The Miracle of the Light

THE ESSENCE OF JEWISH HOPE, WRITES RABBI MEIR SOLOVEICHIK, IS THAT THE LIGHT WITHOUT INSPIRES AND PARALLELS THE LIGHT WITHIN, WHICH IS FUELED BY THE KNOWLEDGE THAT JUDAH'S LIGHT HAS LONG OUTLASTED THE WORLDVIEWS IT OPPOSED. (MENAHEM KAHANA VIA GETTY IMAGES)

Winston Churchill wasn't Jewish. But he understood, from the burning bush to the Maccabees to the modern state of Israel, the meaning of the flame.

By Meir Soloveichik

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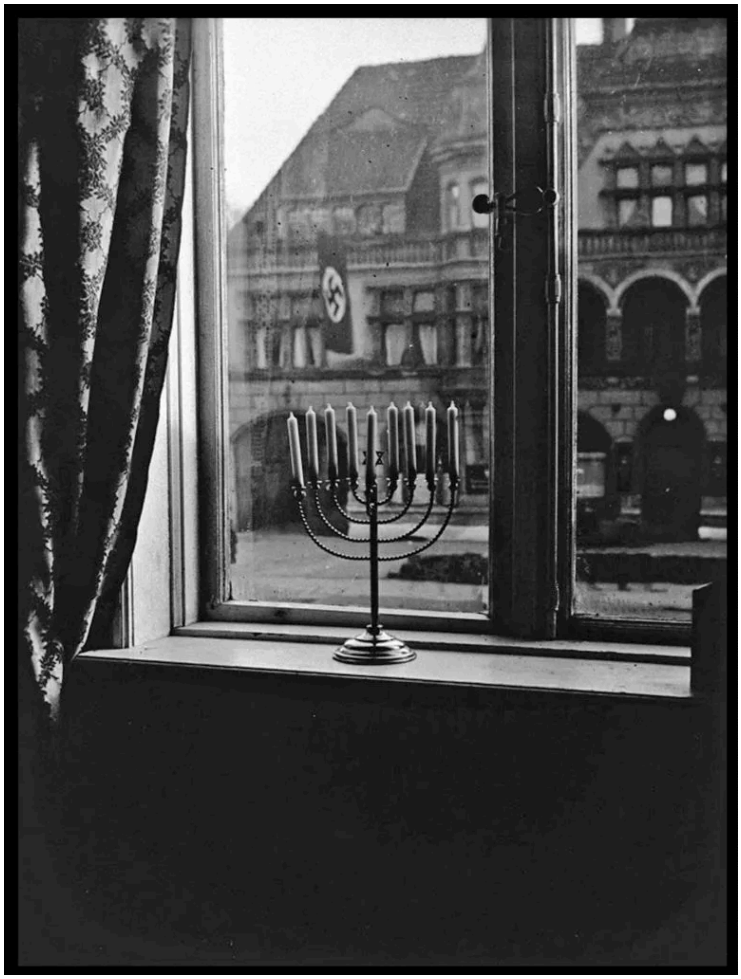
In darker times we look for light.

Among Jewish images of illumination there are few more inspiring than one taken in the German city of Kiel in 1931. Akiva Posner, rabbi of the Jewish community in Kiel, had set up his menorah on the windowsill on the eighth night of Hanukkah. Before the sun set, before the ceremony began, his wife, Rachel, saw that the menorah was facing, across the street, a symbol of a very different kind: an enormous swastika hung by local Nazis.



(RACHEL POSNER VIA GETTY IMAGES)

She was struck by the jarring juxtaposition, seeing in the menorah a response to the Nazi banner. So Rachel seized her Kodak camera and took a picture—one which has justifiably now become one of the more famous in the Jewish world.

But to truly be inspired by it we must understand its meaning. Dwight Eisenhower, arriving at the concentration camps, ordered the men serving under him to enter the camp in order to witness the horror, saying something to the effect of: *If the American soldier did not know what he was fighting for, now at least he will know what he is fighting against*. Ideally we should know both what we fight against and what we fight for.

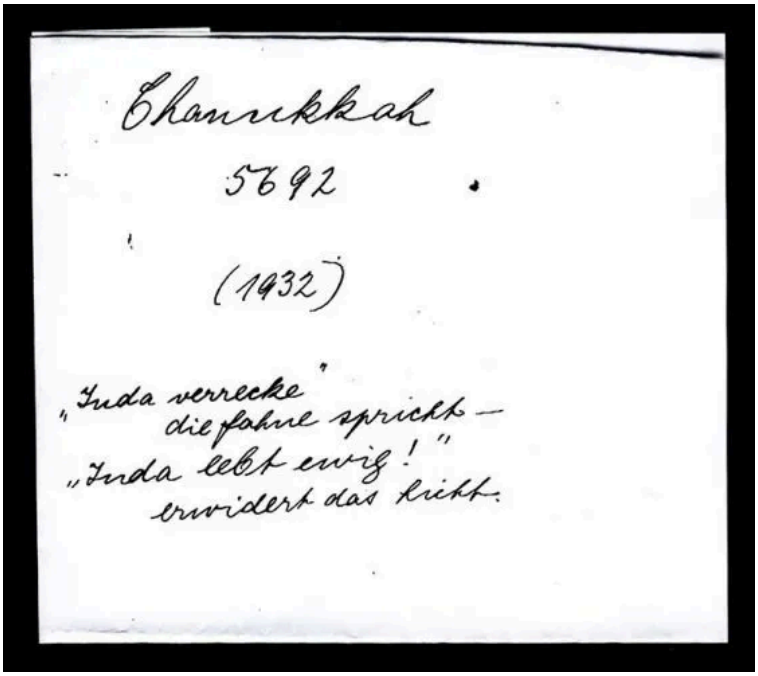
Rachel Posner captures both in a single image: in the Nazi symbol, what the Jewish people have always had to fight against. But in the menorah, what the Jewish people have to fight for—for the sanctity of human life, for the holiness of the family, for a set of Jewish doctrines and ideas that stood against an entire pagan world and preserved biblical monotheism for posterity.

There are those who have sneered at the miracle marked through the kindling of candles, mocking the remembering of a single flask of oil that lasted for so much longer than expected. One of them was Christopher Hitchens. Hitchens gave us an article in 2007 making fun of the Hanukkah miracle: "Epicurus and Democritus had brilliantly discovered that the world was made up of atoms, but who cares about a mere fact like that when there is miraculous oil to be goggled at by credulous peasants?"

Hitchens was being ignorant and obtuse. The Greeks may indeed have conceived of atoms, and art, and architecture, but it never occurred to them that human beings are equal because they are created in the image of God, and that this is the only enduring foundation for human equality and life's sanctity.

It is the light of Jewish teaching that the menorah recalls, as well as the very story of the endurance of the Jewish people. For there is no greater evidence of the God of the Jews that only one people has endured with the very same faith, the very same worldview, the very same values, the very same language, the very same land—while the empires that tried to destroy them found themselves destroyed instead. To light the menorah on the eighth night, to remember a flame that burned so much longer than it ought, is to remember a people that outlasted all others, because they were tasked with proclaiming truths that illuminated humanity.

Rachel understood this. As her family left Germany in 1933, coming soon after to the Holy Land, she bore the developed photograph with her, on which she had penned a poem in the language of the land they left.



THIS POEM WAS PENNED BY RACHEL POSNER IN 1932. (VIA FLASHBACK.COM)

"Juda verrecke," die fahne spricht —

"Juda lebt ewig!" erwidert das licht.

"Judah will perish," the flag says. "Judah lives forever!" replies the light.

Short, succinct, and profoundly relevant to our time. Rachel pondered the lamp and found inner inspiration, revealing how the light of Judaism was not only to be found in the candelabra on her window, but in her very soul. In so doing she followed the example of biblical heroes who had come before, and an essay by Winston Churchill allows us to understand how this is so.

In 1921, Churchill arrived in the Middle East as colonial secretary, with the task of dividing it up. (Thus the legend that the odd zigzag in the bottom of the country that became Jordan ought to be known as Winston's Hiccup, because, having had one drink too many, his hand did not stay stable as he drew its borders.) It was after this conference that Churchill took the same journey as Moses and Israel: out of Egypt and across the

Sinai desert. Though unlike Moses, Churchill actually made it to the promised land. He stopped first in Gaza, where he and Sir Herbert Samuel were greeted by a cheering Arab crowd. As the historian Andrew Roberts tells us, Churchill and Samuel interpreted the cheers as acclaim, but they did not speak Arabic. Churchill's aide-de-camp, Maxwell Coote, later reported of the crowd that "their chief cry over which they waxed quite frenzied was 'down with the Jews, cut their throats.'" The trip through the Sinai seems to have stayed with Churchill, for 10 years later he penned a short biography of Moses, the only biblical essay he ever wrote.

There he recalled a flame that a millennium before for the Maccabees burned miraculously in the Middle East. This, of course, was the burning bush atop Mount Sinai encountered by the shepherd Moses.

Churchill wrote: "One day when the sun rode fierce in the heavens, and the dust-devils and mirages danced and flickered amid the scrub, he saw The Burning Bush. It burned, yet it was not consumed. It was a prodigy. The more it burned the less it was consumed; it seemed to renew itself from its own self-consumption." Perhaps, Churchill concludes, "it was not a bush at all, but his own heart was aflame with a fire never to be quenched while the earth supports human beings."

This is extraordinary. I do indeed believe it was a bush. But Churchill understood that the fire of Sinai was not only on that mountain, but also in Moses's heart.

This passage was published in 1931. At that very moment Rachel Posner was, like Moses millennia before, studying a source of illumination, and finding the flame that lay within, and composing the poem: Judah will live forever.

This, then, is the essence of Jewish hope: The light without inspires and parallels the light within, which is fueled by the knowledge that Judah's light has long outlasted the worldviews it opposed.

There is so much to be learned today from Rachel's poem, and the image that inspired it. We have been reminded again of all that we are fighting against, reminded of this not only in Gaza, or Lebanon, or Iran, but in the American academy, in the mealy-mouthed moral equivalence of university presidents, and in the Nuremberg-esque rallies on our college campuses.

To see this is to be reminded of Rachel's picture. It is also a reminder, for me, of the greatest speech ever given by Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, one which, strikingly, had nothing to do with jurisprudence. It was delivered in the Capitol Rotunda in 1997, in a ceremony remembering the Holocaust.

Scalia spoke of visiting Auschwitz, and then emphasized, "The one message I want to convey today is that you will have missed the most frightening aspect of it all, if you do not appreciate that it happened in one of the most educated, most progressive, most cultured countries in the world." The Germany of the early twentieth century, he noted, "was a world leader in most fields of art, science, and intellect." Its universities were some of the most celebrated on earth, yet this did not prevent Nazism from suffusing society; in fact, German education and Nazism went hand in hand. This, Scalia then added, was not only a fact of history but for our own lives. American parents, Scalia reflected, place so much value today on the opportunities offered in elite educational institutions, yet he added that "is only of only secondary importance—to our children, and to the society that their generation will create."

I often thought of Scalia's speech in the months since October 7, 2023, as I watched rallies at prominent American universities celebrating the atrocities wrought by Hamas, made all the worse by the fact that the language employed by the students—defending infanticide as "decolonization"—reflects the very "education"

they have imbibed. Ours is an age that has validated the quip of William F. Buckley Jr. that he would rather be governed by the first 2,000 names in the Boston phone book than by the faculty of Harvard.

In the first week following Hamas's attack, I saw a clip of a football game featuring the Kansas City Chiefs. A moment of silence was held to mark the memory of those murdered in Israel. Then, from the crowd, rose one sports fan's plaintive cry, an unsophisticated but defiant denunciation of terror: "F - - - Hamas." The crowd cheered.

As I later noted in *Commentary,* it struck me that this one anonymous attendee at a game hundreds of miles away from any Ivy League institution had somehow summoned more moral clarity than most university presidents in America. It was a reminder that if the West is to be saved, it will be through the ability to call evil by its name. Scalia concluded his speech by reflecting on how the true essence of education and of civilization lies in teaching the principles of moral wisdom, and how the West, he said, has "derived them from and through the Jews."

This past year has been described as Israel's darkest hour. A dark time for world Jewry it certainly is. But the menorah proclaims that in such moments Maccabees are made.

As Churchill understood, and as Rachel Posner revealed, the flame of Sinai and the menorah is not only external; it will burn within the Jewish soul, so long as we draw inspiration from our history, and from the fearless leaders who have come before us.

We, too, can look at Rachel's poem, and make it our mantra. Judah will perish—so proclaim the cries heard in the universities and the streets. They say, "Long live the intifada" and "from the river to the sea," but the meaning is all the same. To this we stoutly respond, as Rachel did, "Judah will live forever!" So long as we cultivate the flame within.

As we fight, we do so knowing that as in the Hanukkah story of yore, we live in an age of miracles. In 1949, the British Labor government's foreign secretary, the antisemite Ernest Bevin, still refused to recognize the state of Israel. In response, Churchill delivered one last address for the ages. "Whether the right honorable gentleman likes it or not," he said to Bevin, "the coming into being of a Jewish state in Palestine is an event in world history to be viewed in the perspective, not of a generation or a century, but in the perspective of a thousand, 2,000 or even 3,000 years. This," he added, "is an event in world history."

Churchill held the day; Britain recognized Israel, and Chaim Weizmann, the first president of the reborn Jewish state, telegraphed to express his gratitude. Churchill sent a telegram in return, with only three words: "The light grows."

I cannot help but feel that Churchill referred to words he had written in his essay about Moses first meeting with God. Perhaps Churchill's own heart was aflame with an unquenchable fire.

In 2009, a great-grandchild of Rachel Posner, Akiva Mansbach, named for Rabbi Posner, set up the menorah in his home opposite the flag of Israel, and opposite his grandmother's photo, all while wearing the uniform of the Israeli army in which he served. As candles were kindled he read a poem inspired by that of his great-grandmother; only this one was not in German, but in Hebrew.

This is the translation:

> The menorah stands in the window once again
>
> Facing the flag of the sovereign state
>
> The descendent Akiva, named for his great-grandfather
>
> Salutes through the window and lights the menorah.
>
> And then Akiva concluded by speaking to his grandmother who had written that poem so many decades before, now deceased, but still very much alive in memory:
>
> Grandmother in Heaven: Give thanks and and pour forth a prayer;
>
> That to Zion a redeemer will swiftly come!

With these words, he lit the menorah of his ancestors, the menorah of the Maccabees, the menorah of 1931, the menorah of the ages.

So let there be light.

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This article was drawn from remarks delivered at Tikvah's annual Jewish Leadership Conference.

For more on Hanukkah, and the modern challenges shared by both Jews and Christians, read Liel Leibovitz.