

Beth Chayim Chadashim

Drash by Rabbi Lisa Edwards

December 15, 2006 First night of Chanukah

A friend once said to me that the blessing we just recited - the shehekhiyanu -- thank you God for giving us life, for sustaining us in this life, for allowing us to reach this moment -- is her favorite blessing, not only because we so often recite it at happy times -- the first night of Hanukah, for example, or beneath a wedding canopy -- but because every time she says it she also imagines Jews throughout history who have been through horrifying times, life threatening times, difficult times and surviving, escaping, getting out by the skin of their teeth. She imagines them realizing they're safe and then nodding their heads as they recite shehekhiyanu v'kiyamanu v'higiyanu lazman hazeh. This blessing, she says, contains the whole history of Judaism -- the joyous times and the sorrows, the celebrations and the narrow escapes and just the moments when we stop to acknowledge something that might otherwise pass unnoticed and unnoted -- the first bite of the first peach of the season -- or something miraculous -- your child's first step, first word, first joke, your grandmother's 93rd birthday or her gentle death that brought her huge, loving family together to embrace and honor and exclaim over her long and loving life....

How do we combine tonight the topic of Darfur, a 21st century genocide, going on right now -- with a celebration of Chanukah? Our guest speaker, Sandra Joy Lipshultz, will be giving us her explanation during her compelling presentation that will follow our service tonight. We thank her for being with us tonight.

But I would remind us that Hanukah is always a mix of moods -- falling as it does at the darkest time of the year, celebrating, as it does, a dark time of Jewish history -- one of those difficult times, when not just Jews but Judaism itself was threatened with extinction.

I spent the first part of this week at the first ever conference of an organization called Rabbis for Human Rights. At first glance it would seem an unnecessary organization -- I hope you agree -- after all, aren't all rabbis for human rights? And yet there is a need, and it was incredibly inspiring even as it was dispiriting -- to gather with 150 rabbis and 50 rabbinical students in NYC to address the sorrows of the world today -- Darfur among them, and global warming, and torture -- nearly 170 countries in the world today, including our own, engage in some form of government sanctioned torture. We gathered deliberately on the eve of Hanukah and we began deliberately too last Sunday -- International Human Rights Day

Our teachers there reminded us why Hanukah: it is no coincidence that the Jewish festival of lights falls during the darkest time of the year, when the sun shines only briefly and 5pm can feel like midnight. Our teacher, Arthur Waskow, points to the very middle of the candle flame -- noting the dark spot within the flame, the darkness that gives way to light. We noted -- as many of us do each week when we light Shabbat candles -- the particular way that a flame can give birth to another flame and not itself be diminished. That more and more flames can bring light to the darkest corners of a room, of a heart, of a world where dark corners do indeed hide horrible events, terrible actions being committed, even as we speak, by human beings upon other human beings and upon the world God created. Our task as Jews is to bring light -- so that these actions might be exposed, so that we might find ways to stop them, to change our own behaviors where necessary as well as the behaviors of others. To bring light that might in turn bring warmth and vision and healing to a troubled world.

Next week – on the 2nd Shabbat of Hanukah and on its last night, we'll fill this room with dancing flames and celebrate with joy. But starting tonight and all this week, let us promise ourselves and each other that we'll spend at least part of this Hanukah – this festival of light and of dedication – to dedicating ourselves to tikkun olam – to helping repair in any way we can – our world so filled with heart break and brokenness.

Shehekiyanu, v'kiyamanu, v'higiyanu lazman hazeh – thank you God for giving us one another, and our tradition, and Your instructions, and our skills and our will to join in partnership with You to help heal what is broken in our world, even and always as we take time too to celebrate and love one another and the lives You have given us.

Thank you, God, for bringing us family and love and light, v'higiyanu lazman hazeh – thank you for bringing us to this moment.

The BARECU, the Call to Worship, is on p.21. Please rise if you are comfortable to do so. Tradition teaches us that, "Righteous people ... do not waste in this world even a mustard seed. They become sorrowful with every wasteful and destructive act that they see, and if they can, they use all their strength to save everything possible from destruction" (*Sefer HaChinuch* 529; 13th Century). From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia **Sefer ha-Chinuch** ("Book of Education", often simply **the Chinnuch**) is a Medieval text, published anonymously in 13th Century Spain, which systematically discusses the 613 commandments of the Torah.

Each of the 613 commandments is described with the concept of the *mitzvah* and its Biblical source, the philosophical underpinnings of the commandment, and a brief summary of the halakha (practical Jewish law) governing its observance.

Some scholars ascribe the authorship of Sefer ha-Chinnuch to Rabbi Aharon HaLevi of Barcelona (1235-c. 1290), a Talmudic scholar and halakhist<sup>[1]</sup> <sup>[2]</sup> <sup>[3]</sup> but others disagree, as the views of the Chinnuch contradict opinions held by HaLevi in other works.