

Sivan Rahav Meir and Yedidya Meir



Eight Thoughts *for* Eight Days

1 Self-sacrifice. It sounds like an old, antiquated, irrelevant word. In previous generations, there was self-sacrifice; today everything is easy and comfortable. Nevertheless, the past year has taught us all a lesson in a new kind of self-sacrifice: Grandma must not be hugged. It is forbidden to pray together. Things that were considered *mitzvot* became offenses, and vice-versa. Our basic Jewish communal life... collapsed. Much of what we loved... diminished. We are at home more than ever, close to the nuclear family, far from everyone else. We need to wear weird and annoying masks, keep a distance, wash our hands.

But we are doing it together. The whole world, and the Jewish world within it, is going through a period of trial, of examination, as in previous generations. It is our self-sacrifice. After almost a year of small outside *minyanim*, of Zoom, of days in isolation, of *Seder* and Rosh Hashanah so different from what we are used to, of *chesed* and Torah and prayer that have undergone such creative changes – after all this, Chanukah has arrived! We light Chanukah candles and know that we too are heroes and pioneers. We too know something about self-sacrifice and how to come through the darkness stronger.

2 Every single minute, worldwide, humans are sending 18 million text messages, watching more than four million video clips, downloading 400,000 computer apps, and buying more than \$1 million worth

of online products. The human brain simply cannot contend with the flood of information – much of it unnecessary and undesirable – coming its way.

Rav Chagai Londin, of the *hesder* yeshiva in Sderot, writes that this is exactly what we need to learn from Chanukah – how to contend with the powerful forces of the surrounding culture. We become dizzy and confused, continually bombarded by alien forces and hedonistic messages, but must strive to keep our focus:

“Am Yisrael always tries to connect everything to one place: ‘Shema Yisrael, Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad.’ G-d is One. We endeavor to focus and to concentrate and to unite the forces of the soul into our purpose for living. Greek culture was a culture of many idols, with many focal points targeted in every direction. The struggle of the Hasmoneans has not ended. Today too, we are likely to live absent-minded lives of perpetual distraction, of running from one new thing to the next, of always searching for something that doesn’t exist. To defend ourselves from overpowering forces that seem stronger than ourselves, each of us needs to be a Maccabee – not to be ashamed to take breaks, to set boundaries, and to take control of our digital devices instead of allowing them to take control of us. The Chanukah struggle is not over.”

3 If you do not respect yourself, no one will respect you. This principle holds true in marriage and in

child-rearing (whoever makes a floor-mop of himself cannot expect respect from their spouse or children), but it is also true nationally. Some 200 years ago, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch in Germany dealt with many Jews who abandoned and belittled their tradition. At that time, he wrote an essay for Chanukah, in which he reminded them that even if they give up on their culture, it would still not help them to integrate into German society:

“To the extent to which you respect and admire your past and your holy values, so will the nations respect you. It could be that for this reason or the other you will win less or more sympathy from them, but their respect – you will win. However, if you yourself treat your past with disrespect, if you do not respect the burial places of your fathers, if you do not respect your Holy Temple and you do not try to acquire proper knowledge of your Torah – how could you expect others to respect you and your forefathers? Many pleasures are in store for you if you deny the Torah, but respect is not one of them. How great the mistake that all of those progressive, educated people made, the priests of renewal. Go out and learn what a Chanukah candle tells you!”

4 Ori Kotler, a commander in the Rotem Unit of the Givati Brigade, shared the following idea with us:

There is a famous phrase that states that if you have a hammer in your hand, everything looks like a nail. So

how would the world look to us if we hold a candle in our hand? This is the purpose of Chanukah: to educate us to find the light in everything and in every person, to see reality on a deeper level, to discover the secret within.

Rabbi Ya'akov Moshe Charlap explains that we must take this principle from Chanukah into the rest of the year: "These days, the eight days of Chanukah, which were set as days of praise and thanks, days of marveling – marveling at the sublimity of every *mitzvah*, at the majesty of sanctity, these days are the origin of all the marveling which we will experience throughout the year. Every marvel which brings with it greatness – stems from Chanukah." The ability to marvel and be excited about every point of light in the Torah, about every point of light during the year – is like a constant candle in our hand.

5 We have returned from our Miz-rachi *shlichut* in America. When our *shlichut* began, we were just out of it, especially during the holidays. Over there, it was not our party, not our celebration. At the beginning of our stay, we saw a pumpkin next to the front door of almost every house and scary costumes. Halloween, nice to meet you. Next, turkeys and a multitude of invitations to "Thanksgiving Dinner" that reminded us of "Where will you be going for the Seder?" And then the clerk in our local Target store told us: "From Black Friday through January 1st, we can only play Christmas songs. It's one of our rules." We did count a few *menorahs* displayed in front windows but they were minimal compared to the numerous reindeers, sleighs and trees.

Steven Spielberg once said how as a child he wanted to decorate his house: "Our house seemed like a black hole



in a neighborhood of light," he confided. "I begged my father to let us be like everyone else. I felt like a Jewish alien and was ashamed of who I was. I wanted to be a non-Jew with the same burning desire I had to be a movie director."

We painfully read these words, full of admiration for Jews throughout the generations who kept their identity with love, despite being a small minority within a flashy majority culture.

There is only one Land where the party and the celebration are all our own, only one Land that pulsates with a Jewish rhythm. Learn to appreciate it.

6 Israeli journalist, Oded Harush, published a text that goes against the macho perception in Israeli culture. It's worth reading:

"Did you ever think about what Shimshon HaGibor or Yehuda HaMaccabee looked like? Imagine them for a moment. Rambo? Hercules? There's a reason we imagine our heroes that way. When Chanukah was called the "Holiday of Heroism" over the years, it was referring to the culture of the spirit. To the war on Greek culture. But what is left of all this in Israeli culture? Greek culture, which sanctifies the macho man. Instead of fighting Greek culture, we inadvertently got sucked into it. Instead of expanding the concept of heroism, we reduced it

solely to military courage. No wonder we sometimes experience frustration with our heroes in Israeli society and are so desperate to find new ones.

So what is heroism according to the Torah? Very simple. The word גבורה (heroism) comes from the same root as the word להתגבר – to overcome. What do you overcome? Your instincts. And that is relevant for each and every one of us, because the war on our instincts is not just on the battlefield. It's in the "Black Friday" shopping craze, in line at the supermarket and even at home, between us and our children. And yes, it's also about inappropriate sexual behavior. Stories of heroism from the battlefield are necessary for every nation in its infancy, but it seems to me the time has come to expand the canopy to other types of heroism in Israeli society."

7 We sing, say *brachot*, eat, play and talk by the light of our Chanukah candles, but taking a moment to *daven* by the candles is considered a great thing. Time should be devoted to prayer as well. As the 19th-century Chassidic Rebbe, Israel Friedman of Ruzhyn, said of praying by the candles on the special day, the eighth day of Chanukah: *"The same action that the greatest tzaddikim of the generation cannot perform in the Neilah prayer on Yom Kippur, any simple Jew can ask and enact in front of the candles on the eighth day of Chanukah."*

8 At the end of Chanukah, some people greet each other with *gmar chatima tova!* The eighth candle of Chanukah is considered the conclusion of the entire period that began on *Rosh Chodesh Elul*, through *Selichot*, *Rosh Hashanah*, *Yom Kippur*, *Sukkot*, *Shemini Atzeret* and *Simchat Torah*. *Gmar chatima tova!*

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People do not win respect by insisting on the right to be respected.
Respect is earned: that is what makes it respect.

RABBI SACKS