

# **The Beauty, Power, and Miracle of Your Light**

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## **Meditation and Prayer**

During these days of Hanukkah, increasing light of the menorah during this season of the deeper dark of longer nights ...

May the light without remind us of the light we carry within ...

The light we can join with others to guide us on our way ...

Toward the hope for better days, hope for healing, hope for kindness growing even as the light grows ...

As we pray, joining prayerful hearts for the health and well-being of our dear ones ... and of everyone ...

Prayerful hearts seeking healing, seeking justice, seeking peace.

## **Reading**

from *Seasons of Our Joy*, by Arthur Waskow:

The conflict is ... between apathy and hope, between a blind surrendering to darkness and an acting to light up new pathways. Sometimes the arena will be in outward action, sometimes in inward meditation. But always the question is whether to recognize the darkness – and transcend it.

The necessity of recognizing the moment of darkness is what we learn from seeing Hanukkah in its context of the sun and the moon. There is no use pretending that the sun is always bright; there is no use pretending that the moon is always full. It is only by recognizing the season of darkness that we know it is time to light the candles, to sow a seed of light that can sprout and spring forth later in the year.

Seen this way, Hanukkah can become a resource to help us experience our moments of darkness whenever they occur throughout the year – and strike new sparks.

## **Sermon**

The story of Hanukkah is an ancient one – the story of the victory of the Maccabees over those who were violently prohibiting them from worshipping as they wished ... and then, as the story goes, the miracle of enough oil for one day to light the sacred lampstand in their reclaimed temple ... lasting instead for eight.

Ancient story. But with messages that endure for all times, which means also for our time.

For each one of us.

For all of us together.

The title of my message today is “The Beauty, Power, and Miracle of Your Light”.

Not the beauty, power, and miracle of light ... but of *your* light.

I emphasize *your* since sometimes we may not feel as though we have much light at all (much less beautiful, powerful, miraculous light) to give, to share, or even to light our own way. And more of us might be feeling more like this more this year than ever.

As we know, December can be a very tough month for many, even in the best of times. And we are not living in the best of times. As the nights get longer, the darkness deeper, our own spirits may flag too, our own light, just when we need it most, begin to grow dim.

There are of course individual strategies to help us live through such times, to help us rekindle our own light. We can brighten our homes, get outside when the sun is high, listen to uplifting music, read inspiring poetry, and so on. Or, if we can, if it works for us, we can learn – as the reading suggested – to accept the dark as a place of rest and gestation, of deeper pondering and reflecting, with the faith that this will lead to a renewal of our spirit, rekindling our light.

In either case we would, it seems to me, do well to remember that we are not alone. Even if we are, as so many are, living alone and physically isolated during these days of pandemic, we would do well to remember that we are not alone.

Here I return to the image of the Hanukkah lights – each night one more candle... so, each night a brighter light because the light is shared among multiple candles.

True for us too, isn't it – even at a distance? At our Wednesday evening Vespers services on Zoom, many have been lighting their own candles in their own homes, as I light the candles in the Meeting House – and the image on the screen of a light in each separate square, together filling the screen, has been quite beautiful. For we have been together in spirit, sharing the light, even while physically separated... in some cases by hundreds of miles.

I know it lifted my spirits to see these candle-lights on my screen; perhaps it did for some of you too. Particularly because we knew that these were not just any pretty lights, they were the lights of those we know and care about – candle lights reflecting the light within each of us.

Separate candles, yet one community – something like the separate candles on one menorah. We are not alone.

Albert Schweitzer once wrote that:

At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.

Can you bring to mind a time when you felt that your light had gone out or grown dim ... and was rekindled by a spark from another person – reminding you that your light is beautiful, powerful, a miracle? I invite you to bring that time and that person to mind. Perhaps feel the spark again.

It can be as simple as someone having noted and named the sadness they see in your eyes. A teacher at my seminary, an eventual colleague, Harry Scholefield, now of blessed memory, did this for me one difficult autumn. My spirit lifted a notch, my light brightened a bit, simply because Harry had noticed my sadness and named what he saw. I have been ever grateful.

And I expect you can also bring to mind a time when you may have rekindled the light of another? I invite you to bring that time and that person to mind. Reminding you that your light shared with another *is* beautiful and powerful ... a kind of miracle.

A little more about the menorah in this regard. As you know, there are eight nights of Hanukkah and each night an additional candle is lit until on the eighth night all eight burn.

Ah, but what about that ninth candle? It is called the “shammash” – it is the attendant, helper, or server candle; and it is placed either higher or lower than the others. Its job is to light the other candles – it is, in other words, the only candle to do any work outside of simply casting light. And, as Rabbi Menachem Posner writes:

Though the shammash's primary function has been served once the candles have been lit, we don't extinguish the shammash. Instead, we set it in its place adjacent to the other lights, ready to "serve" in case a candle blows out.

Posner goes on to draw out a lesson for all of us from the role of the shammash, noting that we can each be ready to play this role for others, in the spirit of Albert Schweitzer's words.

So ... sometimes we are one of those eight candles, grateful for the helper candle, and sometimes we are the shammash, grateful to be able to help and serve others. This is how family works, how friends work, how community works, how life works.

Life is, to put it another way, a team sport! Even when we think we are alone. All the more important, actually, when we think we are alone, to remember that life is a team sport.

Hanukkah reminds us of this. For, as we've said, a major theme of the Hanukkah story has to do with the reclaiming of religious freedom, the freedom of the Maccabees to worship in their temple as they chose, and not to be forced to worship other gods. And it is very important to note – particularly in our hyper-individualistic culture – that it is *not* a story of seeking and gaining *individual* religious freedom only. No, it is the story of a people *together* seeking religious freedom as a community and then, freedom won, rekindling for the entire community the sacred lamps – the light – of their reclaimed and cleansed temple.

Our own Unitarian Universalist religious tradition names as our first principle the inherent worth and dignity of every individual person. But we don't stop there. Other principles have to do with supporting one another, with seeking justice for all, with world community, with the entirety of the web of life. Community on every level.

More important now than ever, don't you think?

Last March and April signs with the message "We'll get through this together" were ubiquitous.

Yet ... as we know, "together" fractured all too soon in all too many ways in our nation of hyper-individualism. We must reclaim "together" for the good of each and all, together across differences of color, ethnicity, religion, political party and opinions. We simply must, for the good of each and all.

It begins close to home of course, like so much.

Our Old Ship community, for example, like many other UU and religious communities of many faiths has, I believe, hung together beautifully. Perhaps not perfectly – what is? – but I'm aware of so many ways in which you have been reaching out to one another, staying connected in one way or another, keeping an eye on those who seem most vulnerable to loneliness, those whose flames might be flickering – each of us as best we can shamash for others.

In turn, may such communities as ours be a shamash light for the wider community, for our nation.

But it all does start with us.

May we, each and all, keep on, share the light, share the beauty, share the power of our care and our love – creating the saving grace of community, circles of light ever expanding.

Blessed be.

Amen.

## **Benediction**

The words of Rabbi Moshe Davis (1916-1996):

"A candle is a small thing.

But one candle can light another.

And see how its own light increases,  
as a candle gives its flame to the other.

You are such a light."

So it is. So may it always be. Amen