

Fight with Light

Shabbat Hanukkah 5776

In the U.S., we disagree about how to spell Chanukah, C-H-A-N-U-K-K-A-H? or H-A-N-N-U-K-A-H?

But Hanukkah, however you spell it, is also known by another name: Hag Urim - the Festival of Lights. This name is first mentioned almost 2000 years ago by the Jewish historian Josephus. He says:

“We call it the Festival of Lights, from the fact that the right to worship shone brightly to us at a time when we hardly dare hope for it. “

When the Greeks imposed their agenda on the Jews, there was so little hope: prohibiting Torah study, forcing us to eat non-kosher food, outlawing circumcision. The darkness was overwhelming for them and the light of the hannukiyah could only be seen against this backdrop of darkness. Light brought hope and power. Light overcame the darkness.

It is a challenging time for us to feel the light. For even with the abundance that many feel in our community, there is darkness in the world. There's a shadow over our country and it's hard to find the light. We see and feel violence, loss of life, we hear harmful vitriolic language and hate. During times like these, it is tempting to turn our hannukiyot inwards, towards the interior of our homes and our communities,, toward ourselves as we try to find comfort amidst the nagging fears that tug at us.

But the primary mitzvah of lighting the hannukiyah is to publicize the miracle. So Maimonides tells us that we place our hannukiyah in the window so the light shines out, not in. The world needs our light. The prophet Isaiah says, we are meant to be אור לגוים – a light unto the nations. We are meant to transform the world and others, to bring light into the darkness, to turn our hanukiyot out toward the world.

Congregation Kol Shofar, December 10, 2015: Rabbi Leider

But in order to understand the light, we need to linger in the darkness a bit. We must look into the darkness. The darkness I focus on today is this powerful vitriolic language that is enveloping our public discourse. In this language, we see the urgent need for light.

In the darkness, we see heroes who are speaking out and speaking up. They pierce the darkness with their words, their courage, their action. Here are just two of them:

A few short months ago, Jorge Ramos, a news co-anchor on Univision, the country's largest Spanish-language TV network, sought an interview with Donald trump. But Univision had cuts its business ties with trump, after trump accused Mexico of sending "rapists" to the U.S.

Ramos was at an Iowa press conference. Ramos stood and attempted to ask a question. Trump told him to sit down and to go back to Univision. Ramos remained standing and said, "I am a reporter, an immigrant, a U.S. citizen. I have the right to ask a question. You cannot deport eleven million people. You cannot deny citizenship to children in this country."

A bodyguard moved towards Ramos. Ramos said, "I'm a reporter - Don't touch me, sir." The bodyguard had him by the left arm and was now moving him swiftly toward an exit door.

When Ramos was later interviewed himself, he said, "I knew it was right not to sit down. If I had sat down, Latinos would have been so disappointed."

Jorge Ramos is a hero because he brought light to the latino community by standing up for what is right. He didn't allow powerful language to overcome his calm and resolute soul. He was courageous and he didn't let his community down.

A second hero, sofia ali-khan posted this to facebook just a few days ago. She writes:

Dear Non-Muslim Allies,

It has gotten just that bad. I tell too many people about the advice given to me years ago by the late composer Herbert Brun, a German Jew who fled Germany at the age of 15: "be sure that your passport is in order."

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It's not enough to laugh at Donald Trump anymore. The rhetoric about Muslims has gotten so nasty. It is clearly fueling daily events of targeted violence, vandalism, vigilante harassment, discrimination.

My family and I talk about what to keep on hand if we need to leave quickly, and where we should go, maybe if the election goes the wrong way, or if folks get stirred up enough to be dangerous before the election. I was born in this country. I have lived my whole life in this country. I have spent my entire adult life working to help the poor, the disabled and the dispossessed access the legal system in this country. And I am devoutly and proudly Muslim.

A non-Muslim friend asked what she can do. There is much that can be done in solidarity:

If you see a Muslim or someone who might be identified as Muslim being harassed, stop, say something, intervene, call for help.

If you have a Muslim work colleague, check in. Tell them that the news is horrifying and that you're there for them.

If you have neighbors who are Muslim, keep an eye out for them. If you're walking your kids home from the bus stop, invite their kids to walk with you.

Talk to your kids. They're picking up on the anti-Muslim message. Make sure they know how you feel and talk to them about what they can do when they see bullying or hear hate speech at school.

Call out hate speech when you hear it—if it incites hatred or violence against a specified group, call it out: in your living room, at work, with friends, in public. It is most important that you do this among folks who may not know a Muslim.

Write Op Eds . . . saying how deplorable the anti-Muslim rhetoric has gotten . . .

Call your state and local representatives, let them know that you are concerned about hate speech against Muslims in politics and the media, that it is unacceptable and you want them to call it out whenever they hear it, on your behalf.

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Out yourself as someone who won't stand for Islamophobia, or will stand with Muslims—there is an awful lot of hate filling the airways, and there are an awful lot of people with access to the media and/or authority stirring the pot about Muslims. Please help fill that space with support instead. Post, write, use your profile picture or blog to voice your support.

. . . In addition to the very real threat to their civil and human rights that Muslims face, we are dealing with a tremendous amount of anxiety. While many of us, rely on our faith to stay strong, we are human. This is not an easy time. What you do will mean everything to the Muslim Americans around you.

Today Kol Shofar takes its place among the Jewish institutions speaking out together against a total ban on Muslims in the U.S. We must echo the words of Martin Niemoller, a prominent Protestant pastor and an outspoken public critic of Adolf Hitler who spent the last seven years of Nazi rule in concentration camps. He is best remembered for the quotation:

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) is already [reporting a significant increase](#) in hostile incidents directed at Muslim Americans. ADL's CEO, Jonathan Greenblatt, has said that "we must do more to speak out against, and work to prevent and educate against, the scapegoating of minorities in America."

How will we do this? We will fight with Light, with hannukiyot turned out to the world. The light will pour out of our mouths to fight the hate. This week, the Jewish community looked into the darkness and began to speak and to unleash the light of the hannukiyah.

The midrash tells us that when Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem, the windows were narrow on the inside and broad on the outside, so that the light would go out of the Temple and illumine the world. We didn't need bay windows in the Temple – it wasn't about maximizing the light on the inside, but funneling the light out to the world. The world needs the light.

(Midrash Rabbah Numbers 15:1)

And today's haftarah tells us, לא בחיל ולא בכח כי אם ברוחי – not my might and not by power, but by spirit alone. But the ruah, the spirit, is our breath and breath is what makes speech possible. It is no longer possible for the ruah to stay within our bodies, to be internal and contained. The ruah must be released in light and in speech; a respectful, forceful and unequivocal assertion that all humanity is made b'tzelem elohim. Not on our watch will this vitriol overtake our country without the light pouring out of our mouths, our pens and our fingertips, not to mention our feet.

As we light our hanukiyot tonight and let forth this light into the world, we also charge ourselves with translating that light into action. Here are some additional ideas to add to what Sofia Ali Khan suggested in her FB post:

1. Join me in writing a letter of support to the three Marin Muslim communities, allies of the Marin Interfaith council. **International Association of Sufism**, the **Islamic Center of Mill Valley** and the **Islamic Center of North Marin**. These letters will be shared with their entire communities.
2. This one may surprise you. One of the biggest challenges that we face in social settings is how to respond when someone tells a racist joke or says something racist in front of us. Activist Tim Wise, has a fresh and daring approach to consider. Because racial discrimination does not discriminate, Tim's example can be applied when advocating for any people of color or faith. I have provided copies of this if you would like to take it with you today and read on your own and share with others.

3. Share with others that you came here today and that your Jewish community is taking a strong and public stand on this issue.
4. Come to shul. This is a place of light and hope and we must and will strengthen each other.

I close with Josephus' words again, but this time with a twist. He says:

“We call it the Festival of Lights, from the fact that the right to worship shone brightly to us at a time when we hardly dare hope for it. “

But now we must hope, we must dare, there is so much at stake. Unlike the Jews in the time before the Maccabees, we now have power. We come from a place of peace and a place of light. Let us spread it peacefully, yet forcefully, to vanquish the darkness and the hate.

Shabbat Shalom, Hag Hanukkah Sameakh.