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Light and Darkness:

Reflections on the Eighth Night of Hanukkah in an Israel at War

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Dear Friends:

Last night, Motzei Shabbat, soon after we lit the candles for the seventh night of Hanukkah, I went to the office to check my email and news from the past twenty-four hours. As I browsed the websites of CNN and the *New York Times*, I, along with many others in Israel and the world over, discovered that the country is involved in a large-scale military campaign against Hamas. While this is a tense time in Israel, there is also a national sigh of relief—a catharsis of sorts.

For months (and especially during the past few weeks), Qassam rockets have been raining down over southern Israel. Sderot, Ashkelon, and Netivot have all been victims of indiscriminate rocket fire coming from Hamas militia in the Gaza Strip. Israelis wondered aloud, and in quiet, how long will we sit passively while victims are under attack? Israeli newspapers carried heart-wrenching photographs of children shaking with terror as their parents hovered over them, running for cover as sirens sounded in anticipation of rockets landing close by. Since my wife, Miriam, had planned to take our kids to the Jerusalem Museum of Science, I turned to her after reading the news and quietly requested that she take a taxi to the museum.

The very real threat of Hamas resorting, once again, to suicide bombings lingers over the entire State of Israel and, for us, having lost two dear friends in one of the Bus 18 attacks, it is a fear that strikes to the core. So it is worth taking precautions—at least for the short-term—even though the reality of Gaza is mercifully very far from the quiet streets of Jerusalem. On this, now the eighth day of Hanukkah, we noticed an increased military and police presence in the streets. Heavy hearts celebrated the final day of the Festival of Lights.

As the sun began to set, I took two of my children, Rachel and Adir, on an excursion to Mea Shearim, one of the more famous ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods of Jerusalem. The reason I initiated this *tiyul*, was so that we could be surrounded by the light of Hanukkah—a refuge in the darkness that Israel faces. We walked from the beginning of Rehov Strauss, down to the heart of Mea Shearim. I asked Adir and Rachel to count the number of *hanukkiot* (Hanukkah menorahs): the counting never stopped.

We weaved in and out of the alleyways. Ultra-Orthodox Jews in their *bekeshes* (long black coats) scurried to their homes after *Ma'ariv* to light Hanukkah candles as quickly as possible. Particularly striking were the beautiful glass display cases in which many lit their oil-filled *hanukkiot*. Since the mitzvah of Hanukkah is that of *pirsumei nisa* (publicizing the miracle of Hanukkah), it is considered especially important to display the *hanukkiyah* in such a way that the maximum number of passers-by will see the lights and be reminded of the miracle. I explained to Adir and Rachel that by simply walking around and seeing other families' *hanukkiot*, we were observing a very important mitzvah—enabling others to fulfill the commandment of *pirsumei nisa*.

During the entire course of our excursion, Rachel repeatedly asked if we could stop by a bakery to buy *sufganiyot* (Israeli jelly-doughnuts); the word comes from the Hebrew root *samech-pey-gimmel* (to absorb like a sponge), as in the oil absorbed by these lovely delicacies. Since I am not a regular visitor to Mea Shearim, I stopped a native to ask for a recommendation to a good bakery. The boy responded to my request by whispering, “Brasil.” When I pressed him and

asked where the bakery is located, he pointed directly across the street. Brasil is nothing more than a hole in the wall, but I can tell you they serve the finest *sufganiyot* these three Berkowitzes had ever tasted. We even decided to bring a “care package” back for *Imma*, who had stayed at home with our youngest, Shira, because the air becomes quite chilly after dark.

By the end of the evening, Adir had counted ninety *hanukkiot*, and both he and Rachel had thanked me for our eighth-night excursion. When we got back, Miriam left to witness the wedding ceremony of a couple to whom she had just taught the rituals of *mikveh*. A wedding on Hanukkah is yet another symbol of hope, warmth, and blessing.

While I am still on a “high” from this precious time spent with the children, I, and many others in this country, harbor a heavy heart. Israel is once again involved in a war not of its own choosing. Any sovereign nation under rocket fire would no doubt respond to such a barrage by defending itself. Sadly, many media outlets and sovereign nations of the world refuse to accept Israel’s right to defend its citizens.

From my vantage point in Jerusalem, I am particularly sensitive to the extent to which reports are skewed, primarily showing the suffering of the Palestinian population in Gaza, with little or no reference to what Israeli citizens have been subject to for the past few months, much less the larger context. In a way, the battle in which Israel is engaged echoes back to the period of the Maccabees as they fought against those who were bent on undermining their right to exist.

Today, Israel is engaged in a similar struggle; however, one must keep in mind that Israel desires peace more than anything else. One hopes and prays that the present campaign will bring quiet to Israel’s citizens in the south. And one hopes and prays that this eighth night of Hanukkah will somehow herald an age of legitimacy and equality that the modern State of Israel so rightfully deserves after more than sixty years of existence.

With wishes for a *Hodesh Tov* and *Shavuah Tov*,

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