

D'var Rav: Words from the Rabbi

IT'S TIME TO LIGHT(EN) UP

If there is a single period in our religious calendar that best captures the joy of being Jewish, it is that of Chanukah. The Festival of Light is a time, perhaps more than any other, in which we celebrate not only the unfettered practice of religion, but our pride and delight in our Jewishness.

Many of us know the story of Chanukah, the military victory of Judah Maccabee and his valiant guerilla fighters against their Syrian-Greek occupiers two millennia ago. Perspective is a key to truth, and the way we ought to view this historic episode is not exclusively as a fight *against* an era of anti-Semitic oppression, but also as an *affirmation* of Jewish identity. That is the attitude with which we should observe this sacred holiday in our own age as well.

Anti-Semitism has been and continues to be a problematic reality. From ancient sages to modern philosophers, there have been a wide variety of explanations for this disturbing phenomenon, none of them completely satisfactory. Even today, in countries with modest or almost no Jewish populations, we see eruptions of Jew-hatred. Just look at France and Malaysia. While we need to remain vigilant, we cannot afford to let these dark eruptions warp our self-perception or dictate how we behave.

Yet we must separate serious threats from illusory ones. Some fights are necessary and just, but some are a waste of our time and effort. A recent example of wasted energy is the public reaction by the Jewish establishment to the new, controversial Mel Gibson film about the death of Jesus.

The reactionary impulse is nearly always rooted in a sense of *insecurity*—and we Jews have more than enough insecurity to spare. That is why when the Southern Baptists say that they want to proselytize their faith to us, or some Hollywood action star produces a movie in which Jews are shown in a disparaging manner, all our usual suspects (Abe Foxman of the Anti-Defamation League, Rabbi Marvin Hier of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, and others of their ilk) start appearing on Nightline or in the *New York Times*.

Do these so-called Jewish leaders speak for most American Jews? I truly hope not. They certainly don't speak for me. Theirs is a Jewishness grounded, not in affirmation, but in negativity. Ah, if only we could harness all that negative passion, energy, and zeal, redirect it toward more positive channels, and find a way to inject it into our Jewish institutions and our own lives. . . .

What we need now more than ever is a soulful, vibrant American Jewry that rejoices in its own rich heritage, not one that becomes galvanized only when confronted with threats, be they real or imagined. This year, let us allow Chanukah to help kindle our inner light and burn away our inner demons. Let us allow Chanukah to serve as a catalyst for communal transformation.

To paraphrase the great Zionist Theodore Herzl, who may not have understood Judaism, but who surely grasped the importance and potential power of Jewish pride: *If only we'd will it, it would no longer be just a dream.*

B'shalom, Niles

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