

Embrace Hanukkah's light, in spite of dark

When I was a child, the skyline absorbed me. As the sun surrendered to the night, I could glimpse from my window in the city of my birth, Lyon, a town bathed in — energized by — a different kind of *lumière*, light. I never feared this changing of the guard. Even in the darkest of days, I have always trusted God's presence and care.

The sun's momentary retreat revealed the elegance of the universe to me. And when there was stormy weather outside, battering our tiny shuttered apartment, I sometimes felt imprisoned by a kind of melancholy.

The great 11th-century French Jewish medieval commentator Rashi of Troyes suggested that the stars were created to pacify, accompany and warm the moon. The stars, when they glow brightly, seem like this guiding, clinging presence wherever you go.

I always will cherish the bond, the memories of my father taking me to the great outdoors, where time seemed to stand still as we marveled at the heavens. On evenings when heat transformed to chill, rather than return indoors, I would still gaze upwards trying to grasp the complex, higher purpose that emanated from above. My father, my faith elevated my ideals and modest sense of place in this world.

My father survived war and persecution. In my youth he seemed almost indestructible. Now as he is wracked by illness, each hour is such a precious commodity. I am by my father's side once again, this time around the clock, as his life flickers in hospice care. Every so often, the clouds lift, my heart breaking. I try not to crumble and brighten my smile; my father smiles back, and he reassuringly clasps my hand. Our family, separated by nations and oceans, is united, if only briefly, for the first time in a decade to say "je t'aime, papa."

The Jewish observance of Hanukkah, also known as "Chag HaUrim," the Festival of Lights, honors the Maccabees' purification and rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem on the 25th day of Kislev in the Second Century B.C.E. For 2016, the first evening of Hanukkah's observance fell on Dec. 24. In my family, the celebration always centered on the act of lighting the menorah and rekindling our Judaism. This year will be our final Hanukkah together.

Remembrance and light are common threads that link many peoples and faiths. Light is central to the identity of Lyon, and every December the city stages its own festival of lights, a powerful specta-

cle (whose origins can be traced to the 17th century) that pushes back against the cold temperatures and once symbolized the relief the people felt when the plague had passed.

Despair can easily darken our days if we let it. When I was deep in the throes of my rabbinic studies in London, my roommate Andreas died unexpectedly. He was a gentle scholar and fellow rabbinic trainee possessed by a certain *joie de vivre*. I miss my dear friend ever so much.

The last time I saw him, we were taking a break from our coursework. I recall him saying goodbye to me twice as he told me he had plans that evening. I never imagined he would not return home. We were left reeling by his disappearance. Scotland Yard declared that Andy's murderer was a "grave threat to the public and to members of the gay community, in particular." I learned the details during the course of the trial.

The man who took Andy away from us received life imprisonment.

One of Andy's favorite teachings hailed from the Book of Proverbs: "The soul of man is the candle of God (20:27)." Andy himself had this warmth and glow, beaming with joy from his love for Judaism. There is this light that exists in each and every one of us. It strengthens us. If we take this inner light we possess and share it with others, we can spark goodness. I will be forever grateful to my parents, my family and my friends for igniting this passion for Judaism. My father sacrificed so much so I could be here.

The Smithsonian houses a breathtaking Statue of Liberty Hanukkah lamp. Each branch of the lamp is fashioned in the likeness of the "Mother of Exiles," *La Liberté éclairant le monde* (liberty illuminating the world), the Statue of Liberty. The artist was an immigrant to this proud nation, deeply grateful for his sanctuary here. By keeping this work in the public eye, the museum has allowed his story to shine for all to see. May this vision of America as a place of harmony and acceptance never be extinguished.

We live in imperfect times. But like the Maccabees, we must have courage, be resilient and rededicate ourselves to our task at hand. Like the candles on the menorah, we must increase the light, effort and holiness. Like the passage of time in the skies, we can pay close attention to those we love, honoring the precious contributions they made on earth, and keep their hopes and dreams alive.

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