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Can There Be Light in Dark Times?

Hanukkah 5786

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In 1968, German-born political theorist Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) published a book called *Men in Dark Times*. It was a series of biographical essays, portraits of individuals who, in the midst of darkness, offered illumination. Borrowing the phrase from Bertolt Brecht, she described "dark times" as characterized by a particular kind of malaise:

> If it is the function of the public realm to throw light on the affairs of men [sic.] by providing a space of appearances in which they can show in deed and word, for better and worse, who they are and what they can do, then darkness has come when this light is extinguished by "credibility gaps" and "invisible government," by speech that does not disclose what is but sweeps it under the carpet, by exhortations, moral and otherwise, that, under the pretext of upholding old truths, degrade all truth to meaningless triviality (*Men in Dark Times*, p. viii).

In contrast to the outrageous "monstrosities" of the 20th century, darkness is a more subtle form of despair, a violation of the public sphere and a breakdown in communal discourse. "Truth" obscures truths, and language—thoughts meant to be shared—actually renders words incomprehensible. Dark times destabilize us. They rattle us to our cores.

We are living, alas, in dark times (maybe even monstrous ones?). Whether your measure of darkness today emanates from Bondi Beach or Brown University, or Israel or Gaza, or Ukraine or Russia, or anywhere/everywhere else where chaos lurks, we must contend with the feeling that light is ebbing; that the fabric of the world as we once knew it is coming undone.

What could it mean to take Hanukkah, chag urim, the holiday of light, seriously in the midst of times that feel so very dark? Is there something to say, some healing to be had, some liveable message, that might meet the reality we find ourselves in?

The Sefat Emet, R. Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter (1847-1905), offers a poignant start, highlighting the ways that Hanukkah itself contends with the darkness in its own midst:

> The miracle of Hanukkah was in the light, that one could find the illumination hidden in the darkness and the exile. And on this matter, [let us turn to] what my master, my grandfather, my teacher, my rabbi of blessed memory [R. Yitzchak Meir Alter] said on the Talmudic statement [in tractate Megillah] regarding Purim, that we do not recite the Hallel then, 'for we are still slaves to Achashverosh" (Talmud Bavli Megillah 14a). So too regarding this miracle [of Hanukkah], there was no full release or nullification of Greek sovereignty. It seems to me that on account of the miracle [the Jews] felt that

> they were servants of God even though they were still in exile [or, unredeemed]. **And this itself was the miracle: that they could be servants of God in exile in the midst of darkness.** This remained for generations, the ability to experience something other-worldly even in this world. Regarding the phrase [in the song of Maoz Tzur], "Men of insight, days eight [y'mei shmonah] established [for song and jubilation]," it seems, in my humble opinion, that it should have said "eight days" [shmonah yamim]. It must mean that those days were established in the aspect of "eightness," other-worldliness. Every day of the eight contains this aspect of "eightness" (Sefat Emet on Hanukkah, 1871).

Though the Hanukkah story that we liturgically tell is a clean one—celebrating the triumph of the few over the many, the sacred over the profane, and good over evil—the historical record is anything but clean. To name but a few checkered facts: The revolt itself was arguably led by religious zealots, set off by Mattityahu's stabbing of a fellow (Hellenized) Jew in the vein of Pinchas. The priesthood in the aftermath of the Maccabean victory was corrupt and a puppet of the non-Jewish king. Within two years, Judah the Maccabee was dead and many of his men executed. The Seleucids were left in charge, giving grounding to the Sefat Emet's recognition that though the Jews indeed lived in the land of Israel, they were very much in exile during this era, and would continue to be. The return of the Temple to Jewish hands and its rededication was but one chapter of an evolving story, one compromised both before and after by internecine Jewish fighting and rampant corruption.

Yet, says the Sefat Emet, precisely in the midst of this chaotic darkness, "af betoch ha'choshech," in full awareness of the lack of full redemption, Jews declared "nes gadol haya po," "a great miracle happened here." One small cruse of oil. One battle won. That was gadol. That was a big event worth noticing. And that pause was and is itself the miracle. That willingness to see a half-measure, a step in the right direction, a moment of reprieve, and to feel oneself in the presence of God there—not as an objective unmistakable reality but as a subjective, elected experience. That's miraculous. The Jews of Hanukkah gifted us with this capacity: to choose miracle in the midst of confusion; to discern a whiff of otherworldliness (or "eightness") in the grit of our everyday lives.

Hanukkah, on this read, is thus not a rebuffing of darkness or a refusal to see it. It is instead a deep acknowledgment of it. The holiday actually marks the *lack* of an irrefutable miracle and the willingness to say anyway "nes gadol haya po."

The essential mundaneness of this miraculous domain, the way in which it holds tenaciously to the world-as-it-is, is manifest in the way the holiday is marked. The Sochatchover Rebbe, R. Shmuel Bornsztain (1855-1926), writes in *Shem MiShmuel*:

> The days of Hanukkah are different from all the other sanctified times, for during all other holy times, all the forces of darkness disappear. "All judgment passes from them" [Zohar, part II]. But the days of Hanukkah are regular days (chol), where work is permitted, and external

> forces do not disappear. [Rather] rays of heavenly light break through and penetrate through the screens [or coverings of everyday life]. For this reason, the mitzvah of lighting candles endured for generations even in exile, something we have not found with any other Temple-based mitzvah. It has lasted for generations outside of the Temple because the darkness of the exile cannot hide it or darken it (*Shem MiShmuel* on Hanukkah).

Hanukkah is not a yom tov, a holiday that demands that one step outside of one's daily life, because it must, of necessity, take place in the context of daily life. It is a "zman mekudash," a sanctified time, b'chol, in real time. So we go about our business by day and light candles at night in order to recognize that the plane of our miraculous existence is the humdrum din of our everyday lives. The darkness is not banished in this way, as it is on holidays that step outside of time. Instead, we step into time—into the mundane, into galut, out of the Temple, and into day-to-day living—and we welcome the rays of light that manage to shine through the cracks.

The power to discern that kind of obscured light is the lasting legacy of Hanukkah, says the rebbe: "The days of Hanukkah, during which work is not prohibited, and still the lights fall downward, [those lights] do not go out after Hanukkah."

Holidays that remove one from the world can only work their magic so long as one is not in the world. Hanukkah, though, is a holiday of "l'matah," of this world, of lights falling down into a place that knows darkness. And as such, its effects last far beyond the holiday itself. The power to perceive the miraculous in the mundane endures.

The blessing that we say over our Hanukkah candles reflects this aspiration. "Baruch ata Hashem...she'asa nisim la'avoteinu bayamim hahem bazman hazeh." "Blessed are You…Who performed miracles for our ancestors in those days, in this time." The Kedushat Levi, R. Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev (1740-1810), offers this interpretation:

> In the wording of the blessing we say, "Who performed miracles for our ancestors in those days, at this time," because all the miracles were above time—such as the miracles of Egypt, the Sea of Reeds, the Jordan, and all the [other] miracles that were above nature. This is not so with the miracle of Hanukkah and Purim, which took place within nature: the Hasmoneans and their sons waged war, and in Purim there was Queen Esther. Therefore, with Hanukkah we bless "Who performed miracles…at this time"—that is to say, within time, which is this world, within nature, God performed miracles, for everything came from the blessed God (Kedushat Levi, Homilies for Hanukkah 13).

Hanukkah is a "bazman hazeh" holiday, a designated time to mindfully dwell in these kinds of times. That is, times that are dark, unstable, maybe threatening, full of conflict and also intermittent light, incremental victory, precious moments of joy.

On the capacity to find light not in spite of darkness but in the darkness, Arendt wrote:

> That even in the darkest of times we have the right to expect some illumination, and that such illumination may well come less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain, flickering, and often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and their works, will kindle under almost all circumstances and shed over the time span that was given them on earth—this conviction is the inarticulate background against which these profiles were drawn (*Men in Dark Times*, p. *ix*).

It is also the background against which this holiday was formulated. The assertion that light can be chosen in an unredeemed world and enacted, humbly, specifically in contexts of chaos, that indeed is a miracle for our times. May we find the strength to ignite such flickering flames.

Chag urim sameach!

First published in 2016, this article has been updated to reflect the current moment.

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