolerance. It is incumbent on religious leaders to help their adherents distinguish between the elements of faith that foster peace and understanding and those that lead to prejudice and extremism.

As with Christmas and Kwanza, Hanukkah falls during the winter solstice. It is the darkest time of the year. Appropriately enough, all three festivals have as a central symbol candles and light. If we are to move our world closer to the messianic ideal articulated in the sacred texts of most of the world's religions, each of us will need to find ways to light a candle, increase the light and banish away the darkness.