

“Preparing for the Spiritual Season”
Numbers 8:1-4; Zechariah 4:1-7

Many learned Jews are ambivalent about Chanukah. Sure, trying to keep up with the steady drumbeat of Christmas is stressful. Not to mention the educational burden of a holiday that is minor in the Jewish pantheon garnering top billing over its less well-known but more important cousins such as Yom Kippur and Passover. Let alone the consumer pressure to outdo Christmas morning gift-giving with eight nights of presents.

But really, none of that explains the ambivalence. No, the real reason is that for most of Jewish history, Jews were subject to the power of others. Yet the history behind Chanukah celebrates a military triumph, and this calls into question the self-understanding of Jews as a cerebral, peaceful people. When it comes to Jewish brains or Jewish brawn, which would you choose for your team?

Yet inconveniently for the familiar stereotype, Chanukah commemorates a successful rebellion by the Maccabees against Greco-Roman King Antiochus and the Selucid Empire, which desecrated the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. And even more inconveniently, this revolt, in the second century before the Common Era, was not a simple case of the good guys against the bad. It was more like a civil war pitting the Jewish fundamentalists, the Maccabees, against the Jewish assimilationists, the Hellenists.

The rabbis of old found this history troublesome; they choose to keep the book of Maccabees out of the Hebrew Biblical canon. Instead, they highlighted the spiritual. Citing Zechariah, they asserted, “not by might, not by power, but by my spirit, says the Eternal of Hosts.”

Not the sword but the menorah is the symbol of Chanukah, and every Jewish child learns of its prominence in the holiday. When the Maccabees entered the vandalized Temple in Jerusalem to rededicate it, there was only one unharmed container of oil to light the menorah, the lampstand. In it was enough oil to burn only for one day. But a miracle happened and the oil burned for eight days, and so we celebrate the miracle of light, the miracle of dedication, which is what the root of the Hebrew word Chanukah means. Even in our time, Jews continue to kindle the lights of the menorah or *chanukiah*, one for each of the eight nights of the holiday, as we will do starting Tuesday night. And the menorahs are often placed in the window near the street, *l'pirsem l'mitzvah*” to publicize the miracle, to call attention to the triumph of light over darkness, of the small over the mighty, of hope over despair.

The spiritual message the rabbis wanted to impart is that light can overcome darkness, even in times when it is most difficult to have faith. And lately, it has been difficult to have faith.

As these last months have been filled with news of black males killed at the hands of police, as the streets have been crowded with demonstrations protesting the absence of indictments, as the airwaves have crackled with discussions of race and justice, I can't help

but notice how we, in our country, conflate blackness and fear, darkness and danger.

We need a blazing fountain to dispel the fear, to bring to light the darkness of distance, division and dread. As we approach Chanukah this year, I invite you to light a symbolic menorah, to kindle hope rather than despair, to dissipate fear, ignorance and racism, to recognize ourselves a little clearer in the faces of those who may be unfamiliar or different. I invite you to ponder the divisions in the wake of the Michael Brown shooting that make it possible for 44% of Americans to say that “race is an important issue that needs to be discussed” while 40% say that “the issue of race is getting more attention than it deserves.”ⁱ

So here are eight candles, eight flames flickering against ignorance, racism, injustice and fear.

Light the first candle in memory of the black men and boy killed this summer and fall by police—Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Akai Gurley—those whose names we know. How many names of black males do we not know? Can the memories of these unquiet dead awaken a willingness to listen to the pain of injustice so many people of color feel in our democracy? May their names chanted together help us to acknowledge our ignorance, our regrettable choice to ignore the fear and the isolation that tears our country asunder. May their names catalyze us to insure that their deaths were not in vain. As Alice Walker writes,

Each one must pull one.

Look, I, temporarily on the rim
Of the grave,
Have grasped my mother's hand
My father's leg.
There is the hand of Robeson
Langston's thigh
Zora's arm and hair
Your grandfather's lifted chin
And lynched woman's elbow
What you've tried to forget
Of your grandmother's frown.

Each one, pull one back into the sun

We who have stood over
So many graves
Know that no matter what they do
All of us must live
Or none.ⁱⁱ

Light a second candle for children of color to grow up without having to hear “The Talk”—for parents not to have to explain to their precious progeny how society views them and how to be careful as a consequence of it. Let it no longer be the case that white children are told if they are on the street, frightened and in trouble, to run toward a policeman, and for black and brown children to be told that if they are on the street, frightened and in

trouble, no matter what, to never run.

Light a third candle for the 200 Jewish, Christian and Muslim clergy who gathered at police headquarters in Ferguson dressed in their vestments, robes, collars, stoles, prayer shawls and tunics, turning the parking lot into a sacred worship space and a memorial to Michael Brown, offering an opportunity for the police to seek forgiveness, praying for them to repent of the brutality some of their fellows visited against people of color. Let it be fueled by a commitment to join with other religious communities shedding light on our common humanity, on a call for independent investigations into all fatal police shootings, for community policing, for body and gun cameras, for legislation against racial profiling and, on this second anniversary of the Sandy Hook school shooting, legislation against gun violence.

Light a fourth candle for the current consciousness-raising sweeping our country. Nearly 50 years ago, as civil rights marchers in Selma, Alabama were violently set upon by police at the Edmund Pettus Bridge, many Americans were comfortably sitting in their living rooms watching the relatively new medium of television. The Sunday night movie, “Judgment at Nuremberg,” was interrupted by a newsflash with footage of billy clubs and horses attacking the marchers. People of conscience viewing Nazi atrocities saw with horror the cruelty and injustice taking place within their own shores. The historian Taylor Branch wrote that the images on the TV, quote, “struck with the force of instant historical icon.” Well-intentioned Americans couldn’t un-see what they had seen, disassociate what they had associated. The next day, hundreds of ordinary people flew down to Selma to join the marchers.

We who watched the choking of Eric Garner caught on camera with his wrenching words, “I can’t breathe,” cannot un-see it, cannot un-hear it. “I can’t breathe” are not only the words of a dying man. They are also the description of many who recognize that not just one life, but much else—hope, trust in the future, belief in the promise of justice, even light itself is snuffed out without air. Once again, people of conscience must move from the couch to the barricades. It’s time for the next chapter of the civil rights struggle, for ordinary people to protest so all can breathe, so justice prevails. At the “Justice for All” march in DC and the Millions March NYC yesterday, at demonstrations throughout the country in the past few weeks, children of all races join their parents of conscience in the streets, children of all religions hold up their own hand-lettered signs saying, “Stand up for justice” and “Black lives matter.” Light a candle for a future in which these children will grow up in a world where all lives do matter.

Light a fifth candle for what black and white Americans agree on—our heroes. Researchers Sam Wineburg and Chauncey Monte-Sano asked high school kids and middle-aged adults in all fifty states to nominate figures who mattered in American history. The only restriction was that they couldn’t be presidents or First Ladies. Teens and adults, black and white Americans agreed on five names, and four of them were African-American: Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Harriet Tubman, Susan B. Anthony and Oprah Winfrey.ⁱⁱⁱ If we as a nation, from sea to shining sea, all admire African-American leaders and citizens for their integrity, perseverance and resilience, couldn’t our admiration translate to the man next door or the woman down the block or the child down the street?

Light a sixth candle for finally questioning those in our society who have been given a license to use force. Because of public outcries, some police departments are now subject

to civil rights investigations. Some football stars are losing their right to play because they perpetrate family violence. Slowly, we are coming to realize that the line between acceptable aggression and raw brutality is thin indeed. For all the frustration and hurt that grand jury decisions have inflicted in the past month, it has caused us to look anew at our entire justice system. A small silver lining, burning bright against the dark.

Light a seventh candle for the refusal to let bitterness overwhelm a quest for justice. In 1992, shortly after the Rodney King verdict, a Stanford Masters student wrote in the *Daily* that as a 6'3" 230 lb. black man, he frightened people no matter how polite, how well-educated, how careful he was. He wrote of being surrounded by five police cars, six officers, guns at the ready for thirty minutes—having done nothing to warrant a stop. He wrote of being followed by security at the Stanford Shopping Mall, of the jewelry store employee locking the case when he entered the store. “Our inner cities are stacks of dry leaves and lumber, waiting for a spark. This is but a mere campfire compared to the potential inferno awaiting us. Conditions are worsening and the Rodney King verdict is certainly not the most egregious injustice in our midst.”^{iv}

He wrote prophetically. But rather than building a wall of bitterness, this young man transmuted his anger into a fierce desire to bring change, to create justice. He chose to make mentors and find fellow travelers in his quest to repair the world. And now he is a United States Senator from New Jersey, one of the few persistent voices for courage and generosity in the bowels of a Congress riven by rancor and division. Senator Cory Booker has had ample reason to be defined by pessimism and fatalism; instead he is defined by promise and faith that justice is not just a platitude in our founding documents, but an American ideal to be fought for and achieved.

Light an eighth candle for “the hug heard round the world”—the simple embrace between a small black boy and a uniformed white policeman. On the day after the Ferguson grand jury rendered its verdict, Devonte Hart, a 12-year old boy attended a peaceful demonstration in Portland, Oregon holding a sign saying “Free hugs.” Police Officer Bret Barnum noticed he was crying and called him over to talk. His mother wrote on her Facebook page, “He trembled, holding a “Free Hugs” sign as he bravely stood alone in front of the police barricades and an officer called him over and asked him why he was crying. [The officer’s] response [to Devonte’s fears] regarding the level of police brutality towards young black kids was...an unexpected and seemingly authentic sigh. “Yes, I know. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. ” Officer Barnum tried to put him at ease, eventually looking at the sign and asking, “Can I get one of those?”^v A photographer, Johnny Nguyen, snapped a photo—of the hug between a 12 year old with tears streaming down his cheeks and a uniformed officer who wanted to protect and serve him as much as any other constituent.

Eight candles for eight nights. On the menorah, a *shamash*, a server candle kindles all the others. So it is with us. How much light and hope can we kindle for those around us? This spiritual season, may we become servers to dispel fear, ignorance and racism. May we dedicate ourselves anew to equality, justice, equal opportunity. The rabbis of old debated whether Chanukah was a rededication to political power or to spiritual power. We know differently. We need might. We need power. And we need spirit. We need legislation, government, police and a justice system that protects and serves all citizens, that upholds the rights and worth of people of color, as well as people of privilege. And we need the

spiritual fortitude to affirm the dignity, humanity and promise of every person—whatever their color, or neighborhood or opportunity. May we all invoke both political power and spiritual power to make our lives and our country, a blessing.

O Holy One of Blessing

Thank you for the light, even in the darkness
The good, even in the challenges
The triumph, even in the struggle.

We thank you for the blessing of family, friends, warmth and love.

We thank you for the opportunity to renew ourselves, our lives, our world, daily.

For all this and more, we give thank and praise Your name, now and forever.

Amen

Rabbi Elizabeth Wood

ⁱ Pew Research Center, cited in

http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/08/self-segregation-why-its-hard-for-whites-to-understand-ferguson/378928/?single_page=true

ⁱⁱ Alice Walker, “Each One, Pull One” <http://www.ctadams.com/alicewalker1.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Sam Wineburg and Chauncey Monte-Sono, “Famous Americans: The Changing Pantheon of America’s Heroes”

<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jah/94.4/wineburg.html> From ***The Journal of American History* Vol. 94, Issue 4.**

^{iv} Cory Booker, <http://www.stanforddaily.com/2013/01/23/cory-booker-why-have-i-lost-control/>

^v <http://www.cnn.com/2014/11/29/living/ferguson-protest-hug/>