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FAITH MAGAZINE

A Reflection on time

Hanukkah celebrates not a moment in time, but the defiance of time

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Eliza Anderson, Deseret News PURCHASE IMAGE

By Meir Soloveichik

On the evening of December 31, 2024, as multitudes ring in a new year, Jews around the world will be engaged in one of the singular rituals of their faith: kindling candles on the seventh of the eight evenings of Hanukkah. The lighting recalls the menorah, or candelabra, of the Temple in Jerusalem, and its purification by the Maccabees after its desecration by the Seleucid Greeks. According to the Talmud, only one ritually pure flask of oil remained, enough to last one day; but the flames fueled by this sacred flask ended up burning brightly for eight days.

This may seem a minor miracle when compared to the wonders described in scripture; and there are so many miracles that do not have a holiday ritual devoted to their recreation. But what is actually being recalled is an event that bears powerful symbolism: a small bit of the fuel of faith that lasted beyond expectations. It is to marvel at Jewish history itself. At the time that the Seleucid empire paganized the Temple in Jerusalem, its rulers didn't predict a day when their own version of paganism — revering Zeus and Athena — would disappear, and that the God of Abraham would be known around the world. Two centuries later — when the Romans sacked Jerusalem; triumphantly carried the candelabra of the Temple into the Forum, the epicenter of their empire; and emblazoned an image of the moment on the Arch of Titus — no one predicted that a

Jewish state would be reborn, with its capital in Jerusalem, while the Forum would be nothing but a tourist site.

For those concerned today about the future of biblical faith, the Hanukkah candles present a powerful reminder: Cultures and communities that mark the enduring truly endure. Thus, a truly Jewish contribution to a symposium about the new year must ask readers to reflect on how they use their time, and how they approach time itself. In contemporary culture, millions mark, and count down to, a moment in time, exuberantly exclaiming “Happy New Year.” To ponder the Hanukkah candles is to realize they celebrate something entirely different: not a moment in time, but the defiance of regular time, the enduring within fleeting time. In this sense, as the flames burn, we are asked to ponder what lasts more than a moment, what aspects of life are truly enduring. And it is this question that Americans of faith ought to bring into 2025.

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One of my favorite Hanukkah stories is told by the great Jewish dissident Natan (Anatoly) Sharansky in his memoir “Fear No Evil,” which describes his nine years in a Soviet prison. To celebrate the holiday, Sharansky made a makeshift menorah, which was soon confiscated. In response, Sharansky engaged in a hunger strike, and the prison commander, worried about a public relations disaster, sought a compromise. Sharansky told the Soviet officer that since it was the last night of Hanukkah, he would end his hunger strike if he could light the menorah once more — in the commander’s office. The officer agreed; and at this point Sharansky made up, out of whole cloth, a bit of Jewish law. He impishly informed the officer that for the ritual to be efficacious, all in attendance must stand at attention, listen carefully to the blessing being pronounced and respond “Amen.” Sharansky describes what occurred:

“I lit the candles and recited my own prayer in Hebrew, which went something like this: ‘Blessed are You, Adonai (Lord), for allowing me to rejoice on this day of Hanukkah, the holiday of our liberation, the holiday of our return to the way of our fathers. Blessed are You, Adonai, for allowing me to light these candles. May you allow me to light the Hanukkah candles many times in your city, Jerusalem, with my wife, Avital, and my family and friends.’”

Sharansky continued his prayer a bit, and then added in Hebrew:

“And may the day come when all our enemies, who today are planning our destruction, will stand before us and hear our prayers and say ‘Amen.’”

And the Soviet officer immediately answered: “Amen.”



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Sharansky’s prayer was fulfilled, reminding us that to kindle candles is to mark the endurance of faith — and to foster one’s faith in what is truly enduring. This is especially true following a year that has been a difficult one for the Jewish people, but also one in which the faith of many Jews has grown even stronger, as they pondered their people’s striking endurance in history. And if there is a resolution that is worthwhile in 2025, it is to ponder what truly lasts in our lives, and to remember Henry David Thoreau’s aphorism and insight: that it is impossible to kill time without injuring our eternity.

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Meir Soloveichik is the senior rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel in Manhattan and director of the Zahava and Moshe Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University.

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