

The Chanukkah Light Unseen: Dedicating Ourselves to the Unwritten, Miraculous Future



*Editor's Note: This is an essay by **Risa Dunbar** which was originally published in the All That's Left 2023 Chanukkah Reader, "Rededication." ATL writes that this collection is meant to reject the weaponization of Chanukkah that is used "to justify (and even celebrate!) militarism, Jewish chauvinism, and the violent oppression of Palestinians," and instead "(re)construct a Judaism committed to liberation." The Hasidic source that Risa draws on to do this is attached below in Hebrew and English. Read the other seven essays in ATL's incredible reader [HERE](#).*

Chanukkah is a holiday of exceptions. It is the latest historical holiday to be established, and unlike almost every single other holiday in Jewish tradition, does not appear in the rabbinically canonized masoretic text called *Tanakh*. Instead, the story of *Chanukkah* is recorded within First and Second Maccabees, texts which are included in some manuscripts of the Septuagint — a Greek-language translation of the Hebrew Bible originally compiled around the mid-3rd century B.C.E — and also considered by the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches as a canonical part of the Hebrew Bible. *Purim* is the only other significant holiday that was rabbinically established and whose observance is not mandated by the Torah. But, even the holiday of *Purim* has a text included in the *Ketuvim* (Writings) section of the *Tanakh* that is central to the holiday, called *Megillat Esther* (the scroll of Esther). While *Chanukkah* later had a *megillah* associated with it called *Megillat Antiochus*, written in the late sixth or early seventh century C.E.,¹ it is also not a canonical Jewish text. *Chanukkah* is unique in its lack of a primary text, and even its minimal presence in rabbinic literature where it is discussed in a mere few pages of the *Talmud*.² **What significance is there in seeing the holiday of *Chanukkah* as the only one of our stories that is 'unwritten'?**

Rav Tzadok HaKohen Rabinowitz of Lublin (1823-1900), a Polish Rabbi of *Chasidism*, identifies *Chanukkah* as a celebration of all of the miracles that "cannot be written down": the miracles that have not been fully actualized and revealed, but that accompany us throughout the Jewish peoples' prolonged period of exile all the way until our ultimate bright and miraculous fate of redemption.³ In Rav Tzadok's *Chasidic* work the *Resisei Lilah* (lit. Dewdrops of Night), a collection of insights on Jewish holidays (especially *Purim* and *Chanukkah*) and the development of Oral Law, he says,

¹ RJ Zwi Werblowsky and Geoffrey Wigoder, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997), 613.

² Shabbat 21a, Shabbat 21b, Shabbat 22a, Shabbat 22b, Shabbat 23a.

³ Tzadok HaKohen Rabinowitz of Lublin, *Resisei Lilah*, 57:3.

The miracle of Chanukkah...is the only one of the miracles that was not allowed to be written [but] was [nonetheless] established for all generations. This is because the miracles that were not allowed to be written down have yet to be revealed in their full manifestation, and it is impossible to establish every one of them for all generations. But the miracle of Chanukah is the sum total of all the miracles throughout the period of exile...⁴

For Rav Tzadok, a miracle that is “committed to writing” is a fully manifested miracle— like that of the story of our sacred Temple’s oil that lasted eight nights when the amount appeared to only be enough for one. Fully manifested miracles are obvious to the human eye: it is the light that we can see. Hidden miracles, however, are the “unwritten” miracles, the light we cannot see.

In his Pulitzer prize winning novel under this title, “All The Light We Cannot See,” author Anthony Doerr tells a story of hope, destruction, moral conflict, and resistance exploring the lives of two people during the Second World War. The novel follows a blind French girl named Marie living in Occupied France, and a young German soldier named Werner, thrust into the German army at a young age because he is a radio engineering genius. The novel offers us a glimpse into the French Resistance, specifically in the occupied city of Saint Malo, and the simultaneous destruction and hope that come in times of war, as revealed in the quote “the most important light is all the light we cannot see.” When asked about his title, Doerr explained that it refers to both

...all the light we literally cannot see: that is, the wavelengths of the electromagnetic spectrum that are beyond the ability of human eyes to detect (radio waves, of course, being the most relevant). It’s also a metaphorical suggestion that there are countless invisible stories still buried within the Second World War — that stories of ordinary children, for example, are a kind of light we do not typically see. Ultimately, the title is intended as a suggestion that we spend too much time focused on only a small slice of the spectrum of possibility.⁵

In the words of *Chanukkah*, we might say that all the light we cannot see is the unwritten miracles of both our time and the time to come. **It is not easy to find if you do not know how and where to look, but that does not mean it isn’t there.**

Though of course a different time and setting than the novel, living in a time of war here in Jerusalem has meant, for many of us, a narrowing of our world: some of us do not go far outside of our neighborhoods, and we limit our social interactions to those with whom we are most at ease politically and socially. So things begin to feel both too small and too far away, both of which hinder our ability to truly see.

Further, those of us Jews who oppose the war find it becoming more and more dangerous for our Palestinian partners chiefly (though also for ourselves) to speak out against this war, let alone The Occupation as a whole. This has meant that the light of resistance feels farther and dimmer because those pockets of resistance are happening in the shadows as much as possible to preserve peoples’ safety.

Yet, despite their undetectability, they are most certainly happening, sparking and sustaining real relationships and causes for justice and solidarity. Over the past week alone people have put up posters and stickers at 3 a.m. around Jerusalem demanding a recognition of Gazans’ humanity and a diplomatic solution to this war. There are Jews from Jerusalem and Tel Aviv and other cities across Israel taking overnight protective presence shifts in Palestinian

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Anthony Doerr, “All The Light We Cannot See: Q & A | Further Reading,” 2021. Accessed via <https://www.anthonydoerr.com/all-the-light-we-cannot-see>

villages under severe threat of Settler violence. Thousands of dollars have been raised through international fundraising for villages where people cannot leave to retrieve food and supplies for fear of harassment or because of roadblocks. People in solidarity together are forging and maintaining their relationships through shared photography, writing, and media projects, and shared meals even when food and water are harder to find. **These are some of the lights we cannot see, the miracles of our days.**

The word *Chanukkah* itself can also assist us in cultivating a deeper sense of vision that is absolutely vital for a sustained commitment to a redeemed world. *Chanukkah* literally means “dedication,” traditionally understood to be a reference to the victory of the Maccabees regaining control of the Temple in Jerusalem from the Greeks, and (re-)dedicating it for Jewish worship. But this is not the central point of dedication: the Temple mattered because of what it allowed us to do, which was to live freely as Jews, to serve and be in deep partnership with our G-d, and to envision a redemptive reality for our people.

This holiday does not need to be a time of thinking about re-dedicating a place within the framework of militarism and conquest; rather, it is a time of dedicating ourselves to the unwritten story of this place, the unwritten future that we get to participate in making. What might happen if we do not rush past suffering as though it is separate from miracles, but instead honor our ability to be moved, to grieve, to admit that we are heartbroken and angry, and let those deeply human moments be part of the miracles of our time that lead us to envision more, perhaps different, miracles to come? We have the blessed opportunity to gaze into the candles for eight nights, and to be reminded that just as the candles are never alone even on the first night, “rarely, if ever, are any of us healed in isolation. Healing is an act of communion.”⁶ We have the power to see in the candles’ collective light the power of our own collectivity, and to cultivate ourselves as witnesses of the light that is yet to be seen. *Chanukkah* is unwritten, so it is ours to make, ours to see, and ours to tell of. Let us (re)dedicate ourselves to trying to see the unseen miracles, to imagine and commit to miraculous possibilities as a liberatory strategy, and together, in solidarity and deep care, illuminate a redemptive future together.

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All That’s Left is a collective unequivocally opposed to the Occupation and committed to building the Diaspora angle of resistance. Read the other seven essays in their incredible reader [HERE](#).

Rav Tzadok HaKohen Rabinowitz of Lublin (d. 1900), *Resisei Lilah* 57:3.⁷

<p>The miracle of Chanukkah...is the only one of the miracles that was not allowed to be written [but] was [nonetheless] established for all generations.</p>	<p>ועל כן נס דפורים ניתן לכתוב והוא סוף כל הנסים (יומא כט)... והוא ההכנה לנס דחנוכה שהוא לבדו מהנסים שלא ניתנו לכתוב שנקבעו לדורות..</p>
<p>This is because the miracles that were not allowed to be written down have yet to be</p>	<p>כי הנסים שלא ניתנו לכתוב אין להם התגלות...</p>

⁶ bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York, NY: William Morrow, 2000), 215.

⁷ Translation from Sefaria.

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But the miracle of Chanukah is the sum total of all the miracles throughout the period of exile...

בפועל עדיין ואי אפשר שיקבעו לדורות כל אחד בפרט. רק נס חנוכה הוא כללות כל הנסים דעת הגלות שלא ניתנו לכתוב, שיש בו קביעות לדורות

...
הוא הולך ומתגלה בכל פרטי הכחות בכל זמן המשך הגלות