

Chanukah Supplement 5784/2023

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This year has seen turmoil in the United States and in Israel. During this Festival of Lights we need to bring light into the world, now more than ever. We hope that these meditations and prayers, intended as an introduction to the lighting of the menorah each night of the holiday, will enrich your celebrations as you kindle light against the darkness of our world.

The First Night: Community

Judaism is a communal religion. Our community comes together during times of celebration or grief or prayer or action or learning. Especially at times when our community is under duress, we come together as a people to support and strengthen one another. Our tradition teaches that כל ישראל ערבים זה בזה “*Kol Yisrael areivim zeh baze*h” — “all Israel, all Jews, are responsible one for the other.”



This evening, we kindle the first light of Chanukah exactly two months after the horrific terrorist attack of October 7th. We begin the ritual by lighting the *shamash*, the central candle, that will in turn kindle all of the other candles that mark each night of the festival. **Each of us is responsible to be the *shamash*, the bearer of light** — the one who is committed to kindling light at this difficult time. *Kol Yisrael areivim zeh baze*h — all of us are responsible to support and hold and uplift each other.

As we kindle these flames on this First night of Chanukah, let us be the bearers of light.



The Second Night: Faith

From the youngest of ages, Jews are taught that one of the miracles we celebrate on Chanukah is the fact that while there was only enough oil to light the *ner tamid*, the continually burning flame, for one night, it lasted for eight. If that is the case, then one might ask: what was the miracle we celebrate on the first night since there was enough oil to keep the flame going?



The miracle of the first day of Chanukah is that the Maccabees, who succeeded in reclaiming the Jerusalem Temple, had the faith to light the menorah at all. They knew that the single cruse of oil would burn out before they could acquire more. Chanukah is about faith – about celebrating our traditions fully even when our path forward as a people seems uncertain.

After we light our menorah this evening, we will light Shabbat candles. The lighting of Shabbat candles has been an act of faith throughout the generations, even in our people's darkest moment. A story from Auschwitz:

Every Friday evening my mother made two small candles from the margarine she saved and did not eat, and from some threads from the bottom of her dress. She lit them and encouraged all the other women in the barrack to do the same, so the barrack was lit every Friday night with these candles. She never lost her faith and claimed that she survived the Holocaust only due to her Shabbat candles.
(based on a story by Olga Fin)

To this day, we include this Sabbath hymn of faith written by the 12th century poet Avraham ibn Ezra: "If I keep the Sabbath, God will keep me. It is a sign for eternity between me and God."

As we kindle these flames on this Second night of Chanukah, let us be the bearers of light.

The Third Night: Havdalah

Tonight, in addition to lighting the Chanukah candles, we observe the ritual of Havdalah — separating the holy time of Shabbat from the secular work week.



A midrash tells the story of Adam and Eve at the conclusion of that first Shabbat. As night began to fall, they became afraid. But God showed them how to kindle light — a light that brought them warmth and comfort.

Kindling light against the darkness conquers fear and despair. Bringing light into the world carries with it healing and hope. We need that light at this dark time in our people's history:

It should not be lost on us that 2500 years ago Haman sought to exterminate the Jews of Shushan and now Hamas seeks to exterminate Jews in Israel and throughout the world. Upon Haman's defeat, the Jews celebrated, as it is written in the Book of Esther: "The Jews enjoyed light and gladness, happiness and honor." And then the Havdalah ritual continues, adding these words: "So may it be for us."

And to that, let us say: Amen!

As we kindle these flames on this Third night of Chanukah, let us be the bearers of light.

The Fourth Night: Freedom

Often when we speak about freedom, we divide the enslavement we feel into two categories: that which we impose on ourselves and that which is imposed upon us by external forces. We enslave ourselves when we feel trapped by bad habits or addictions, or feel trapped in toxic relationships or jobs. More recently, however, we have been faced



with those who are attempting to take our freedoms from us. Much of this is taking place in our own country where there are those who seek to take away our rights — rights to make our own healthcare decisions, to experience love that is natural to us, or to seek the breadth of knowledge we expect to find in classrooms or libraries. Diversity, disagreement, and self-determination are routinely demonized. It makes us anxious about our future here at home.

In our ancient homeland, the Israeli government has sought to undermine the freedoms of the majority over the past year. Quite abruptly, though, the consternation around internal, authoritarian forces been replaced by the fear of no longer being safe due to external forces. Whether it be terrorist attacks by Hamas or the surge in antisemitism around the world, Jews feel less safe to go about their ordinary lives. At the same time, innocent Gazans are trapped between poor socio-economic conditions and war. The freedoms of both peoples have come under fire.

More than at any time in recent memory, people around the world are desperate to be free to lead fulfilling lives in safety, prosperity, and autonomy. May the lights we kindle this evening serve as a beacon of freedom to all.

As we kindle these flames on this Fourth night of Chanukah, let us be the bearers of light.



The Fifth Night: Peace

Peace — that sense of calm, quiet, and harmony. But peace is not found in some idyllic Garden of Eden. We must find peace in a world torn apart by discord, violence, hatred, and fear. Peace is hard work.

Peace begins with empathy, empathy leads to connection, connections are knit together to form an ever-growing tapestry, and that tapestry becomes a place of refuge when we hoist it high over a broken world. In partnership with God, we spread over the world a shelter of peace.



A PRAYER

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, and the God of all humankind;
the God of Abraham, the God of Sarah, the God of Hagar,
the God of Isaac, and the God of Ishmael —
look upon Your children everywhere with mercy and lovingkindness.

You are the God of Life — every living soul is precious to you:
the life of the Israeli teen attending a concert celebrating love;
the life of the Palestinian newborn
emerging helpless from the womb into a world of violence;
the life of the elderly Jew living near the Gaza border, acting upon her faith,
dedicating her life in service to her Palestinian neighbors;
the life of the Palestinian doctor
bravely treating victims of violence while surrounded by violence,
only to suffer the fate of the fallen himself.

Old and young, women and men, children of the kibbutzim and the children of Gaza City,
innocent victims of terrorism and war —

O God of Life, You weep for each of these, Your children.

And we weep with You, Compassionate One, our tears mingling with Yours.
We weep for the infinite potential of every soul now lost to the world.
We weep with every person grieving the death of a loved one.
We weep for those praying for the safe return of family and friends held as hostages.
We weep for those still living in fear,
not knowing whether they might again find themselves
in the path of death and destruction.

The God of all humankind, the God of Life, the God of Compassion,
spread Your loving Presence over the holy spirits that have returned to you,
over the grief-stricken, over the fearful, and over all of us who are in pain.
Spread over all humankind Your shelter of peace.

Let those who have died find perfect rest in You;
and let all who are suffering find healing, wholeness, and peace in the sanctuary of Your love.
We praise you, Adonai, our Sheltering Presence.

As we kindle these flames on this Fifth night of Chanukah, let us be the bearers of light.

The Sixth Night: Healing

We think of those caught in the conflict in the Middle East. There is a shattered feeling that is pervasive in Israel and Gaza. The shards of Israel's southern communities have left people devastated and scattered across the country. The shattered, shell-shocked Israeli population who had faith in their government's promise of security is left shaken. There is new alarm in the global Jewish community recognizing that an ancient antisemitism, Jew-hatred, has been awakened in a new iteration, dressed in "anti-Zionist" claims and garb. The confusion in Israel is made more pronounced by the 240 individuals who were taken hostage, the 136 individuals who remain in captivity, by the 250,000 Israelis displaced from border communities, and the 360,000 reservists called upon to serve.



And then there is the devastation in Gaza. More than 80% of the 2.2 million people living in the Gaza Strip have been displaced by a military action that Israel deems necessary for defense but that has tragically killed more than 16,000 civilians and has left their infrastructure demolished.

As we light this candle of healing, we pray for healing for all those around the world facing violence, including the Ukrainian people, fighting for their democratic homeland. We pray for healing for those who face hatred and bigotry: Jews and Muslims, racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities. We pray for healing on college campuses and in our cities where inflamed passions boil over, threatening lives and undermining civil discourse and any hope for understanding.

On this night, we also bring to mind our own circle of family and friends who are in need of healing — the healing of the body and the healing of the spirit. May the glow of our Chanukah candles carry a warm embrace to all those we hold dear. Please, O God, heal us; take our brokenness and make us whole once again.

As we kindle these flames on this Sixth night of Chanukah, let us be the bearers of light.

The Seventh Night: Memory

The rituals of Chanukah invoke so many wonderful memories — the lighting of candles, the aroma of the food, the singing of songs, and the warm hugs of family. Those delicious and funny and sentimental recollections remind us that we don't just light candles ourselves this evening, but with all of those loved ones whose memories brighten our spirits each and every day.



These lights also represent the spirits of so many whose lives have been cut short, innocent victims of violence. Tonight we remember especially all of those lost in the conflicts in the Middle East and in Ukraine, and those who have been victims of gun violence in our own country. As we bring light into the world this evening with the kindling of our Chanukah candles, let us commit to working against the forces of hatred and violence that have robbed the world of so many precious souls. May their spirits be reflected in the flames of our candles this night.

As we kindle these flames on this Seventh night of Chanukah, let us be the bearers of light.

The Eighth Night: Hope

Hope — the light that illuminates our path forward. In our physical world, we are approaching the darkest day of the year. In our Jewish world, we are living through a darkness not seen in almost 80 years. In our own country, there are those bringing the dark forces of hatred, bigotry, and cruelty.



And yet we have hope. We are believers in hope and we are agents of hope. We have hope because we must fulfill our mission to be a light to the nations. **We are the bearers of light!**

A PRAYER

When evil darkens our world, let us be the bearers of light.
When fists are clenched in self-righteous rage, let our hands be open for the sake of peace.
When injustice slams doors on the ill, the poor, the old, and the stranger,
 let us pry the doors open.
Where shelter is lacking, let us be builders.
Where food and clothing are needed, let us be providers.
Where knowledge is denied, let us be champions of learning.
When dissent is stifled, let our voices speak truth to power.
When the earth and its creatures are threatened, let us be their guardians.
When bias, greed, and bigotry erode our country's values,
 let us proclaim liberty throughout the land.
In the places where no one acts like a human being,
 let us bring courage;
 let us bring compassion;
 let us bring humanity. (From *Gates of Prayer*, based on Chaim Stern)

As we kindle these flames on this Eighth night of Chanukah, let us be the bearers of light.



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