

Yashar koach Hunter and Maggie! You have both taught us very important Torah here this morning.

Maggie, I was so moved by your words about forgiveness. How you tried to understand how Joseph could even consider forgiving his brothers who had caused him so much pain. And how you uncovered some of the primary ingredients of a person's ability to forgive. And your invitation to **us** to be brave enough to consider forgiveness for the ways we may have been hurt. For forgiving is something that takes courage and character and it's clear that you see that.

And Hunter, I really appreciate your agitation to our community, and to all people, with your question: when a person or a group of people attain to power . . . what is our responsibility in wielding that power? And, at the heart of your question, how will and should those with power act when it comes to people who have less power? What is the right thing to do, what is the compassionate thing to do?

Truly, you have both raised critical questions for the challenging times that we are living through. As I sat down to consider your ideas, I realized that tomorrow is the darkest and longest night of the entire year, and boy are we feeling it.

So as I make my way toward responding to your teachings, I want to start by sharing a text that I recently learned from my friend, Rabbi Esther Lederman:

Rabbi David Hartman, alav hashalom, asks a question about how we light our chanukiyah on Chanukah. He wonders: Why do we celebrate 8 nights of the miracle of light when the miracle didn't apply to that first day? So goes our story, the Temple had been ransacked and left in ruins and the Jews had come to rededicate it, but they only found enough oil to last for one night! As we know - the miracle was that it lasted 8 whole nights. But that means that the first night they lit it - was not a miracle - it was just lighting the oil that they had. So really, only seven of the eight days should be considered miraculous. Why do we light 8 candles, then, to signify the miracle? What was miraculous about the first day? So Rabbi Hartman taught that the miracle of the first day - was that our people were even willing to light the lamp in the first place.

All around them was destruction. Many of their people had died in the Greek army's attacks on them. The Temple was in ruins. They were living in the hills and caves for safety. It would be understandable if they allowed themselves to succumb to their despair, their anger, their exhaustion. But instead - they dared to believe that they could rise again. Not knowing how their story would end, they took a deep breath and with a great resilience and not a little defiance and a profound hope, they lit what oil they had and they chose to live, they chose light. The first candle - the one that was not a divine miracle at all, is arguably the most powerful miracle - the one that has the power to teach **us** what to do when our despair in the darkness threatens to crush us.

This week has been very difficult. First of all, as you likely know, there was a terrible antisemitic attack on Jews celebrating Chanukah on Bondi Beach in Sydney, Australia last Sunday. I truly

regret bringing such a horrible story into this joyful day, but it's important that we talk about what we do when such an awful thing happens to our people. And how to respond when we see that it also doesn't feel like an isolated incident. In recent days, we've seen two attacks on Jewish people in Crown Heights, there was an arson attack on the San Francisco Hillel, The White House Chanukah party hosted at least one prominent individual with deep ties to Holocaust deniers, and more. From the left and from the right, and this week, with tragic consequences, antisemitism is rising. It would be easy - and understandable - to feel crushed by our fear, exhaustion, and anger.

And yet, in the midst of it all, there are those who chose to light the light of that first night with the miracle of human resilience. In the midst of the Bondi Beach attack, a 14 year old girl, Chaya Dadon, decided not to let her very real fear crush her into despair. Seeing two small children out in the open, she ran from her hiding place and put her body on top of them, and saved their lives. Ahmed al Ahmed, a Muslim immigrant, instead of giving in and giving up to the hopelessness of the situation, jumped on and disarmed the gunman, at great risk to his own life. And every single Jew and Jewish adjacent family member who woke up the next morning and lit the Chanukah candles at home and in public throughout the world - who decided to keep living our out-loud Jewish lives and values, made manifest the miracle of the first night - and chose life and light in the face of despair.

And even as we hold the pain of our Jewish community, so we also carry the weight of other attacks on humanity this week. This past Thursday, the administration announced threats on hospitals to stop giving what can be life-saving gender affirming care to young people. And so now parents, some of our parents here at CBE, are understandably feeling crushed by the weight of their anger, fear, and exhaustion as they worry about how this will impact their children, the people they love most in the world. And yet here, too, we see the power of every parent and community (like ours) who will fight harder now to make sure that their children can be their whole beautiful selves. We see in their courage the miraculous light of that first night, the glow of their decision to not allow themselves to be beaten down by the darkness. But to choose to kindle the light of human resilience.

And we add to this weight of despair the shootings at Brown and MIT, the continued attacks on our immigrant neighbors, and more. And we add to the miracle of that first candle every person who has hugged their child close and pressed on the next day, and every person who has stood between ICE and a more vulnerable neighbor. And every human being who has determined that from their very real fear, exhaustion, and anger, they and we are going to light that first light anyway.

In fact, we see threads of this human miracle told in the story of parshat Mikeitz as well. Maggie, you saw this particular light in Joseph's decision to forgive his brothers. He has been abandoned by them, he has been betrayed by them. They broke his heart, separated him from his father, and tried to destroy his life. He has been enslaved and thrown in jail. And now finally, he has met them face to face. It would be understandable if he had succumbed to his despair, his anger, his exhaustion. But he is an inheritor, a progenitor, of our tradition. And so he

manifests the same light that is the first light of our chanukiyot. He decides not to give in or give up, but instead he draws them near to him and he forgives them. Maggie - you saw this in him - how against all odds, he chooses light and life with this miracle of human resilience. A decision to light the lamp in the first place. And it reunites and heals his whole family.

He seems to get this trait of resilience from his father. We find Jacob in this parsha with a decision to make as well. His family and his people are out of food because of the famine. The second in command of Mitzrayim, which he does not know is his own son, has demanded that his youngest child, Benjamin, come to Mitzrayim himself if they want food. And Jacob has to decide what to do. The commentator Rabbeynu Bachya, describes what's going through Jacob's mind at this time. He suggests that Jacob is reflecting on the suffering and despair from his own lifetime - remembering his struggles with his brother Esau, how he had to flee for his life, how he was betrayed by his father in law, how his daughter had been assaulted, how he had lost his beloved wife Rachel, and his most devastating loss, his grief over his son, Joseph, who he thought had died. Destruction and pain envelopes him. And now he has to decide what to do - whether to allow his anger, his fear, and his exhaustion to crush him, or whether to take another step toward life and light.

And what he does is truly incredible. Hunter, he steps into his own power and he decides what it means to be a person with power. He decides it means that he cannot give up and that he has to light that first miraculous light for others - his family is hungry, his people are hungry - so he lights the light. We see this in the words he utters.

He agrees to send Benjamin and he says: *ka'asher shacholti, shacholti*. If I am bereaved, then I will be bereaved.

Now, many commentators read these words as Jacob expressing unbounded despair. But RaMBaN notices something different. They reflect, he says, the words of Esther at her greatest moment of courage and resilience. Now we're celebrating Chanukah, but of course Esther recalls our Purim story. Haman is about to wipe out the Jews and Mordechai comes to Esther in the palace and tells her that she needs to take action now to protect the people. He says to her: perhaps it is for this very moment in history that you have attained to this position of power. And she answers: *v'cha'asher avadti avadti*, if I die, then I die. And then she stands up and goes to the king and saves the Jewish people. It is her words that Jacob echoes in his own as he decides to do the same. He has the power to save, and so instead of succumbing to his own despair, he, too, lights the light of the first night - acting with courage for all those who are counting on him.

This has been a time of great despair for undeniable reasons. Of sadness, of anger, of exhaustion. And tomorrow **is** the darkest and longest night of the year. **BUT** tomorrow is also the 8th night of Chanukah, on which our chanukiyot will be fully illuminated. And so we pray that in that glow, we can see clearly the call from our ancestors, the call from our neighbors who need us, too, and the tingling call from our own hearts - to refuse to succumb to the weight of

despair. And to choose instead life and light, to choose to light the lamp in the first place, as a miraculous act of human resilience and hope.

Maggie and Hunter, on this morning you have helped to remind us of the power we have to bring light in dark times. Yashar koach and mazal tov.