Lighting in a Time of Danger

A HIAS Hannukah Text Study



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)

- What sentiment does the photograph evoke?



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)

- Does the meaning or significance of the first photograph change for you in light of the family's decision to flee Germany as refugees?

Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 21b

תָּנוּ רַבָּנַן: נֵר חֲנוּכָּה מִצְוָה לְהַנִּיחָהּ עַל פֶּתַח בֵּיתוֹ מִבַּחוּץ. אִם הָיָה דָּר בַּעֲלִיָּיה — מַנִּיחָהּ בַּחַלּוֹן הַסְּמוּכָה לִרְשׁוּת הָרַבִּים. **וּבִשְׁעַת 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.

- How do you understand the designation of *sha'at hasakanah* – a time of danger?
- What values do you think the rabbis are weighing and communicating in this discussion?
- Are there groups of people now who feel compelled to alter their typical behaviors in the name of safety?

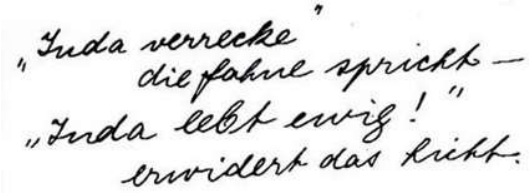
Hannukah Sermon by HIAS Rabbi in Residence Sarah Bassin

The early rabbis make a point to declare that the mitzvah for a holiday about public defiance can be fulfilled through a 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.

B'sha'at hasakahah – in a time of danger – calculations about risk and defiance, identity and survival change. It is a truth that refugees across the ages 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.

Conditions in our country have become a *sha'at hasakanah* for some. Rights and protections due to citizen and non-citizen alike have been undermined. People must 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 for years. What's happening for them now is a whole new level. And the impact stretches far beyond our undocumented neighbors. This uncertainty is the new reality for many who have been here with legal status – as categories of eligibility narrow, processes are complicated or made more expensive, and many statuses are stripped or intentionally allowed to expire.

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 that may not always feel completely safe for us. No matter how bad the conditions around us – we must always bring light. And we should bring light in a way that acknowledges the conditions around us. So, whether hidden or in full view – we light. Because the reminder of the will to survive, live our values, and be who we are – that is non-negotiable.



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)