

Where Should We Place the Hanukiyah in an Anti-Semitic World?

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Have you heard of someecards.com?

Popular a few years ago, they are witty online cards with old-time illustrations and funny captions.

Here are some of their Hanukah ones:

- Hanukkah is 8 days because it takes that long for people to realize it's Hanukkah. (For the record, it starts tomorrow night.)
- Sorry we laughed at Hanukkah: Suddenly a holiday based on fuel efficiency seems like a pretty good idea.
- A Hanukkah miracle would be feeling confident that you spelled Hanukkah correctly.
- I could buy you better Hanukkah presents if the oil **only** lasted a few nights.
- Happy Hanukkah! Now please stop reminding everyone that you're Jewish.

Humor is usually embedded with some truth.

In the case of the last joke, it's true that our Jewish identities are more revealed to the world than the rest of the year.

We host Hanukkah parties and not Christmas parties.

We place the Hanukiyah by the window instead of Christmas trees.

We don't decorate our outdoor trees and house with red and green lights.

We're more aware of who celebrates which holiday when we exchange holiday greetings.

And all that is somewhat by design, teaches the Talmud of 1500 years ago.

Hanukkah is about *Pirsum HaNes*, *publicizing* the miracle. Jews honor other miracles but always *privately*: the Passover miracle is retold in our homes at the Seder. The Purim miracle is recalled in the synagogue at the Megillah reading. But Hanukkah is public, where we light the Hanukiyah inside the house but place it by the window for the outside world to see.

The Talmud tells us *where* to place the Hanukiyah. It says, "One should place the Hanukiyah outside one's front door. But if one lives on an upper floor, like an apartment, he should place it by the window that faces the public. But if it's a time of danger, one leaves the candles on the table inside, and that counts" (Shabbat 21b).

Is 2018 America such a time of danger that we should move our Hanukiyot?

Let me first explain the Talmud here before speaking of the current climate.

In other words, the preference is for the Hanukiyah to be highly visible because the holiday emphasizes maximizing the Hanukah miracles. If you lived on a ground floor, you were to place your lights outside so passersby can see. But if that were impossible because you lived on a higher floor, you did the best you could by leaving it by the most visible window.

Today we don't live in courtyards of old, nor is it practical to leave burning candles outside. So most of us light them inside by a window facing the street, even if we live on a ground floor. This achieves the same goal of *Pirsum HaNes*.

But what if that's too dangerous? asks the Talmud. What if displaying the candles can get you hurt or worse? The law is clear: in this case, light them inside in private.

I've always understood the last line about dangers to refer to eras of pogroms, which recurred far too frequently throughout our people's history. But not to us in America, thank G-d. *This year*, however, feels different.

For me and many of you, we're more aware of the direct threats to Jews here in America because of the Pittsburgh synagogue massacre and the rise of domestic Anti-Semitism. It's scary. It feels more dangerous. The Anti-Defamation League confirms it is.

My question today is, given today's landscape, where do we light our Hanukiyah? I mean that literally and metaphorically.

First, should we actually place our Hanukiyot by the windows as we're instructed when all is well, or should we place them away from the windows as in a time of danger?

Second, substitute the Hanukiyah for other public markers of being Jewish:

- wearing a Jewish star or Chai necklace,
- wearing a Kippah,
- putting a Mezuzah on your home and workplace office,
- taking off work on the holidays, and more.

Should we continue to publicly identify as Jewish, like we did before when things were better, or should we scale back given that the climate is more hostile?

Where do we light our Hanukiyot?

I for one will continue to light my Hanukiyah by the window. Will continue to wear my Kippah everywhere. Will continue to let the world know I'm Jewish. Because Hanukkah teaches us that

the Jewish response to darkness is light. (To clarify, I'll put it as close to the window as is safe for my small kids).

We should be proud to be Jews, proud to show we're Jews. But we shouldn't be fools either. Were I to visit Europe, for example, I wouldn't wear my Kippah outside, wouldn't light my Hanukiyah in a visible spot. Europe is much more hostile to Jews these days than the USA.

I'm not pretending things are perfect here. They are not.

For example, one month ago a man was arrested for making a threatening phone call to Central Avenue Synagogue, the Highland Park Chabad. The man was not a local but lived an hour away. And two months ago, an Orthodox young man named Eliyahu Moskowitz was killed by a gunshot in West Rogers Park. It's unclear whether he was killed for being Jewish or another reason.

These are real and these are scary, but they must not deter us.

I've lived in Highland Park for 5 months now, worn my Kippah everywhere, and I've felt nothing but accepted everywhere I go and by everyone I've met. Even the Instacart delivery person said, "Oh, I didn't realize the local Jewel has so much Kosher food!"

Think about how long you have lived here. Think about how many incidents of anti-Semitism you've seen with your own eyes here or moments when you felt uncomfortable. I'm guessing - and hoping - the answer for the vast majority of people is none. And if you have to go back a few decades, that proves my point too.

Fortunately we live where we live, in a neighborhood and city that are friendly to Jews.

Highland Park is as safe as it gets when it comes to being Jewish openly. It's not perfect, but then again it never was, and Israel itself isn't 100% safe for Jews either. It's the world we live in, and it's still far better than it used to be. It's far better than for most Jews in history.

I don't spend time trying to understand anti-Semitism because it is, as *New York Times* writer Bari Weiss says, a conspiracy theory. When someone is hooked on a conspiracy theory, you can't talk them out of it no matter how crazy the idea is.

The best articulation I've read is by Leon Pinsker, an assimilated 20th century Russian who became an early Zionist leader. He writes: "To sum up then: to the living, the Jew is a corpse; to the native, a foreigner; to the homesteader, a vagrant; to the proprietary, a beggar; to the poor, an exploiter and a millionaire; to the patriot, a man without a country; for all, a hated rival."

Pinsker identifies that people hate Jews for conflicting reasons.

Here's my 21st century update:

- They hate us because we try to fit in, and because we stand out.
- They hate us because we're powerful, and because we're weak.
- They hate us because we're capitalists, and because we're socialists.
- They hate us because we're devoted to America, and because we're loyal to Israel.
- They hate us because we're rich, and because we're poor.
- They hate us because we care only about ourselves, and because we care about the strangers and the others.

One contradiction after the other.

I think of the legend of Rabbi Akiva and the fable of the fox and the fish. The Talmud teaches that after the Bar Kochva Rebellion the Romans outlawed Torah study, among other things (Brachot 61b). One day the Roman official Pappus Ben Yehuda found the legendary Rabbi Akiva teaching Torah to his students, in public no less. Pappus said to him, "Aren't you afraid of the government? Why are you doing something that will get you killed?"

Akiva answered him with a parable.

Akiva said, "There was once a fox walking by a river who saw fish swimming from one place to another.

The fox asked, 'What are you escaping from?'

The fish answered, 'We're escaping from the fishermen's nets.'

The fox continued: 'Why don't you come up onto the dry land so that you and I can live together just like our ancestors did?'

The fish responded: 'And they call you the smartest of all animals? You're an idiot. If we're afraid while in the water, our source of life, all the more so in your mouth, on dry land, a place where we will die!'

Akiva summarized: "It's the same with us. If we study Torah, we may live or we may die. But if we stop studying Torah, there's no more Judaism. The Jewish people will die."

I think this is a really powerful model for us.

If Jews are too afraid to light our Hanukiyah at all, that's the end of Judaism and the Jewish people.

I will light my Hanukiyah in the window because it's also an act of defiance against those who seek to turn out the lights on the Jewish people.

But it's more than that.

It's an act of strengthening our people.

Mitzvot add holiness to the world and strengthen the Jewish people in the process because they deepen our connection to our community and G-d. Lighting Hanukkah candles is the defining Mitzvah of the holiday.

I will light my Hanukiyah in the window because in doing so I strengthen our people by continuing our traditions and passing them on to my own children.

But it's more than that.

It's a sign of solidarity with the world.

Hanukkah falls davka during the darkest part of the day during the darkest part of the year.

We kindle the lights at nighttime in the winter, the coldest, harshest season when the days are short and darkness dominates.

And what's the Jewish response to darkness? Light.

One candle drives away a sea of darkness.

Darkness permeates our world today. Both nearby and far away the world appears to be dangerous, scary, unfair.

The Jewish response is to light a candle.

The Jewish response is to add light to drive away the darkness.

The Jewish response is to recommit to living lives infused with values, ethics, and justice.

We light physical candles to spur us to add spiritual light to the world around us.

I will light my Hanukiyah in the window because the window reminds me to look outside and fulfill my responsibility to add light to the world.

Let's go back to that someecard:

Happy Hanukkah! Now please stop reminding everyone that you're Jewish.

Not a chance. Hanukkah is a time - the time - to rekindle our pride.

Shabbat Shalom.