

I'm dreaming of a white Rosh Hodesh Tevet! Indeed, just as the deepest winter month begins, the weather cooperates. Yes, it's going to be a long cold dark month. But most of the Hebrew month of Tevet, which begins today, falls after the winter solstice -- so the seeds of our redemption are planted right at the darkest time of year.

Today, in North African Jewish tradition is Chag HaBanot, the Festival of the Daughters. Every Rosh Hodesh is considered something of a women's holiday, and the one that falls late in Hannukah is especially so. This honors Channah, the mother of seven who supposedly let her children die rather than have them bow down to a Greek idol -- and Judith, the wily warrior-heroine of the Apocrypha, whose original story is set centuries earlier but whose memory is ever linked with the Festival of Lights.

Redemption will come in our time only when people are acknowledged in their fullness, and constrained by nothing but their own intellect, skill, and goodness. Redemption will come when women are half or more of the highest office-holders -- when people of color finally can fully flourish amid equality -- when every historically underprivileged group knows their collective identity only as a birthright, not as a burden. Chag HaBanot, today's "Festival of the Daughters," offered a taste of this redemption even within highly patriarchal societies. May we build on its legacy of empowerment and equality, and take its promise to new heights.

That's day one of Tevet. By the third day, the nightly lights will have ended. Can we do something about the darkness, even after festival? Can we somehow conserve some of the light of that full Hannukiyah early in the month, and let it continue to warm us through the chilly weeks and months ahead?

Shammai, the frenemy of Hillel in the early Mishnaic era (first century BCE), thought that we should light all eight candles on the first night, and count down over the festival, rather than building up. He was onto something: how can we make ourselves ready for, and not get too thrown by, the diminution of the light? How can we cultivate our own inner lamps, and prepare to help those to shine, instead? "Don't curse the darkness; light a candle." And after the candle burns out, *BE* the light.

Tevet will take us past Solstice, and through Christmas (which this year falls on the Tenth of Tevet, a minor fast day commemorating the siege that would bring down Jerusalem in 587 BCE) -- and into the New Year. It will quickly leave Hannukah behind, yet it will almost bless us to keep its themes of hope and light lifted high, long after the holiday itself. Indeed, may we all nurture Hannukah's optimistic spirit, and its promise that freedom will yet be earned after our privation and our struggle.

The Maccabees had to bring down the mighty Seleucid army, waging a four-year war, before the promise of divine deliverance was realized, and they could rededicate the Temple. And us? All we have to do is stay out of the hospital by wearing masks, limiting exposure, and not flagging in our physical distancing -- for maybe the next four months or so, until the promise of widespread vaccination is realized, and the all-clear signal goes out. We can do this! Let's get Maccabean on the coronavirus.

May light, and joy, and health, and meaning be ours -- all throughout Tevet, and beyond.

-- Rabbi Fred