"Banish the Darkness"

Lighting Hanukkah candles from a hospital bed is not my idea of a fun holiday. But on Hanukkah of the year 2000, 14 years ago, I had no choice. I was 26 weeks pregnant with Ellie and had gone into pre-term labor. Since I had delivered Rebekah very early at just 25-1/2 weeks, the doctors were trying to prevent another pre-term delivery. The two weeks in the hospital were difficult, to say the least. I was having contractions every few minutes, and I was on some serious medication with troublesome side effects. I was worried about the pregnancy and the health of the baby. I was so sad that I couldn't be with my four-year-old Rebekah all the time. And when Hanukkah arrived, I had to celebrate it in the hospital.

Hospital staff don't really like when patients light candles in hospital rooms – something about oxygen being flammable or something like that. But that didn't stop my persistent family (even my mom, who was a nurse and knew better). Each night of the holiday, Harvey, Rebekah and my parents brought in a *hanukkiyah* and candles so that we could all light the candles together. Rebekah would lie next to me on the bed, and everyone else would stand close by. We lit the candles together, sang the blessings and some songs, and even opened a gift or two. This traditional ritual, carried out in a non-traditional setting, brought me light during a time that otherwise felt quite dark.

Darkness can be frightening for those who are healthy as well as those who are sick. Children are often afraid of the dark; after all, the monsters only come out in the dark. For someone who is sick, cold symptoms seem to worsen at night, and fevers tend to spike in evening hours. Our tradition even acknowledges that nighttime is difficult for one who is sick. The Talmud teaches that one should not visit a patient in the hospital too late at night, because it might be too demanding on the patient. The dark brings with it a sense of mystery, uncertainty, apprehension and fear.

Hanukkah falls on the 25th of the Hebrew month of Kislev, at a time when the days are shortest and often coldest. Some surmise that the Syrian Greeks chose this time of year to desecrate the Temple precisely because it was a time of darkness. Perhaps it was easier to attack under the cover of darkness. The Maccabees then rededicated the Temple and brought their light into the dark. As we know from the story of the oil that lasted eight days, the light burned brightly even longer than expected. Our people's temple and traditions were restored, and today we celebrate that light each time we light our candles.

As a rabbinic student, I worked as a hospital chaplain at UCLA Medical Center. I recall bringing a *hanukkiyah* (this time electric, not candles) into patient rooms and lighting candles with them. These are some of my favorite memories from that time, as I remember how meaningful it was for patients to light candles on the holiday. I remembered what it was like to lie there in bed and not be able to celebrate the holiday

at home. And I remembered what it was like to feel darkness and to have someone bring in some light.

Lighting candles and experiencing the glow of that light is a warm and beautiful tradition; bringing that light to someone who exists in darkness is an even greater tradition. Not only is this an act of kindness and compassion, it is a *mitzvah* (commandment). A Jewish saying teaches that light without *mitzvah* is like a lamp without oil. In other words, even though someone may have good intentions to bring light to another person, concrete action is necessary to ignite the flame. Good intentions don't bring light into the world; only action can do that. You can care a lot about someone or something, but unless you take action, there is no impact.

Perhaps this Hanukkah, you can bring light to someone who is living in darkness. Maybe you know someone who is sick, someone in the hospital or at home, someone recovering from surgery, someone who recently lost a loved one, someone who is sad, or someone who is alone on the holiday. Bring a *hanukkiyah*, light candles together, sing a song or two, spin a *dreidel*, maybe even bring a gift. Scare the monsters away – banish the darkness for someone who is seeking the light of friendship, company, or comfort.

A Hanukkah song that is popular in Israel begins "*Banu choshech l'garesh.*" It is more poetic in Hebrew, but the English translation reads:
> "We came to banish the darkness,
> In our hands is light and fire.
> Everyone's a small light,
> And all of us are a firm light."

Each person can bring a little bit of light; together, we can bring so much light to others that we light up the universe.

My two girls, healthy and happy at ages 18 and (almost) 14, bring me more light than they will ever know. But I also will never forget the people who brought light into my hospital room just 14 years ago, during a time of fear and uncertainty.

Harvey, Ellie, Mom and I wish you and your family a Hanukkah filled with light and love. Hanukkah sameach – happy Hanukkah!!