

December 2017

Dear Friends,

One of the principles of Reconstructionist Judaism is that Jews in the United States live in two civilizations – the Jewish and the American. Two weeks ago, we witnessed the truth and joy of that fact when our congregation hosted the annual Port Washington community Thanksgiving service. The lobby and the *bimah* were festively and imaginatively decorated with squash, cookbooks, plush turkeys, and cartoonish pilgrims. The sanctuary was filled to overflowing with people happy to be together. There were readings, a stirring sermon from the new Methodist minister, a collection to benefit our neighbors and residents of Puerto Rico, and much singing concluding with Sheri Lindner's words to Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah." Our celebration continued with an "Oneg Thanksgiving," which lasted as long as the service. People just didn't want to leave.

I know that spirit will stay with those Thanksgiving service attendees as we approach the winter holidays of Hanukkah and Christmas. As Dianne Ashton notes in her book, *Hanukkah in America*, much of the contemporary observance of Hanukkah in our country has been informed by the celebration of Christmas. With the commodification of both holidays – a quintessential American value – parents raising Jewish children are eager to emphasize our eight days versus one to ameliorate possible envy. Latkes and jelly doughnuts are another point of pride, though no one, I think, would argue that "I Had A Little Dreidl" could ever hold a candle (sorry!) to Handel's "Messiah." But it's not a competition, as I often remind my own children about so many things, to which they *always* roll their eyes in response.

Of course, at their roots, neither holiday has anything to do with gift giving or food or music. It is, at the core, all about lights. Christian, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus alike all share the elemental fear of the dark. Whether it is a tree alight, a *hanukkiya* with blazing candles, or bulbs strung 'round a window or along the eaves, we all do what we do to bring light into the world. Even at a time of deepest darkness, we can strike a match or turn on a switch. When we act in community, we bring new light and promise into our midst. That's the function of our religiously oriented pre-solstice holidays. That's what we experienced collectively two weeks ago on a Sunday afternoon here at RSNS.

I wish you all light and love and the courage to do what you can to bring it about as we move toward solstice time and the year's end. Warmly,

*Lee*