

## **Season of Miracle and Resistance**

*A Sermon by the Rev. Molly Housh Gordon*

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On Tuesday, December 16<sup>th</sup>, Jewish families across the country gathered to mark the first night of Chanukah and to celebrate the miracle of light.

Many told once more the story of the ancient Jews' persecution under Greco-Syrian emperor Antiochus, the desecration of their temple, the victorious rebellion of the Maccabees, and the rededication of the Temple with a day's worth of sacred oil that miraculously burned for the 8 days required for rededication.

Also on Tuesday, December 16<sup>th</sup>, Jewish protestors in 16 cities across the country participated in a first night of Chanukah march in solidarity with Ferguson, New York, and the rising movement declaring that Black Lives Matter.

The organizers declared it an evening of #ChanukahAction, and some drew a parallel between the ancient Maccabees fighting for their lives under the Greek Empire and contemporary African American resistance against an entrenched American system that kills and devalues black life.

Protestors carried signs and lit menorahs, many struggling to keep the flames lit on a blustery December night. Some lit the candles again and again, but would not let them stay out.

Chanukah is a celebration of the miracle of a light that just kept on burning. One sign read: "We celebrate the miracle of resistance that we will not let die."

The miracle of resistance.

The *miracle* of resistance.

The miracle of human hope kindling candles in the darkest night.

The miraculous flame of the human spirit that refuses to be snuffed out, no matter how low it may burn.

The miracle of human dignity refusing to be denied – even when temples are desecrated, even when bodies are brutalized.

There's a story Fred Rogers, our own neighbor Mr. Rogers, told about his mother. Whenever some particularly scary news would come on the television when he was a child, his mother would instruct him to look for the helpers. "You will always find people who are helping." She said.

I've been thinking about those words lately, but taking them slant. Right now, I am finding hope in the helpers, but I am also finding hope looking for the resisters.

In this time of torture and terror and struggle, I'm looking with hope at the millions marching together in non-violent resistance and sitting together in compassion all over the world – all those saying my life matters, and so does my sibling's life, and my neighbor's life, and the stranger's life, and even my oppressor's life.

I am inspired to new life by those souls whose light will not go out, who stand up and claim their lives where their dignity is being denied. My spirit takes flight with those who lift their voice in song even when singing is all that is left to them. All those who light lamps against the dark, not knowing how long their fuel will hold out.

Resistance can be as small as a defiant laugh or an angry tear. It can be as grand as an eight-day vigil of rededication with only a day's worth of oil. But it is always a miracle.

Every scrap of humanity that we claim in dehumanizing situations is a miracle. Every drop of oil fueling our human flame a miracle.

Resistance is the miracle of creativity and resourcefulness in the most deprived of times and places. It is creating a menorah from twisted metal spoons and thread and cooking fat in the midst of a concentration camp. It is crafting something beautiful even in the face of terror and hate and a human-made situation that is literally meant to kill you.

Resistance is the miracle of courage and hope in the face of clear danger. It is stealing spoons from the trash at great peril in that same camp, and daring to light a signal fire for hope even where hope is hunted and rooted away without mercy. Resistance is the commitment to preserve humanity even unto death.

Resistance is a miracle. Resistance is all around us.

Resistance is the small and the weak triumphing even amidst the great and powerful. It is the temple lamp burning bright even in the midst of the Greek empire. It is the human spirit limping on even when we are broken. It is the force of love entering the scene even through our brokenness.

Resistance is also the story of Love Eternal taking the form of a tiny, helpless baby, and confounding the powers of empire by aligning the Ultimate with the lowly and the weak. Resistance is also the unmarried Mary carrying and birthing a child society would judge illegitimate and naming him wonderful, precious, prince of peace.

It is a delicate thing, to put Chanukah and Christmas in the same sermon – especially given the ways that American cultural Christianity makes Christmas an omnipresent

national event from October to January and the general sense of cultural supremacy enjoyed by Christianity in our country.

I also don't want to draw too close a parallel, for, though related in heritage and in use of the Hebrew scriptures, they are of course different traditions, each with distinct and beautiful stories, rituals, beliefs and more. Inevitably I won't get their juxtaposition quite right.

But there is something about miracle of the light at Chanukah and the little baby at Christmas that both tell us a profound story of God's presence, or the power of Love, or the perseverance of the human soul, most especially in times of struggle and strife.

There is a beautiful and creative resistance in each story – a miraculous resistance to all that would seek to snuff out the unquenchable human spirit.

Indeed, reform Rabbi Howard A Berman writes of some of these themes, through his work with interfaith families. He points out that: "The faith in the miraculous power of God to change human history--to bring freedom and redemption - both political and spiritual - in the most unlikely circumstances--is at the heart of both narratives. This message is, indeed, the most profound link between the Chanukah and Christmas stories. Above all the parallels--and the contrasts--between the two festivals, both ultimately affirm the miracle of redemption ... of liberation and salvation ... of God's love ... and of the deliverance of humanity."<sup>1</sup>

Rabbi Berman continues: "This is a miracle we still yearn and pray for today--a time in world history that seems all too much like the first century two millennia ago. Humanity still lives under the yoke of oppression and of war--of the denial of freedom and liberty to so many people in our world. Chanukah and Christmas, both proclaim the promise of light in the midst of darkness... of life in the face of death... of liberation from all oppression... and of the hope for peace on earth."<sup>2</sup>

It was in a time like this that the Chanukah story blazed forth in light – a time of life and livelihood contingent upon the culture norms of the dominant and powerful – whether the forces of Greco-Syrian empire or the forces of white American capitol.

It was in a time like this that the Christmas story came singing peace on earth – a time of violence and fear: whether the slaughter of the innocents by an ancient Roman King in Bethlehem or the massacre of children by 21<sup>st</sup> century extremists in Pakistan.

It was a time like this that the lamp burned on in miraculous resistance.

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[http://www.interfaithfamily.com/holidays/hanukkah\\_and\\_christmas/Chanukah\\_and\\_Christmas\\_The\\_Deeper\\_Connections.shtml](http://www.interfaithfamily.com/holidays/hanukkah_and_christmas/Chanukah_and_Christmas_The_Deeper_Connections.shtml)

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

It was a time like this that the mighty trembled at the wonder of new life in a dusty barn.

It was a time like this that hearts broken by the world's brutality welcomed light in through every crack and fissure - when the miracle of human survival and spirit overcame the forces that would deny them.

It was a time of suppression that hearts rebelled. Rabbi Howard Berman tells us of the historical context of the stories. He writes: "The successors of Greek Emperor Alexander sought to impose Greek culture, language and religion on their subjects. In 170 BC, the Greco-Syrian ruler of occupied Israel, Antiochus IV, took over the great Temple in Israel and decreed that the most important observances of Judaism were to be prohibited. A rebellion broke out in the year 168 BC and despite daunting, overwhelming, indeed impossible odds, the rebellion of this small rabble against the greatest military forces of the time was dramatically and miraculously victorious. Three years later in December of the year 165 BCE, the Maccabees recaptured Jerusalem, drove out the tyrannical rulers and--significantly--on the 25th day of the Hebrew month of Kislev, rededicated the Sanctuary to the worship of the God of Israel." <sup>3</sup>

Rabbi Berman continues, regarding the context of Christmas: "But within a century, a far more powerful and cruel oppressor was to descend upon Israel--the ruthless power of imperial Rome. It was in the tumultuous years of the early first century BC, with the Maccabean spirit of resistance and rebellion against tyranny resurfacing once again among the people of the Roman Province of Judea, that the stage was set for the events surrounding the birth, life and death of Jesus."<sup>4</sup>

Throughout the history of empires that rise and fall, there has always been an alternative history of religious tradition, which exists at times more and at times less comfortably in the narrative of the empire at hand.

At their best, these communities of faith have provided an alternative narrative of solidarity and compassion and flourishing for all against the tendency of empire to consolidate power in the hands of the few. At their best, these traditions have created communities of resistance to life-denying regimes. They have declared the counter-cultural news of glad tidings and great joy for all people – of hearts made whole and human will unbroken.

Even today, when we are at our best, our faith communities call on us to build that new land, that alternative narrative of mutual thriving and compassion and living gently with the earth.

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

When we're at our best, our congregations are communities of resistance to politics that deny dignity; communities of resistance to systems of racism and classism that divide us from one another and rob us of our humanity; communities of resistance to the market forces of overconsumption to the detriment of the earth.

We are here, together to build that new land, the beloved community. To light the flame that will burn on and on, past all reason. To incarnate the love that calls us even beyond belief.

What does resistance look like today? It does not look like violence or vengeance, though it might look like grief and rage, sorrow and insistence on something better.

Certainly it looks like diverse people coming together in compassion and solidarity to proclaim the worth of lives that are being denied.

Resistance can even be feminist selfie, or a hashtag, heralding a powerful story - #yesallwomen #blacklivesmatter #bringbackourgirls.

Resistance is carpooling and opting out of the overuse of plastics, or choosing the vegetarian option.

It might be a stranger paying off all of the layaway bills at the local Walmart – a generous resistance to the market narratives of scarcity where every person fends for themselves.

Sometimes miraculous resistance is getting out of bed on a day when the weight of depression or anxiety rests heavily upon your chest – and sometimes it is not getting out of bed, but managing to survive.

Resistance might be choosing sobriety for the first time, or for the 365<sup>th</sup>.

It is singing, and hoping against hope, and the courage to live.

It might be as simple as loving who you love, freely and joyfully.

And resistance, too, is the human act of lighting candles in the long night.

Candles of joy despite all the sadness,  
Candles of hope where despair keeps watch,  
Candles of courage for fears ever present,  
Candles of peace for tempest-tossed days,  
Candles of grace to ease heavy burdens,  
Candles of love to inspire our living,  
Candles that will burn  
Beyond one day  
Beyond eight.  
Candles of miracle and resistance

that will burn all year long.  
Through all of our days.