

You may have already noticed that the Gregorian calendar is falling very early this year. (As it is said more conventionally, the Jewish holidays are falling very late.) One of the consequences is that this year, Hanukkah will fall at the very end of December, right after the winter solstice.

I know that it has been a difficult autumn. The meanness of this election season, the hatred that has been vocalized in the public discourse, has left many people dispirited and disheartened. It will take a little longer to get to Hanukkah this year, but I think it's appropriate that we'll kindle lights just after the shortest day of the year. We get to remind ourselves that more light and more warmth are indeed around the corner. But that's not all we do.

In the only Talmudic discussion of Hanukkah, in Masechet Shabbat 23b, the rabbis discuss the importance of the mitzvah of kindling the lights of the hanukkiyah. All of our other holidays have a great many mitzvot and practices associated with them. Hanukkah has just this one; we light the candles, and we put them in an easily visible window. This mitzvah is so important, according to the rabbis, "because of the mitzvah of publicizing the miracle."

Now what is the miracle that these lights symbolize? In the book of Maccabees, the miracle is that a small, zealous band of Jews could withstand the pressures of the Hellenizing empire, fight back against religious persecution, and win the right to maintain their traditions. The rabbis of the Talmud, not wishing to encourage a Jewish rebellion in the time that they were writing, spoke instead of the miracle of the oil for rededicating the Temple, oil which should have lasted only one day but instead lasted eight.

In any case, the lights symbolize the possibility of a miracle: the possibility that hopeless causes can indeed be won, the reminder that illumination is possible even in what looks like the foggiest, most frightening circumstances. We will get through the cold, dark times. And until then, we will kindle lights.