

The Darkness of Darfur: A Call for Light on Hanukkah Hanukkah

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Today is Shabbat Hanukkah. Over the past several decades in our country, this morning has traditionally been an opportunity for rabbis to address the "December Dilemma." Rabbis and other Jewish educators will speak of the challenge of living as a Jew in our predominantly Christian society during the winter holiday season. They will focus on the differences between Christmas and Hanukkah explaining that the two have utterly nothing to do with each other, and that Hanukkah really isn't even that big of a deal, as far as Jewish holidays are concerned.

In truth, there are some nuanced similarities between the two holidays. Most notably, they both are connected to the winter solstice. On that day, the shortest day of the year, the daytime hours are at a minimum in the Northern hemisphere, and nighttime is at a maximum. Both of these festivals, Hanukkah and Christmas, are a way to overcome the darkness with light. Think of the Christian homes decorated with the colorful, bright Christmas lights. Think of the Jewish homes with the flickering lights of the menorah in the window. So, if we are looking for some harmony between our two religious traditions during this time of year, we can find common ground in our approach to bringing light into this dark time of the year. Symbolically as well.

In ancient times, our ancestors became quite fearful during this dark time of year. Light was needed. And to this very day, we seek to step out of the darkness and into the light with our joyful celebration of Hanukkah, *Chag Urim* - the Festival of Lights. Statistics show that many more individuals suffer depression during these dark winter months. For some people this depression may be associated with Seasonal Affective Disorder, a mood disorder related to seasonal variations of light. So you can see, light is very important for us and controls for the way we feel. Light is seen as hope and joy. And light is very important in many ways in Judaism as well.

Let us look at four uses of the term light, in Hebrew or, in our Tradition:

Or Lagoyim - A Light unto the Nations. We are obligated to think of ourselves and our actions as an example for humanity. We must live our lives according to the words of God as put forth in the Torah, *I the Lord have called you in righteousness, and will hold your hand, and will protect you, and make for you a covenant, to be a light unto the nations.* What does it mean to be a light unto the nations? When there is darkness in our world, we must be the guiding light, the symbol of leadership, the ray of hope, and the impetus for change. We must lead the way out of the darkness and into the light.

Or Layehudim - Light for the Jewish people. There are many similarities between the celebrations of Hanukkah and Purim. If you recall, at the conclusion of the Purim story as told in Megillat Esther, Mordechai leaves the presence of the King in royal clothes, with a great crown of gold, and with a beautiful royal garment. Everyone rejoices over this turn of events and was glad. The text then says, *"the Jews had light, and gladness, and joy, and honor."* It is significant that the way to explain the happiness and delight of the Jewish people is to first state that they had light and only then that they had gladness, joy, and honor.

So too on Shabbat, we are told that the rest and the happiness of the Sabbath is a light for the Jewish people. *Menucha v'simcha* or Layehudim. One of the leaders of the Conservative Movement, Rabbi Jerry Epstein has used the term Or Layehudim to encourage us in our observance and practice of Judaism. He writes, "As Isaiah challenged our ancestors to become an Or Lagoyim, - A light unto the nations - I want to urge Conservative Jews to become an Or Layehudim - a light unto the Jews. Today, we must become the beacon to inspire Conservative Jews to live a more fulfilling and meaningful life."

Or Chadash - A new light. Hanukkah is a time in which we celebrate the rededication of the Temple. And we do this with light. Specifically, with a new light. It is the renewal of the eternal flame. It is the celebration of miracles, and miracles happen in our own time as well. We say, *bayamim ha hem u'vazman hazeh*. Those miracles happened in times of old and they happen in this time as well. In our modern times, the Temple is our planet earth and like the Maccabees, we need to protect it and its inhabitants from evil. Each night of Hanukkah, we light an "*or chadash*," a new light. In so doing, we symbolize our rededication to the cause of humanity.

Or Zaruah Latzadik - Light is sown for the righteous. A metaphor for our Torah is light. Just as God gifted us light at the beginning of creation, so too God has gifted us the light of Torah. It is that light that the Psalmist is referring to with the words *Or Zaruah Latzadik*. It is the Torah that is sown for us. It is up to us to share that gift with others, to plant the seeds of Torah and spread the message of Tikkun Olam - repairing the world situation, and of righteousness to others.

Each of these uses of the concept of light dictates that we search out darkness not only in our midst, but throughout the world as well, and seek to brighten the dark situation with light. Where there is darkness, there is an inability to see and a failure to envision the brightness of hope in the future. We are duty bound to create light. *L'taken olam b'malkhut Shaddai* - Our liturgy tells us to repair the world. Tikkun olam is our understanding of bringing light into our dark world. We must shed light on the entirety of our earth to seek out those areas that need our help, that need our repair.

Our communal history of persecution - of our people being in the dark, fighting through the dark periods of our history should tell us that we must help our fellow humans who are in the dark. Those who are being persecuted. Those who are being victimized.

Our people have experienced the darkness. Throughout our history when we have been in dark places, we have always persevered and found the light. In one of our darkest times, the Shoah of last century, we, the Jewish people, made a promise with two profound words: "Never Again." We must live up to that promise that when we see darkness engulfing other humans; we will not stand idly by.

The phrase "Never Again" must not be reserved for us alone. It is not enough to say that we will never allow our own people to suffer those atrocities again. We must understand the phrase "Never Again" as a pledge, as an oath. The message of Hanukkah should guide us in the notion that we will be responsive to all attempts by any people to annihilate another people. Chancellor Ismar Schorsch writes, "Hanukkah is conducive to thinking about [...] values, because [of] the religious persecution which the festival commemorates." The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum made a strong statement of values this past summer when it issued its first ever genocide alert for Sudan.

American Jewish World Service director Ruth Messinger, who traveled to Darfur in Sudan, writes "I went to Darfur in August to bear witness, to assess humanitarian needs, and to ensure that funds provided by the American Jewish community are being and will be used effectively. I met many of the displaced farmers and listened to their chilling and all-too-similar stories. The government bombed their villages, and then men on camels or horses rode in, often yelling ethnic slurs and shooting wildly. They plundered the farm animals that were the lifeblood of these communities. They stole, they raped, and they killed. They stuffed wells with dead bodies or carcasses and burned villages to the ground."

Since February 2003 in the Darfur region, tens of thousands have died, villages have been destroyed, women and girls raped and over a million people have been driven from their homes.

As Jews, we have an increased moral obligation to respond, to speak out, and to take action against ethnic cleansing regardless of the ethnicity, race, or religion of the people being victimized. These are lessons we should have learned from the Holocaust. The US was silent during that dark time. How can we allow that same reaction to repeat itself?

The situation in Sudan is certainly bleak. And it is even worse in other regions of Africa. How many of us are aware of the atrocities taking place in the Congo? Reuters reporter David Lewis writes "over 1,000 Congolese civilians a day are dying, nearly all from disease and malnutrition, due to a festering conflict that has killed 3.8 million people."

"Although the Democratic Republic of Congo's five-year war was declared over last year, the International Rescue Committee (the IRC) said it was still the 'deadliest crisis' in the world, but the international community was doing too little to stop it." One of the authors of a study by the Refugee Relief Agency said that "In a matter of six years, the world lost a population equivalent to the entire country of Ireland or the city of Los Angeles." He asks, "How many innocent Congolese have to perish before the world starts paying attention?" Rephrased, how long will we allow darkness to overcome part of the world's population?

Is this mass genocide in our backyard? No. However, it is still affecting our neighbors. The Sudanese and the Congolese are our neighbors here on earth. We're in the dark about them because of the lack of attention to the situation. And they are in the dark because of the genocide being waged on them. If we are in the dark and they are in the dark, then the sad fact is that our world is a dark place and in desperate need of light.

Over and over again, we are tested. Our values are tested. Our ability to make good on the pledge "Never Again" is called into question. We cannot allow ourselves to get accustomed to living in the dark. Or accustomed to allowing others to live in the dark. A Chasidic story is told of a man entering a dark room. He is overwhelmed by the darkness.

"Don't worry," said his friend. "The darkness hits only at first. Soon your eyes will grow accustomed to it, and you will hardly notice the dark."

"My friend," replied the man, "that is our problem. Judaism teaches us to distinguish between light and darkness. But unfortunately, by becoming too accustomed to the situation, we begin to think of the darkness as light!"

So what can we do to bring light unto the situation in Africa? Following the recommendations in the Unity Statement and Call to Action for the Massive Crisis in Darfur, Sudan, we can resolve to do at least one of the following:

- Encourage worldwide efforts to stop the displacement and end the crimes against humanity;
- Support legislation, such as the Comprehensive Sudan Peace Act that will increase humanitarian aid to the Sudan;
- Demand massive worldwide governmental humanitarian support and access to match the need;
- Promote efforts to rebuild villages and return the displaced; and finally,
- Call for a UN Commission of Inquiry to investigate war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide.

By setting out to do any one of these recommended acts we will help bring in the light to overcome the darkness a little at a time. We can only shed light onto this desperate situation if we take action now. Think back to Egypt. Darkness is a plague. But moving from darkness to light is a blessing. It is transformative.

In this morning's Torah portion, we read about Joseph, who, in a major leadership position in Egypt, is now in a position to help others. Joseph was not always the helper. He, at one time, hurt others. He was only concerned with himself. He also experienced the darkness. The darkness of the pit his brothers threw him in. The years of darkness in the Egyptian prison. When he emerged from this darkness into the light, however, he was transformed. Joseph began his life as a conceited young man. He spent the rest of his life in the light, helping others. Maybe he had to experience the darkness in order to find the light. Maybe we all do?

We do not want to be in the dark though. We want to - and should want to - be aware of the plight of those with whom we share this earth. Awareness, however, is only the first step in the process. We must spring into action and help to make a change. That is the true message of Hanukkah. Let us make the transformation as Joseph did. From darkness and unawareness to light and action. We must be optimists.

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg teaches, "Pessimists and assimilationists have more than once informed Jews that there is no more oil left to burn. As long as 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." Let us, together, step out of the darkness and create the light - for ourselves, for God, for all of humanity.

Shabbat Shalom v'Chag Hanukkah Sameach.