

It is said that all Jewish holidays have the same theme, which can be summed up in these three sentences:

They tried to kill us.

We survived.

Lets eat!

Here we are on the last day of Hanukkah. To be honest I can barely remember celebrating Hanukkah on the Kibbutz when I was growing up. Purim wins for my most memorable holiday celebrations - After all, it had a teenage girl as the hero, we ate Hamentashen, and I got to dress up as a queen. Hanukkah always had that association with war, so I didn't really like it. Hanukkah is actually a minor Jewish holiday. However, there have been times in history when it has been a particularly important holiday. There is a Hanukkah song called Judah Maccabee by Safam. It starts off cute, the first verse is about a little boy playing, pretending that he is Judah, and the chorus says "No Syrian decree could make you bend your knee" The second verse seems amusing, his friends think he's strange, they don't see any danger, and the chorus repeats except "No Syrian decree" changes to "No Roman cavalry." Then you hear the third verse:

In the Polish underground I never made a sound while running through the forest late at night.

Just like Matthias' son, I knew the time had come, when I would need my courage to survive,

Oh! Judah Maccabee, how was I to see what you would mean to me?

No German infantry could make you mend your knee not Judah Maccabee.

Hanukkah was hugely important to Jews during the lead up to World War II when antisemitism was rampant across Europe. The holiday's import grew as the Nazi plan progressed, and it is easy to understand why. However, as I said, Hanukkah never resonated with me. That is, it didn't used to.

Then, two months ago, on November 8th, something happened that affected me profoundly. To be honest, the election shook me to my core. I think I have gone through every stage of grief, but acceptance. Shock, denial, anger, fear...My mood seemed to change daily until the depression hit. And it stayed. I am usually an annoyingly positive person, but this depression grabbed me and dragged me into a world of hopelessness that would not ease. In fact, every day, every tweet, every position filled, made me sink deeper. I still hear that voice in my head saying, "This is the greenwood, it will only get worse in the New Year."

To my surprise, the story of Hanukkah gave me some hope and courage, and after weeks at an emotional abyss, that feels like a bit of a miracle in and of itself. I'd like to use the miraculous number eight to share with you some of the why and how.

Number 1

I'll begin with the most obvious: I am a woman, and no different than all women I know, I've experienced some less than respectful treatment simply because of my gender. Some of these interactions went on for months and even years, but I'm going to share with you one that lasted only seconds. For my first job out of college, I found work in my neighborhood, and as I do today, I walked to work. There is a church on a hill, which has steps leading from its door all the way down to the sidewalk. One day as I walked, 4 men were standing on those steps, and when I walked by, the man standing on the lowest step grabbed my ponytail, and I came to an abrupt stop, my head jerking back. The man said something which I did not understand, but which caused the 3 men with him to burst out laughing. Then he laughed and let me go. I mention this because, today, decades later, I still remember how my mind raced with panic, thinking "what are they going to do to me?" I can still taste that thick sour ooze released inside my cheeks, I can sense the air getting stuck in my throat, and feel the wild slamming of my heart against my ribs trying to burst free. So when a man who made numerous misogynic comments, who freely judged, rated and insulted women based on their looks, and who bragged about sexually assaulting women by grabbing them, won our election I felt betrayed by my fellow Americans, devalued and insignificant.

Number 2

I have white privilege. As the mother of two black sons I am acutely aware of that privilege. My son Terry's birth father was born in the South in 1923. One of 11 children, he never had the chance to go to school. Instead, as a young boy, he went to work to help support the family. He grew up during the Jim Crow Laws and public lynchings. I thought we as a country had come so far. Our current president is a liberal, thoughtful and an extremely intelligent man, who is also black. This is the greenwood, and yet we still have racial profiling, racial inequality in our criminal justice system, and disturbing cases of police brutality. During these past couple of years we have actually needed a movement to remind people that "Black Lives Matter." My greatest fear with Terry now living away from home, is that he will wander away from his group home, or day program, as Terry is apt to wander. I'm not as worried about him being lost as I am about him being found. Terry is deaf, he will not obey instructions he cannot hear; he has autism, he will not react in a typical fashion if frightened. Those two traits are not immediately visible. What people will notice first is the color of his skin, and that will color how they interpret everything he does. James is now a teenager. All his life strangers have asked me where he is from because they view him as being "too black to be American." As if that is possible. I love these boys more than any two people in the world. They are my world, and I'm terrified for them.

Number 3

I consider myself a Jewish Unitarian Universalist. I grew up Jewish. My parents are Jewish. Most of my siblings are Jewish. Most of my nieces and nephews are Jewish. I have been asked how do I hide my horns. I have been called some rhyming names because of my religion. I have been told that I killed Jesus. Jews make up only 2 percent of the US population, yet according to the FBI, in 2014, of the anti-religious hate crimes in the US. 57% were anti Jewish. (The second largest group was Muslims at 16%). When swastikas started turning up in college hallways, businesses and a children's playground, when Stephen Bannon was named the new chief strategist,

when video showed crowds of people giving the Hitler salute and chanting “Heil Trump!” my insides shriveled. Then our new Ambassador to Israel was named. A man with extreme right-wing views, who vilifies pro-peace groups, and speaks out against a two-state solution which most Israelis and Palestinians support. I fear the ripple of hatred spreading not just in our country, but in the Middle East and the greater world. I fear the slaughter of Palestinians, people who have already lost too much. I fear the backlash of hatred against all Jews everywhere. I fear the never ending war in Israel/Palestine mushrooming into full out war. I am someone who has lived there during full out war. I have heard the gunfire. I have run at the sound of the air raid sirens. I have slept in bomb shelters. I can tell you that is no way for any person, of any faith to have to live.

Number 4

My great aunt, whom everyone just called “Auntie,” was an RN and the director of nursing at General Hospital in Portland Maine. She would help my father with his Latin and test his medical knowledge. Here is an example, “If you call the removal of excess growth from your appendix an appendectomy, and you call the removal of excess growth from your tonsils a tonsillectomy, what do you call the removal of excess growth from your head?” Auntie’s answer was, “A haircut.” Auntie lived her entire adult life with her partner, “Auntie Twa.” Together they raised Auntie’s five youngest siblings as their own. They never had the option of marriage. Next October, my niece Rebecca and her girlfriend Amy are getting married. They’ve been happy and excited. I’ve been happy and excited. Then suddenly, the state they are living in, Florida, became a red state. The vice president elect supports electroshock “therapy” as a means to change a person’s sexual orientation. Their community, which is still mourning the killing of 49 people in the Pulse nightclub, is hearing people say, “The time has come for more Pulse events.” The university where Amy is a graduate teaching assistant had several incidents of racial slurs and threats written on dorm walls. Rebecca and Amy are frightened, and I am frightened for them.

Number 5

I am the parent of children with disabilities. Historically, it is the disabled who are the first group of people to be resented and abandoned. This was true when the original Hanukkah story took place and ancient Greeks idolized physical strength and beauty. This was true during my childhood, when people with disabilities were kept separate from society, warehoused in institutions. Both my sons have cognitive, physical, and mental disabilities as well as life threatening medical conditions. They are the people Hitler labeled “useless eaters,” and “life unworthy of life.” Terry has a primary immune deficiency disease called hypogammaglobulinemia. He takes 12 prescription medications daily. James is having a cardiac catheterization surgery next month, and probably his next open-heart surgery this summer. Now, our president elect is someone who places a person’s worth on their physical beauty, uses the R word, ridicules the voice of someone who is deaf and mocks the movements of a disabled reporter in front of a crowd. This is not the man I want to make decisions about my children’s healthcare and treatment.

Number 6

I am 1/16th Abenaki. Don't know who the Abenaki are? That may be because, white man has been so successful in trying to eradicate them. There were once 40,000 Abenaki. By the 1990 U.S. Census there were only 1,549. They are best known for their victimization during the eugenics movement of Vermont. The state forcibly sterilized hundreds of Abenaki with the argument that less-evolved and less-civilized races would pose a biological threat to the American population.

The other historical event the Abenaki are known for is their role in the first Thanksgiving. Samoset was an Abenaki sagamore who spoke English. He was the first Native American to greet the Plymouth settlers. It was not lost on me in the weeks after the election, as we prepared to celebrate Thanksgiving, that we were also using tear gas, freezing water, dogs and rubber bullets on unarmed protesters at Standing Rock. If we do these things in the greenwood what will happen when the man who has millions invested in oil companies is president, a climate change denier runs the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Exxon/Mobil CEO is our Secretary of State?

Number 7

As many of you know, my husband is a peace and social justice activist who has travelled to war torn areas more than 10 times in the past two decades. He has many Muslim friends. People who have almost nothing, have offered him hospitality. In Baghdad on Missile Street (so called because it has been bombed so many times) his hosts invited him to sleep on their home's roof in 100 degree weather. In Palestine, Muslims have offered him tea and comfort, while watching their own olive trees and homes bulldozed for a wall. In Afghanistan, teenage boys have come to stand by Ken's side and argue for him after a machine gun was pointed at his chest. Ken's only complaint from his months away, has been that he goes there to work, and they won't let him, "No. Grandfather, you are our elder, let us collect the firewood to heat water for your bath." Photographs of these Muslim friends sit in frames in my bedroom and living room.

The level of Islamophobia currently in our country is making me feel physically sick.

Number 8

I have the privilege of having been born here. My grandfather, Henry Thielman did not.

He was the son of a Mennonite minister, born near the Ural Mountains of Russia. Between his 12th and 20th birthdays:

His father died

WWI plunged the family into dangerous poverty

The Czar abdicated and the country fell into chaos

His village was overtaken by armed bandits

He saw schoolmates and teachers murdered

The German army invaded, then left

The Red Army advanced and everyone in his village was forced to flee on foot
They returned but the White Army invaded his village
He was forced him to join and was sent on a death march
He survived, but was sent to the front
He contracted typhoid and was left for dead when the White Army deserted
His limp body was transported in a wheelbarrow and hidden in a woman's house
He was locked in a building with 300 other typhoid patients and denied food, water and heat,
He escaped
He fell into a coma
He recovered enough to go back to school, but
Was taken prisoner by the Soviet Secret Police
He was a POW of the Red Army, held in a room in which one prisoner was killed each day
Then, in a symbolic move on the anniversary of Bolshevik rule, Henry was among a small group of political prisoners released.
When he was 21 he traveled to Moscow, made contact with an outside group and with the aid of the Canadian Pacific Railway Co.
escaped Russia by train.

He was able to later get his mother, one brother and one sister out.

When my grandfather arrived in the US, he had few marketable skills, lacked English proficiency, and had no money. He would go on to receive his Bachelors, Masters and Doctorate degrees in mathematics and gain an international stature. When I see video of Americans screaming, "Go back where you came from." I think of him, and it hurts. What would have happened if he went back where he came from? Well, his brother Peter was taken by the White army and was never heard from again; His sister Lena and his eldest nephew starved to death after his brother-in-law was taken by the Soviet Secret Police, held for 6 years and then executed; His brother Kolja who chose to stay in their homeland, survived the revolutions, but when the Germans invaded during WWII he, along with his wife and all their children were sent to concentration camps.

My grandfather came here, and now I am here. I know many of you could write your own lists of fears and worries. You are not alone. I did not share mine with you to make you as depressed as I have been, but rather to let you know that I feel it too. When I tell you, there is hope, don't think it is some delusional, la-de-dah hope. I know how bad things are. I know how much worse they could get. Yet, I am going to tell you that I do have hope.

Here I am, after two months of dark, bleak, hopeless feelings, talking about hope. Why? Partly because Hanukkah came. This holiday about the refusal to submit to the religious demands of an empire, this holiday about the struggle against total assimilation, loss of culture and identity, and this holiday about the fight for political autonomy and self-determination. Hanukkah came, with the story of an old priest who persuaded his sons and friends to join him in trying to fight the Syrian army. It was crazy. It was impossible. It was

hopeless. There was no way this community could go up against a king, his laws and his army. But they tried, and even after Mattathias died they kept trying, regained their temple and relit the eternal flame.

Hanukkah came, and I started singing about a boy who at first thought his fight was a game, then found that his friends couldn't understand the danger. How could he possibly think there was any hope as the Nazi's advanced? And yet, he found his courage while running in the Polish underground.

Hanukkah came and I read my son his favorite book, about a traveler who is welcomed by villagers even though he has no money. He doesn't even have any of his own food. Yet he tries to go up against the goblins. The villagers are sure they will never see him again, but he tries.

I believe that things are only really hopeless when we stop trying. We must not allow ourselves to be paralyzed. As long as we try there is hope. If you currently feel like an elderly priest up against a Syrian king, a boy outrunning the Nazis, or a traveler facing the King of the Goblins armed only with hard boiled eggs and a jar of pickles, there is hope. I have seen that recent events have empowered people -people who might have been too meek or too polite in the greenwood- to now speak up, reject those hateful words and deeds, and protect their fellow humans. I've realized what happens when things get dark. People, good, courageous, conscientious people, might stumble, but then they light a candle. We can light candles, and the more candles we light, the brighter things will start to look. Happy Hanukkah.