



BURNING CANDLES, IGNITING CHANGE: A CHANUKAH REFLECTION AND CALL TO ACTION

BY ROBERT BANK, AJWS'S EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT

This piece is part of AJWS's Chag v'Chesed Publication Series.

Every December when I light the Chanukah candles, I'm transfixed by the light. The candles flicker and dance in the window where I place our menorah, and my partner Alan and I enjoy their radiance. I have always felt warmth and joy looking at the menorah's light, but a few years ago, this moment took on new meaning.

At a meditation retreat led by the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, I was invited to watch each candle burn down—from the first brilliant spark to the moment the last flame disappeared. As I watched them shine, my mind turned to those who inspired me to make our world better that year. This profoundly changed my experience of Chanukah. Now, each year, as I light my candles, I set an intention to do more to pursue justice and to support others who are bringing light to those suffering around the world.

This Chanukah, I invite you to join me. When you light your menorah, take a moment to pause and reflect in its light. Ask yourself, *who inspires you to stand up for change? How can you act now to make a difference?*

This year, I will be dedicating my nightly Chanukah meditation to extraordinary individuals whose courage and passion in the face of profound injustice inspire me to renew my commitment to repair the world. Like the Maccabees, who more than two millennia ago used a tiny flask of oil to illuminate their menorah for eight days, the contemporary freedom fighters whom AJWS supports make the most of limited resources to change lives, communities, nations and the world.

This Chanukah, let us all come together around the hopeful glow of our menorahs and gain inspiration from their stories for a year of action that will lead to profound change.

On the first night, I invite you to reflect on the story of [Julienne Lusenge](#), a Congolese activist who protests sexual violence in a country where rape is used as a strategy of war. Julienne's tireless work to protect women and girls and prosecute those who assault them brings justice and hope to thousands in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

On the second night, stand in solidarity with [Carlos Chen Osorio](#), an indigenous Guatemalan who refused to be silent when his community was massacred to make way for a hydroelectric dam. Carlos spoke out—and after decades, his government finally promised to pay reparations for the thousands of lives destroyed.

On the third night, commit to helping stop the mounting refugee crisis and threat of genocide against the Rohingya people of Burma, who are being persecuted, extinguished and forced into the sea because of their beliefs. May this candle illuminate the work of brave Burmese activists (anonymous to protect their security), who are standing up against tyranny to forge a more democratic and equitable Burma that respects the rights of ethnic and religious minorities.

On the fourth night, extend your support to girls and young women around the world who aspire to choose their own paths. After being forced to marry an abusive man at age 14, Indian activist [Sonali](#)

[Khatun](#) managed to obtain a divorce and today inspires other girls to defer early marriage and pursue careers and their dreams.

On the fifth night, vow to aid victims of disasters that have shattered lives and homes around the world. Learn about the selfless efforts of [Gopal Kumar Nakarmi](#), a Nepalese activist who came to the aid of remote communities devastated by the earthquakes in Nepal.

On the sixth night, pray for healing and pledge to help alleviate the suffering of those who are afflicted by disease. Light this candle in honor of [Bendu Musah](#), a Liberian woman who survived Ebola and went on to help fellow survivors heal.

On the seventh night, honor [Nicholas Opiyo and Adrian Jjuuko](#), Ugandan human rights attorneys who risked their lives to overturn a hateful law that struck the fear of imprisonment into LGBT people throughout their country. May their victory over tyranny motivate us to speak out to ensure that no one is hated for who they are or whom they love.

On the eighth night, celebrate the commitment of people like us—Jews who are proud to stand up as Jews to promote justice around the world. With Jewish history, tradition or values as your guide, rededicate yourself to building a world in which all people—regardless of their beliefs, religion, nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender identity—are honored for their unique diversity and humanity.

May this practice of reflection bring new meaning to your Chanukah and transform the glow of the candles into new hope for mending our broken world.

But it's not enough for us to sit and watch the candles burn down. Like the Maccabees of old and these contemporary activists of Maccabean courage, we must act. Join with AJWS and activists around the world to take action on a cause that matters to you this Chanukah.

Wishing you a joyous holiday season filled with reflection, hope and action.



Robert Bank, currently the executive vice president of American Jewish World Service (AJWS), will be the next president of AJWS, starting on July 1, 2016. As the organization's Executive Vice President for the past six-and-a-half years, Robert has focused on the organization's strategic growth and on deepening its impact. Robert is an experienced leader and manager of local, national and international organizations, and prior to joining AJWS in 2009 he served in New York's municipal government and in the leadership of GMHC—one of the leading organizations in the world engaged in combatting HIV/AIDS. In 2008, he played an instrumental role in the campaign to overturn the ban on HIV-positive people entering the United States and becoming U.S. citizens. Robert's commitment to social justice is rooted in his experience of growing up in a Jewish family in South Africa under apartheid, witnessing its daily cruelties and understanding its deep roots in racism and oppression. At the time, Robert was influenced by seeing how indefatigable activists can build more just and democratic societies. Robert's Jewish identity was also shaped in South Africa, where he attended Jewish day schools in

Cape Town and drew inspiration from members of his own family who were active in the anti-apartheid movement, one of whom was jailed for more than two decades. As a young person, Robert also drew inspiration from the Jewish tradition of serving the poor and the most vulnerable among us.

Robert immigrated to the United States as a young man to follow one of his passions, studying piano at Juilliard. While performing in New York City's most underserved schools as a teaching artist at Lincoln Center Institute, Robert came to understand more fully the economic and racial divides in American life. This inspired him to follow another lifelong passion: working for justice and dignity for all. Robert studied law and then pursued a career in advocacy, and has since dedicated his professional life to fighting for the civil rights of women, people of color, immigrants, LGBT people, and people living with HIV/AIDS. Robert has received the Wasserstein Public Interest Fellowship from Harvard Law School, the Lifetime Achievement Award from Gay Men's Health Crisis and the Partners in Justice Award from AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps. He currently serves on the advisory boards of the Selah Leadership Program, Peripheral Vision International and Nehirim. In his work with AJWS over the past six-and-a-half years, he has championed the human rights of our world's poorest and most oppressed people, and helped our organization forge a strategic and sustainable path for future success. Before immigrating to the U.S. in 1977, Robert studied at the University of

Cape Town. He holds a Bachelor's and a Master's degree from The Juilliard School in New York and a law degree from the City University of New York Law School.

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. To subscribe to Chag v'Chesed, please visit www.ajws.org/cvc.

About Us

Inspired by the Jewish commitment to justice, **American Jewish World Service (AJWS)** works to realize human rights and end poverty in the developing world. AJWS advances the health and rights of women, girls and LGBT people; promotes civil and political rights; defends access to food, land and water; and aids communities in the aftermath of disasters. We pursue lasting change by supporting grassroots and global human rights organizations in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean and by mobilizing our community in the U.S. to advocate for global justice. Working together, we strive to build a more just and equitable world. For more information, visit www.ajws.org.

©American Jewish World Service 2015
45 West 36th Street New York, NY 10018
212.792.2900 or 800.889.7146
