

FIRST THINGS

DIGNITY IN FLAMES

by
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The flames of the Hanukkah candles symbolize both enchantment and futility in a way that speaks to the narcissism of our age.

To understand how, we need to turn to the work of a pivotal thinker. Immanuel Kant's philosophical toil marked perhaps the most decisive moment in the history of modern thought. He wrote during the eighteenth century, in an age in which the sway of confessional faith began to fade and the pillars of traditional metaphysics underwent irreparable change. Aristotelian beliefs that had seized the stewards of a whole slew of religious creeds—from Avicenna to Aquinas to Maimonides—were deserted in a powerful critique of pure reason.

With the ground caving beneath the feet of revealed ethics (which threatened to bring about a Nietzschean politics), Kant and his peers and devotees frantically sought a surrogate to bind people together and inspire them to virtue. Kant, in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), outlines the notion of the categorical imperative and what he calls the Kingdom of Ends (*Reich der Zwecke*).

The Kingdom of Ends is an imaginary realm in which human needs and responsibilities are perfectly balanced. The central tenet of this moral paradise is that each person serves as an end in and of themselves, and never as a means to another's ends. Everyone serves one another, and no one uses anyone else; there is no abuse or exploitation, no persecution or manipulation—each and every human being keeps an unassailable and essential dignity.

The ritual choreography of the Hanukkah candles stresses a similar attention to ends. The candles grace windowpanes and doorframes in a row of low flames, but maintain a ritually endowed futility throughout the night: They may not serve as a means to reading or eating or seeing beyond themselves in any way. The flames are

lit and seen, but never used; while the blazes draw our gaze, the wicks have no utility. The rhythmic liturgy makes this confession: “*Ein Lanu Reshut LeHishtamesh Bahem, Elah Lir’otam Bilvad,*” which means, “We have no authority to make use of them, but only to look at them.”

So devoted were the rabbinic sages to this prohibition that measures were taken to avoid even inadvertent use. The extra wick—the *shamash*—is always present, independent of the candles marking the number of the night. It is there not only to ignite the others, but to preclude any illicit use of prohibited light by diluting the ritual flames’ illumination.

And yet, despite the embargo on their use, the flames are at the center of a publicity campaign unlike anything else in Jewish life. They are lit in homes and synagogues and parks and public squares, in the White House and at the Western Wall. Though forbidden for use, they are enchanting. They encapsulate the truth of Oscar Wilde’s words: “All art is quite useless.” Though clearly satirical and acerbic, Wilde’s maxim suggests that uselessness can be a mark of profound worth, casting an object not as empty but invaluable, not as vacant but purposefully unusable. Art, for Wilde, ceases to be art if it is used—much as human beings, for Kant, lose their dignity through abuse.

The Hanukkah candles glisten through the winter, signaling that we need to see beyond mere utility, to discover in others an inalienable dignity—and never treat those others simply as means. While Kant’s *Kingdom of Ends* failed to impede the rise of Nietzsche and the anarchic ethics of a will to power (or the ideology of utilitarianism, for that matter), the wicks lit by the Maccabees more than twenty centuries ago still burn, exhibiting dignity in flames.

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