Lighting in a Time of Danger

A Hannukah Sermon by Rabbi Sarah Bassin

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There's a famous historic photo. It may be stored somewhere in your memory from a history textbook or a visit to a Holocaust museum. It's black and white. In the foreground is a brass menorah with all eight days of candles and the shamash ready to be lit on a windowsill. Through the window's glass, you see a swastika flag flying prominently over the public square – marking the Nazi party headquarters of the city.

When you look at the photo, it evokes defiance. Pride. It captures the essence of the holiday of Hannukah itself — when the act of being who we are was considered a threat to the powers that be. When the Jewish people fought against an empire that sought to destroy us and we won. When we reclaimed and rededicated our Temple.

Rosi Posner took this photo in Kiel, Germany in 1931. It was before Hitler formally took power. The Nazi party was growing. Street violence against Jews by the Nazi paramilitary group known as the SA was growing. But Hitler and his party did not yet have the power of the state behind them. Within two years, the Posner family would not be displaying their menorah on their window ledge in Kiel. It was one of the few possessions they carried with them as refugees. Between 1931 and 1933, triumph no longer came in the form of public defiance but in fleeing in search of refuge.

Hannukah is not a holiday that the early rabbis focus on much. So it's revealing that one of the few halakhic conversations they had is about what our obligation is for the holiday בְּשְׁעַת הַסַּכָּנָה *b'sha'at hasakanah*[1]– in a time of danger. Of course – in ideal conditions, to celebrate, we place the menorah in full public view to publicize the miracle of the holiday. But conditions are not always ideal. You may, after all, live under the jurisdiction of ancient Zoroastrians whose fire-priests didn't appreciate others kindling lights on their festivals.[2] Or... the Romans. They made us nervous too – well before they destroyed our Second Temple. Or. Or. Or. We are never at a loss to come up with a governing authority that targeted us or deemed us expendable.

The rabbis acknowledge that lighting and displaying the menorah for all to see in a time of danger could invite trouble. It could undermine the very act of survival the menorah is intended to celebrate. In such conditions, they give permission that one can fulfill the mitzvah of Hannukah by lighting the menorah just עַל שֻׁלְחָנוֹ *al shulchano* – on their table. Out of public view. Without... exposure. It's notable – that the early rabbis make a point to declare that the mitzvah for a holiday about public defiance and fighting can be fulfilled through a subdued and quiet act of survival.

We may feel most drawn to the 1931 story of the menorah in the windowsill against the background of the swastika. But that part of the menorah's history is no more or less Jewish than the act of carrying it out of the country in 1933 to be kindled somewhere else.

בְּשַׁעַת הַסַּכָּנָה in an hour of danger, calculations about risk and defiance, identity and survival change. It is a truth that refugees across the ages, Jewish and gentile, have come to know viscerally. When once unthinkable options become the most rational choices. It's not so much that the person changes. It's the conditions around them that do. The state's increasing impotence against violence. Or perhaps its tolerance of violence. Or worst of all- its embrace of violence.

Perhaps the notion of a time of danger feels more resonant than it once did. More than we want to acknowledge. We all know the rising tide of hate, threat and harm. We are certainly not in Nazi Germany, but maybe you have questioned the placement of your metaphorical and literal menorah. How publicly do you want your Jewish identity to be on display? If these are questions you have considered, you know that it has little to do with your sense of Jewish pride or your embrace of Jewish values and everything to do with the world changing around you.

As profound as the conditions have changed for us as Jews, it does not strike me that the language of *sha'at hasakanah* – a time of danger – feels fully applicable to the entirety of the Jewish community in this moment – uncertain as the world may be for us. But the shifting conditions in our country **are** a full blown *sha'at hasakanah* for some. Rights and protections due to citizen and non-citizen alike are being undermined. People are compelled to make calculated assessments of threat to safety and security in the most mundane parts of their day. Whether to ride the bus. Drop their kids at school. Show up to work. Pray at church. Wondering, "is this the act that could separate me from my child? Send me back into harm's way? Shatter my American dream?"

People who are undocumented in the U.S. have been living with some level or risk in our country for years. What's happening for them now is a whole new level. It should also be noted that the impact stretches far beyond our undocumented neighbors. This uncertainty is the new reality for many who have been here with legal status… the conditions have changed for many of them too.

For the Haitian woman here who fled the complete breakdown of law and order in her country, now living without status in fear of deportation as her Temporary Protected Status has been removed.

For the mother who fled stalking and abuse by criminal gangs and was promised safety here for her family, only to be told that the violence she experienced because she is a woman is no longer 'enough' to qualify her for asylum.

For the political dissident diligently following all the steps to pursue his asylum claim, scared that he could be arrested on the way to have his day in court.

These stories are not theoretical categories. They are actual people. Confirmed by staff at HIAS. Their identities are anonymized so as not to invite additional harm. I say this because discerning truth in an age of misinformation and AI understandably makes us more skeptical.

There's an added layer to the tragedy of all of this – that these changing conditions are happening not in the places in which they fled but precisely in the place they went to seek refuge. That they find themselves living through the trauma of *sha'at hasakanah* – a time of danger – more than once.

We are all faced with the question of what, then, is our obligation in this moment – that is certainly a time of danger for some and may not always feel completely safe for us. We are obligated to put light into the world. And the rabbis understood that this obligation can look different when circumstances around us change. Ultimately, in the

conversation that they have about kindling the lights of Hanukkah during a time of danger – they are signaling their trust in us – to use our wisdom and our *kishkas* to discern the conditions around us and how we embody our values. No matter how bad the conditions around you – you must always bring light. And you should bring light in a way that acknowledges the conditions around you.

Whether it is a time for defiant pride or a time for subdued affirmation.

A time for principled public action or a time for quiet acts of kindness.

Not all of us will read the conditions and the risks of this moment the same. Perhaps – we will make different choices about what the embrace of our values looks like in this moment. Perhaps we will make different choices about how to balance the simultaneous need to protect ourselves and protect others. But the underlying truth is that as radically different as our answers to these questions may appear from one another, they share the same unifying value. Whether hidden or in full view – the menorah must be kindled. You must light. No matter the conditions, that reminder of the will to survive and be who you are – that is non-negotiable.

Rosi Posner, the photographer who captured that original picture of the menorah in 1931. Who carried that menorah with her as a refugee in 1933. She captured it best when she wrote on the back of the photograph (translated from German): "*'Death to Judah' So the flag says. 'Judah will live forever' So the light answers*."

So, whether hidden or in full view – we light. Because the act of lighting reminds us of the imperative to hold our values dear – no matter the conditions around us.

Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 21b

תָּנוּ רַבָּנָן: נֵר חֲנוּכָּה מִצְוָה לְהַנִּיחָהּ עַל פֶּתַח בֵּיתוֹ מִבַּחוּץ. אִם הָיָה דָּר בַּעֲלִיָּיה — מַנִּיחָהּ בַּחַלּוֹן הַסְּמוּכָה לִרְשׁוּת הָרַבִּים. **וּבְשָׁעַת הַסַּכָּנָה** — מַנִּיחָהּ עַל שֻׁלְחָנוֹ וְדַיּוֹ.

The Sages taught: It is a mitzvah to place the Hanukkah lamp at the entrance to one's house on the outside, so that all can see it. If one lived upstairs, one places it at the window adjacent to the public domain. And in a time of danger (*sha'at hasakanah*), when the gentiles issued decrees to prohibit kindling lights, one places it on the table and that is sufficient to fulfill the obligation.

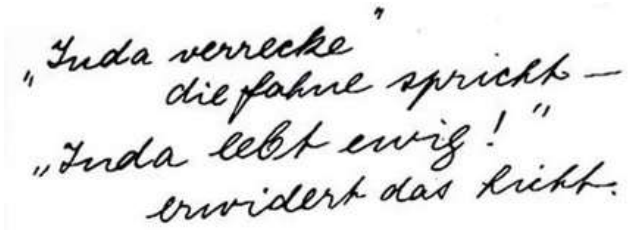
Referenced Images in the Sermon



Photo by Rachel Posner on the 8th night of Hanukkah in 1931 in Kiel, Germany across from Nazi Party headquarters (rarehistoricalphotos.com/menorah- defies-nazi-flag)



Rabbi Dr. Akiva Posner, his wife Rachel and their three children: Avraham Chaim, Tova and Shulamit, at the train station in Kiel upon leaving Germany, 1933. They took the menorah with them. (rarehistoricalphotos.com/menorah-defies-nazi-flag)



German inscription on the back of the 1931 photograph of the menorah translates to: "Death to Judah", So the flag says, "Judah will live forever", So the light answers. (rarehistoricalphotos.com/menorah defies-nazi-flag)