

Dear friends of Hillcrest Jewish Center:

A few days ago we celebrated Hanukkah, the festival of lights. We remembered the heroic fight of the Maccabees to expel the Syrian-Greek aggressors from the Land of Israel, the rededication of the Temple, and the miracle of the cruse of oil, which occurred after the liberation of the Temple in Jerusalem, in which a jug of pure oil that was to be enough to light the lamp for one day, lasted instead for eight days.

Who was the hero in the Hanukkah story?

For many, the first association is Judah Maccabee. Others will suggest Mattathias and his family, the Hasmoneans. Perhaps others will say the Jewish people in its entirety, or the women of that time, like Channa, the mother of seven children, who died a martyr for not bowing to a Greek idol. Some will point out that the real hero is God Almighty, while others might propose the simple Jew who found the jug of oil, or the High Priest who hid it.

I would like to suggest, without detriment to all the above good choices, that perhaps the real hero of the Hanukkah story is the simple anonymous Jew, who believed that one day, the nightmare of the occupation would be over, and that a day would come when laughter and rejoicing would be heard again in the streets of Jerusalem.

In the words of my teacher, Rabbi David Hartman: *"The miracle of the first day was expressed in the community's willingness to light a small cruse of oil without reasonable assurance that their efforts would be sufficient to complete the rededication of the Temple...The 'miracle' of Jewish spiritual survival throughout history...may best be described by our people's strength to live without guarantees of success and to focus on how to begin a process without knowledge of how it would end."*

2020 is over. Perhaps the worst year many of us can remember.

Now, who were the heroes in 2020, the year that we just left? The essential workers? Doctors and nurses? Trash collectors and mail deliverers? Nursing homes staff, shelf stockers? Yes, and yes, and yes. All of them and many more, including teachers and rabbis who needed to reinvent themselves, parents who juggled a remote job with four little children at home, and seniors who lived in isolation for almost an entire year. Couples who dreamt of a perfect wedding

and ended up with 10-people at their ceremony in a backyard, and mourners who couldn't say goodbye to their loved ones. The list goes on, and I am sure you can add your own heroes to the list.

Taking the above example from Hanukkah, and again, without detriment to all the above real heroes, I would like to suggest that perhaps the real hero of our COVID-19 story is the average person who pushes himself day after day because he or she continues to believe that 2021 will be a better year, that the solution is at hand, that a small cruse containing a vaccine dose will free us from masks and social distancing, from fear and isolation.

Truth be told, we are all tired. More than tired, we are exhausted.

However, if we are still standing, if we wake up every morning, get dressed, put one foot in front of the other and keep going, we are the real heroes of this pandemic. All of us.

May Hashem bless us with the gifts of strength, hope, and determination – with a better 2021 for all of us

Rabbi Manes Kogan