

Rabbi David Wolpe's

Off The Pulpit

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Glow Of The Past

Hanukkah is post-biblical and there is no scriptural mention of the holiday. Why then does the blessing say God "commanded us" to light the Hanukkah lights? Where does that command come from?



In the Talmud, Rabbi Nehemiah gives a profound answer (Shabbat 23a). He says the command is in the verse in Deuteronomy, "Ask your father, he will inform you; Your elders, they will tell you (Deut. 32: 7)." In other words, commands are a product of the chain of tradition as well as the direct word of God.

Judaism is an interpretive tradition. We shape our behavior through the generations, through the discussions of the study hall, the practices of the community, scholarship, tradition, and aspiration. Rabbi Nehemiah teaches that we can hear the voice of God through history, through our people's struggles and successes. The excitement of the enterprise is to listen together, to try to figure out what our ancestors are saying, how we discern the voice of God in their legacy.

Listen to the elders and light with the children. The glow of the lights reminds us of the miracle of a people that, like the cruse of oil, should have lasted only a short time but miraculously endured.