

From: <http://www.ascentofsafed.com> Story #1201 (s5781-13) 28 Kislev 5781 (Dec. 2020)

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The Menorah vs. the Swastika in Nazi-Era Germany

This year, starting on Thursday night, December 10 [Kislev 25 on the Jewish calendar], and for the next seven nights, millions of Jews around the world will light a *menorah* to celebrate Chanukah. Akiva Mansbach will be one of them. But his isn't just any *menorah*. In Kiel, Germany, in 1932, his great-grandfather (for whom he is named), Rabbi Dr. Akiva Posner, and his wife, Rachel, lit this very *menorah* and placed it on their window sill. Directly across the street was a Nazi flag.



One of the essential components of Chanukah is “*perumei nisa*” -- publicizing the miracle — the miracle of the triumph of a small band of Jews, the Maccabees, who led a revolt and conquered their Seleucid persecutors 2185 years ago, and, as tradition has it, the primary miracle of when the Holy Temple was being rededicated and its golden *menorah* lit, although there was only enough oil to last for one day, the small supply miraculously burned for eight.

The Talmud contains detailed guidelines of how to publicize the miracle, with extensive commentary on where the *menorah* would be most visible to people walking by. The rabbis also discussed foot traffic in marketplaces: They wanted to make sure that people lit their candles when pedestrians were flooding the streets.

There's one more crucial detail the rabbis insisted on: In a time of danger, the lighting of the Chanukah candles can take place inside one's home, on one's table, away from the gaze of the hostile outside world.

But this escape clause didn't suffice for the Posners. In 1932, just before Hitler's rise to power, their *menorah* shone brightly for all their neighbors to see. Its light — and the meaning behind it — was made all the more incandescent given the symbol of Jew-hatred hanging from the building across the street.

The poignancy of the juxtaposition didn't escape Rachel Posner. She took a photograph of the menorah and the swastika. On its back, she scribbled in German, “*Death to Judah,*’ *the flag says, ‘Judah will live forever,’ the light answers.*”

Rabbi Posner, Rachel and their three children left Germany in 1933. Rabbi Posner managed to persuade many of his congregants to leave as well. They

immigrated to the Holy Land (then called Palestine) in mid 1935, where Rabbi Posner worked first as a librarian for the Mizrachi Seminar and then became the head librarian of Hechal Shlomo.¹

For 51 weeks of the year, the *menorah* belongs to *Yad Vashem*, Israel's Holocaust museum in Jerusalem. But each year, right before Chanukah, the family takes the *menorah* back and puts it to good use.

I spoke by phone with the Posners' great-grandson, Akiva Baruch Mansbach, who lights the *menorah* every year. The significance of lighting it in his home in Beit Shemesh, Israel, so many decades after his ancestors lit it as an act of resistance, does not escape him. "The same light that my great-grandparents lit in the exile in Germany is the light that so many light today in Israel," he told me. "It demonstrates the continuity of Jewish history."

"Whether it's the Greeks on Chanukah or the Nazis in Germany, they want the same thing — to destroy the nation of Israel,"² he added. The *menorah* symbolizes our strength and continuity, the idea that our nation is strong and will conquer all its enemies."

On where that strength resides, Mr. Mansbach was unambiguous. "Until 70 years ago, we had no true home," he said. "That ended with the establishment of the state."

Maybe so. But many Jews still live in the diaspora, including more than six million here in America. Even now, we are lucky to live in a place where what constituted an act of defiance for Akiva and Rachel Posner can exist here as a quotidian exercise of religious freedom. But as the Chanukah story also reminds us, that freedom can vanish almost overnight. In this year more than most, it needs to be defended against the old-new bigotries that would extinguish its light.

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Source: Adapted and supplemented by Yerachmiel Tilles from a stirring article by **Daniella J. Greenbaum**, then assistant editor at Commentary Magazine, on // **NYTimes.com** on December 12, 2017, as reprinted in *Shabbat Stories for the Parsha* (keren18@juno.com).

**Photo Credit:** Shulamith Posner-Mansbach/United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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<sup>1</sup> This sentence is from the website of the *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*.

<sup>2</sup> **Not exactly.** True, the goal of the Nazis was to destroy us mortally, but the Greeks' primary intention was to destroy us spiritually by uprooting Torah from the nation. That's why the primary celebration is for eight days instead of one (as is the Purim celebration of the battle victory against their Persian enemies -- and also the State of Israel's *Yom Atmiut* commemoration of the 1948 War of Independence), and centers on the *menorah* and not on the war victory.