

Asserting Our Jewishness

December 15, 2025 (Hanukkah)

My late husband, Rabbi Gershon Schwartz, z”l, would regale the family with stories about being the Little Drummer Boy in his Fall River, MA, public school’s annual Christmas pageant. As the one child in the class who played the drums, he was a natural. His being Jewish didn’t seem to matter to the school, and it never occurred to him to demur. In the 1950s, Christmas permeated the season, with nary a menorah in sight. No “Happy Holidays” or “Season’s Greetings” euphemisms. Jews nodded awkwardly when wished a Merry Christmas, and Hanukkah was a family affair with a small menorah in the window, or at most a communal synagogue event.

A generation later, Jews felt more confident, and wanted to accustom their neighbors to the fact that Christmas was not the only holiday of lights this time of year. Jewish parents voluntarily visited their children’s classrooms to teach the history and message of Hanukkah, read the Hanukkah story, or share favorite Hanukkah foods. Thanks to the more ecumenical ethos of this era and determined advocacy, Hanukkah menorahs began to appear alongside Christmas trees and mangers in town squares, business offices, apartment buildings, and stores. And of course, nothing marks this shift more dramatically than the giant-sized Chabad Hanukkah menorahs mounted in the public square beginning in San Francisco in 1975 and now ubiquitous all over the world, including the one in Sydney, Australia, site of the most recent act of deadly antisemitism.

We know that we kindle the menorah to publicize the miracle of the small vial of oil burning for eight days. To some extent, displaying our menorahs in public spaces and holding public Hanukkah celebrations is a contemporary variation on this mitzvah. Yet if we’re honest about it, we also know that for most Jews, these public menorahs are less about publicizing God’s miracle and more about proudly and confidently asserting our identity and sense of belonging as Jews.

The horrific terrorist attack at a Hanukkah celebration at Sydney’s Bondi Beach illustrates the tension between the desire to publicly acknowledge our Jewish identity and the fear and vulnerability such public identification brings. As one of the deadliest attacks on Jewish people outside Israel in decades, this hateful, antisemitic act only heightens the risk of professing our distinctive identity with pride and confidence.

This spike in antisemitism over the past few years, which has impacted Jews in so many aspects of our lives, leaves us feeling much more vulnerable. The choices we make—to wear our Stars of David or kippot in public or attend large Jewish gatherings—have become less about affirming our belonging and more about actively choosing to rise above our fears in defiance of those who hope to prevail over us. As we each actively choose how best to do this, we fortify and embolden one another not to retreat from the world around us but to engage further with it.

When I think about how to do this, I’m drawn to the message of one of my favorite Hanukkah songs. *בָּאָנוּ חַשְׁךְ לְגַעַשׂ* (We Came to Drive Away the Darkness). Hanukkah itself is a holiday that

helps us all rise above the age-old fear of winter darkness. This song explicitly addresses this by telling us:

כל אחד הוא אור קlein
ובכלנו – אור איין

Each one of us a small light, and all together we are a strong light.

I remember being stirred by these lyrics many decades ago, when, as a child, I performed this song with my Jewish day school class. We mounted the stage in a dark auditorium, wearing all black with flashlights in hand. When the music started, we turned the switch on our flashlights, and then sang and danced in a coordinated manner, gesturing forcefully with our hands to illuminate the space. We literally overturned the darkness with our lights as we sang the song. I never forgot the power that we children collectively held that night as we creatively demonstrated the power of humans to banish our fears.

Each of us has moments when we have to drive away the darkness in our lives individually or collectively. In the past week alone, the deadly shooting at Brown University, in addition to the slaughter of Jews in Australia, and—close to home—the untimely death of our beloved faculty member, Rabbi Eliezer Diamond z”l, have dampened our spirits and shaken us profoundly. As we muster the strength to move toward the light, I, for one, feel fortunate to have found this strength from the JTS community—from inspiring students, devoted faculty, dedicated staff and colleagues, passionate lay leaders—through learning, praying, and engaging with one another.

This Hanukkah, may we all find light in our lives and in our communities, and may we inspire others to do so as well.

Hag Urim Sameah.