

Shuv'chem L'shalom

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Shabbat Vayigash 5784 / December 22, 2023

Today is the shortest, and darkest day of the year: the winter solstice, as it is known. On this day we enjoy the least amount of daylight, and we have the earliest Shabbat of the year as well. It gets darker sooner.

In the Jewish calendar today is not the solstice, as we observe the lunar calendar. The new lunar month, or Rosh Chodesh, was last week. 10 days ago, the month of *Tevet* began, making today the 10th of *Tevet*, or *Asarah b'Tevet*. It's an auspicious day, and I'll return to that idea a bit later. Just remember the 10th of *Tevet*.

Now, the shortest day of the year on the Jewish lunar calendar fell on *Rosh Chodesh Tevet*. If you're counting backwards correctly, that's last Tuesday, which also is the 6th night of *Hanukkah*. There's a couple reasons I'm turning our attention back to last week.

First, *Rosh Chodesh* is a time of blessing—we recite Hallel, and it's a time of celebration, especially for women. As it happens, Hanukkah is the only festival that straddles two months and Rosh Chodesh Tevet ALWAYS falls in the middle of the festival.

If you're familiar with legends of Hanukkah, you may know the story of Yehudit, or Judith, a heroine who may have singlehandedly won the war for the Jews. An Assyrian general fled the field of battle and sought shelter in her tent. She offered him salty cheese, which made him thirsty, whereupon she gave him enough wine to get him into a drunken stupor. Then she drove a tent peg into his skull. Don't mess with Jewish women.

Judith's triumph was marked by the Jews of North African countries with an ancient celebration known as *Chag haBanot*, the Festival of the Daughters. In Algerian, Libyan, Tunisian, and Moroccan communities, there were special customs for *Chag haBanot*. Women would come to synagogue, touch the Torah, and pray for their daughters. Mothers would give gifts to their daughters. Women of all ages would come together to dance and feast in honor of Judith, and of course, eat cheese to remember her bravery.

Second, *Rosh Chodesh*, the new moon, is as we observe its phases, when we see no reflection of the sun on its surface. We do not see it during the day nor by night. This makes for excellent stargazing as our nighttime sky is at its darkest. The light of the moon is hidden. Jewish mysticism gives a term for this: *Or HaGanuz*—the hidden light.

In the Kabbalistic tradition, there are 10 sephirot, or emanations, of the divine presence, illustrated in the Tree of Life symbol drawn from that tradition. You've surely seen it even if you've not studied it. At the top of the tree are divine aspects which we humans cannot truly understand. The utmost of them is the *Keter*, or Crown, also known as the *Ein Sof*—that which is without end.

When we refer to the Divine in English, we often refer to The Eternal. That's because of the unending, timeless, and boundless nature of God. In the poem *Adon Olam*, master of the universe, The Eternal is described in the stative: *Hu Hayah, Hu Hoveh, Hu Yihiye*. God was, God is, God will be. Moses, at the burning bush, asks God's name. The response is *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*—I will be what I will be. From this comes The Eternal's formal name—Yud Hey Vav Hey- an enigmatic mashup, if you will, of IsWasWillBe.

The mystery of a timeless Eloheinu is hidden from us. In fact, the root word for Olam, universe or world, is alam, Ayin Lamed Mem, having to do with that which is hidden from our gaze, be in the grandeur of our globe, the Endless universe or the *Ein Sof*, *Yud Hey Vav Hey*, IsWasWillBe nature of God. The *Or HaGanuz*, the hidden moon and hidden light, is a reminder to keep faith in the God who is hidden from our sight but not our hearts.

Now, back to this week, to today, the 10th of Tevet. You may not know, but this is traditionally a fast day. This is the day when, according to tradition, the Babylonian emperor Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem in 425 BCE with his armies, breaching the walls two and a half years later and eventually destroying the temple and exiling our people for seven decades.

There is little doubt that this siege, and the subsequent destruction, brought about great suffering for our ancestors. They were put to the sword in their homes and in the streets, the city ransacked, women raped, babies murdered and eventually, hundreds of thousands kidnapped and carted off to Babylon. Our sages declared a fast from sunrise to sunset on this day, and there is a long-standing custom to recite *Kaddish* on this day for the nameless victims of hatred against our people.

I'm sure very few of us kept this fast today, let alone ever heard of it before now. That's understandable, as our Reform custom tends to minimize or eliminate some of these lesser-known days of mourning and misery. It certainly feels, however, that we might now remember and repurpose this day. A fast to recall our people under siege feels especially appropriate amidst unprecedented antisemitism around the world and especially here at home. It feels appropriate given what our brothers and sisters in Israel are dealing with—battling enemies to the north, south, west, and of course, online too.

Is it coincidence that this day falls amidst the siege mentality we are all experiencing, with the Destruction and Desecration on October 7th, the subsequent War in Gaza, the deaths of so many innocent people, the murders, and the kidnappings? Is it coincidence that *Chag HaBanot*, the celebration of our daughters and of Judith's bravery, also came around this moment?

Kaddish for the nameless. As I see the posters of the kidnapped, I realize that the victims are not nameless. Not those in captivity nor those killed *al-kiddush haShem*, for the sake of being Jews. They are not nameless. *HaKol Yesh Shem*. They all have names.

It's so easy to feel angry about all of this. We see friends and families suffering, and it's hard not to let one's blood boil. And this too is a lesson from our sages. We can't get too caught up in earthly fight. We can't forget who we are even while we fight for our right to survive.

Destruction. Desecration. Rededication. The Hanukkah we learn about is so often the one of triumphant military victory of the few over the many, but the Rabbis were anything but comfortable with this idea. The tale of the miracle of light found in the Talmud may well have been a fiction to emphasize a spiritual victory rather than a martial one.

I pray that just *bayamim haheim*, in their day, *bazman hazeh*, that in our day too, that our people's victory over the evil and darkness arrayed against us is more than a military one, that our spirit is not consumed in the process, that after the Destruction and Desecration we rededicate ourselves to ensuring the hidden light will be revealed, not just those of the candles of the *Hanukkaiah* but of the light within us all, and hope that is within our people.

As we welcome Shabbat into our midst tonight, let's remember the angels who accompany us this Shabbat. Tonight, let's imagine these angels are the nameless for whom we say *Kaddish*, the named for whom we also say *Kaddish*, and the those we pray need not *Kaddish* recited, for they, like Jacob and Joseph in this week's Torah portion, remain alive and are reunited with one another.

For their sake, when we sing *Shalom Aleichem*, let's add a 5th verse, with the functional first word being *Shuv'chem*, return, *Shuv'chem L'shalom*- return to wholeness and peace.