Rosh Hashanah 5776

*Darkness Into Light*

By Rabbi Ken Chasen

What a gift it would be if we were able to engage in the powerful self-work of reflection and repentance of the Days of Awe without distraction. However, most of us feel so consumed by our busy lives that scant time remains for attending to the content of our souls. And then there is the condition of our world, which kindles in us a disturbing sense of futility. We see the ever-growing injustices of hunger and homelessness and racism...the trampling of human rights and human dignity...the subjugation of young women. These scourges are spreading everywhere, from our own city streets to the most remote corners of the globe.

At times like these, it is tempting to surrender to feelings of hopelessness. What, we wonder, can we possibly do to stem the tide of injustice all around us? In attempting to answer that question, especially at this time of year, I am reminded of a story found in the Jerusalem Talmud: The Jews approached the prophet Isaiah in a time of great darkness, asking, “Our master Isaiah, what will come for us out of this night?” Isaiah replied, “Wait until I ask.” After seeking an answer from God, Isaiah returned to them: “God said, ‘The morning comes, and also the night.’ There will be morning for the righteous, and night for the sinful.” They demanded to know when. Isaiah replied, “When you wish it, God will wish it. If you desire it, so, too, will God.” Exasperated, the people asked, “So what stands in the way?” Isaiah responded, “Your lack of repentance. Return...come...”

If the prophet is right, all is not lost, no matter how dark the night may seem and how vast the injustice in the world may appear. The words and deeds of repentance that will fill the coming High Holy Days have a potentially transformative power on us—both through our prayer and through our actions. By reshaping ourselves, we chip away at the massive task of reshaping humanity and the world that is in our care. Our prayers and reflections throughout this season of the High Holy Days are surely not enough, but if they mobilize us to take action to effect change in ourselves and in the world, then there is hope that humankind as a whole may soon be capable of moving permanently from darkness into light, one act of justice at a time.

My own great-grandmother, whom we called Bubbie, achieved such a transformation. While she was alive, I thought of her simply as the little old lady with the Eastern European accent in our family; but when I finally learned her story after she had died, I discovered that she had overcome a seemingly insurmountable obstacle in her youth.
Ken Chasen is Senior Rabbi of Leo Baeck Temple in Los Angeles. He is an outspoken commentator and author on a wide variety of subjects pertaining to Jewish life and an activist in support of issues such as immigrant rights, affordable housing, environmental sustainability and Israeli-Palestinian coexistence. Rabbi Chasen’s writings have appeared in a wide variety of national and international publications, including the Los Angeles Times, The New York Times, Chicago Tribune, Variety, Reform Judaism and The Jewish Journal. In addition, he serves on the adjunct faculty of the Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion, and he is a nationally-recognized composer whose original liturgical and educational works are regularly heard in synagogues, religious schools, Jewish camps and sanctuaries across North America and in Israel.

Background on Child Marriage
Annually, 14 million girls around the world are married before they turn 18. Child marriage—also known as early or forced marriage—deprives adolescent girls of the freedom to make informed and independent choices about their lives, relationships, education, economic pursuits and bodies. Many parents view child marriage as the key to obtaining future security for their daughters, often not realizing that they will be more likely to drop out of school, experience domestic violence, live in poverty or die in childbirth.

AJWS’s Response to this Issue
AJWS supports local and national organizations that are working to end the practice of child marriage in India, a country that is home to one-third of the world’s early marriages. This effort emerged from AJWS’s more than 15 years of experience supporting Indian social change organizations working to achieve equality for women and girls. These groups are engaging adolescent girls and their communities to address the root causes of the practice, including gender inequality, poverty and limited sexual health education. Last fiscal year, we supported 34 grantees for a total of $1.8 million in grantmaking in this area. This includes 24 local organizations, five national organizations and five research organizations. Visit our website for background on AJWS’s approach to child marriage and stories from our grantees in the field.
About this Publication
This essay is part of American Jewish World Service’s Chag v’Chesed (“Celebration and Compassion”) series. Written by prominent leaders in the Jewish community, Chag v’Chesed draws on teachings from the holidays to inform our thinking about Judaism and social justice. AJWS is committed to a pluralistic view of Judaism and honors a broad spectrum of interpretation of our texts and traditions. The statements made and views expressed in this commentary are solely the responsibility of the author. To subscribe to Chag v’Chesed, please visit [www.ajws.org/cvc](http://www.ajws.org/cvc).

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