

“Light One Candle”
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...every day on the balcony of the sea,
wings open, fire is born,
and everything is blue again like morning.

sound the words of Chilean poet Pablo Neruda.

“Fire is born.” So it is as we light our chalice, kindling a spark of that fire that we draw from the sun itself. Fire is mesmerizing how ever it is born, how ever it burns. A single flame can burst into a horrific blaze. A single flame can stretch upward as if reaching for the ineffable. A single flame gracing a simple candle can be no less wondrous than the fire that is born every morning on whatever horizon we are blessed to behold. Lighting a candle is an act of hope.

“Light one candle for the Maccabee children with thanks that their light didn’t die,” we sang moments ago. The story of Hanukkah is a story of lighting a long ago candle, actually an ancient lamp, with a marginal amount of oil in an act of rededicating space that was long sacred to the Jewish people.

It all stemmed from an imperial decree roughly two centuries before the Common Era. Alexander the Great had cast his imperial arm across the Near East. In the spirit of imperial behavior, Antiochus Epiphanes, the Hellenistic ruler of the Syrian outpost, forbade upon penalty of death the practice of all local religions, Judaism among them. To seal the deal, the sacred temple in Jerusalem was defiled by pagan rites.

The story goes that over the span of three years a band of brothers known as the Maccabees resisted and triumphed. The year was 169 BCE. It took another three years to prepare the temple for re-dedication. The legendary specifics weave around a celebrated miracle of light. How so? Kindling the temple lamp was at the heart of the re-dedication. A scant portion of oil had been rescued from the original temple, only enough to burn for a single day. The legend endures that the oil that was kindled burned for eight long days—a miracle of light! The temple was rededicated beyond imagining, leading to the proclamation of a holiday, originally called the Festival of Lights.

Hope is what the candles of Hanukkah signal, hope against hope embodied in the victory of Judah and his fellow warriors, the Maccabees, over the imperial forces of Antiochus Epiphanes, a victory that reason had rendered impossible. In the story of Hanukkah, reason bowed twice: to the victory of the lesser over the larger and to the endurance of light beyond the capacity of its fuel.

Hanukkah begins at sundown this evening, just as every Jewish holiday begins at sundown. For the eight nights of Hanukkah, we lift the candle known as the *Shamash*, the servant candle, to light one candle a night until all eight candles and the *Shamash* burn brightly, reminding us of the ancient miracle of lights.

Hanukkah is a holiday of hope against hope. Through the centuries, those who are Jewish among us are called to light the candles of the menorah, no matter how trying the circumstances. In a cramped garret in Holland, a young girl wrote in her diary on December 7, 1942:

“We just gave each other a few little presents and then we lit the candles. Because of the shortage of candles, we only had them alight for ten minutes.”

Lighting a candle in community is an act of hope and affirmation for all who know oppression. Lighting the candles of the Hanukkah menorah and placing it in the window connects the celebrants with all who pass by. “Remember! Remember the miracle of lights.”

“What is the mem’ry that’s valued so highly we keep it alive in that flame?
What’s the commitment to those who have died
when we cry out they’ve not died I vain?”

Tradition is a form of holding memory, a reminder never to lose hope no matter what the odds.

What, I wonder, were the odds that Raphael Simon would honor the Hanukkah tradition of kindling the candles of the menorah and placing it in the window of his home? Nicholas Gordon tells the story of Raphael and his grandfather and much more.

Raphael Simon stood at the hospital bedside of Solomon Simon, his grandfather, who was dying. “Please, Raphael, one favor I ask of you before I go?”

“What’s that Grandpa?”

“Promise that you’ll put your Hanukkah candles in the window—in the menorah I gave you when you were a little guy.”

“But you know I don’t light Hanukkah candles, Grandpa.”

“Time to start, Simon,” as the old man squeezed the young hand and smiled hopefully.

“I’m not religious. You know that Grandpa. I don’t believe in God,” came the reply, frosted with assertion, tinged with a wince.

“No need to believe. Just do what I ask. The belief happens.”

“But I’m not even Jewish.”

“Oyveh!” the elder stammered under his breath. “Please. It’s a little thing I ask of you, Raphie.”

“Raphael,” came the reply, with the chutzpah of youth. Raphael grew silent, churning inside. It wasn’t such a little thing. He had been raised New Age Buddhist by his Chinese-American mother. His wife was African-American Catholic, which was how they were raising their son. But he knew why his grandfather insisted. He wanted some trace of Judaism to survive in this family. But a menorah in the window? How could Raphael make a public statement that wasn’t honest privately?

His grandfather had fallen asleep. Raphael thanked the God he didn’t believe in and slipped out without a yes or no. No words were his last words to this old man whom he loved so much.

In a few days, Solomon Simon was gone. Raphael was left with a deep sadness and a lingering dose of obligation—not quite guilt, but a close runner-up.

Through the period of mourning that followed, with an abbreviated period of *shiva*, Raphael said nothing to his father, a resolute secularist. He tried not to think about that unfinished conversation back in the hospital room. A menorah in the window? The thought gnawed at him. It wasn’t like Grandpa was looking down at him. He was stone dead. Something was stirring inside him—a reincarnation of his grandfather? No, he didn’t really believe in reincarnation.

Memories of his grandfather were invaded by images of a menorah in the window of his home. “Oyveh,” he thought (Jewish or not). He had been raised among his mother’s Chinese-American family and taught from early on the importance of family. How many years had he spent Christmas with her family in the Bronx; and when Christmas came close to Hanukkah, how many times had he spent a few evenings with Grandpa Solomon, his father’s father? Every night he was there, he would watch his Grandpa light the candles in the kitchen, then carry the menorah to the living room window, casting a warm glow in December’s darkness. Raphael could look out and see other Hanukkah candles shining in other windows in the urban neighborhood.

He remembered his Grandpa saying the Hebrew prayers, grace and dignity swelling inside him. But that wasn’t who Raphael was. So ran the dialogue inside him. After the sadness of bidding his Grandpa goodbye, he headed to the airport along with his father, who had also been there during the final days. “Grandpa asked me to put my Hanukkah candles in the window,” Raphael mentioned over a drink with his Dad before they went to their separate gates.

“Seriously?” came the quick retort.

“Yeah, seriously!”

“And you’re seriously thinking about it?”

“I am,” Raphael responded, with a bit more confidence than he usually mustered in the presence of his father.

“You always were sentimental,” his Dad replied, giving him a quick squeeze of the arm with a clear signal that he had a flight to catch.

Raphael arrived home in Shaker Heights, still full of ambivalence. One Saturday afternoon when he and his wife Letitia were relaxing in front of the fireplace after setting up their Christmas tree, he broached what was troubling him.

“He asked you to do what?” came Letitia’s response.

“Light Hanukkah candles and put the menorah in the window.”

“You didn’t promise him, did you?”

“I didn’t have time.”

At that moment, Xavier, their nine-year-old son, bounced in after throwing snowballs at Teddy, their high-energy mutt. Raphael took in the full picture of his Black-Asian-Jewish child and wondered how he, Xavier, would handle all these heritages and what he, Raphael, might do to help him.

The story continues as told by its author, but not as I’m sharing it with you.

What do you think Raphael did? How did he communicate his decision to—or with—Letitia and Xavier? Did he ever answer his Grandpa—in spirit, of course? How? What right does a parent or anyone dear to us have to make a request like that made by Solomon? What drives a response to such a request—Obligation? Guilt? Honor? Tradition? Love?

Imagine that you’re Raphael. In just a few hours, the sun will set. Tonight is the first night of Hanukkah.

Hear again the words of Fredrick Zydek:

“If I light this candle, something more
than light will enter the darkness.
The big silence will shift, just a little,
and begin to hum.”

Can you hear it? Can you hear it?

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