

Let There Be Light
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Of the two, we must admit:
it is the Chanukah miracle that's more unexpected,
more of a "traditional" miracle.
After all, the solstice comes every year;
on this day, the shortest amount of daylight is given,
but tomorrow will be longer,
and the next day longer,
just by a minute or two, but noticeable,
if you keep close records,
and humans have been keeping close records of these
things
for thousands and thousands of years.
Before there was writing, there was knowledge of the
solstice,
and the returning of the sun.
So the solstice is not unexpected.
The turning of the year is predicable.

The Chanukah miracle, on the other hand;
I mean, you know how long that much oil will burn.
You've burned oil for generations,
and this isn't an guess.
It's not going to last eight days.
It just isn't.
But it does.

The story of Chanukah is a miracle story,

and the candles, the oil, are only the tangible reminder of the wider story:

the Jews, oppressed by increasingly mercurial and tyrannical Syrian rulers, who were in turn vassals of the Romans, had taken to the hills of Judea.

The Syrians had despoiled the temple, banned Jewish worship and ritual practice, and were trying to destroy the last of the rebels. But the rebels rose up together, and against a larger and stronger army, won.

They came to Jerusalem, to rededicate the temple, but there was only one container of oil whose seal was unbroken.

The flame, like our flaming chalice, burned on oil, but the oil had to be specially prepared, the olive leaves pressed, blessings said from beginning to end, and it was going to take eight days.

The new revolution saw the symbolism clearly - if the holy flame died a day after they retook the city, it would not bode well for their long-term freedom. So they lit the flame and hoped.

The flame lasted long enough, so the story goes, and the freedom of the Jews, still under the technical rule of the Syrians,

but with autonomy and religious right protected,
lasted 102 years, from 165 BCE to 63 BCE,
when the Romans had enough and invaded themselves.

There's a lot more complicated story here,
about mideast politics, and Zionism, and colonialism, and
land, and freedom,
about internal Jewish politics and Syrian and Roman
power-games.

But strip it down:
there's not enough oil,
but then there is.

And between the two, that seems like the larger miracle.

Solstice we expect.
It's natural, we think.
Chanukah, that's the real miracle.

Unless you are an astronomical geophysicist,
Or understand a bit about such things.
Then you know, solstice - that's an unbelievable miracle!
A miracle so amazing that our whole existence depends
on it.

If the earth was in a steady orbit around the sun, a
straight line,
there would be no seasons - and maybe some life around
the equator,
but winter, spring, summer, and fall?

Planting, growing, harvesting, renewal?

Adaptations and growth?

Nope.

Our existence as we know it depends on the fact that the earth's orbit is wobbly,

That it goes like this and not like this.

But not too wobbly, mind you - for the seasons were more extreme then they are,

everything would freeze too much or burn too much - there is this narrow band of possibility,

and the solstice is a reminder, evidence, that we are lucky to be in that band,

that our existence itself is a miracle.

A total and complete miracle.

The sun comes back every year,

and we might be blasé about it,

oh, of course it does, big whoop.

But it is a big whoop! An amazing, totally naturalistic, miracle.

The Unitarian Universalist minister Victoria Safford puts it this way:

Now is the moment of magic,

when the whole, round earth turns again toward the sun, and here's a blessing:

the days will be longer and brighter now,

even before the winter settles in to chill us.

Now is the moment of magic,
when people beaten down and broken,
with nothing left but misery and candles and their own
clear voices,
kindle tiny lights and whisper secret music;
and here's a blessing:
the dark universe is suddenly illuminated by the lights of
the menorah,
suddenly ablaze with the lights of the kinara,
and the whole world is glad and loud with winter singing.

Now is the moment of magic,
when an eastern star beckons the ignorant toward an
unknown goal;
and here's a blessing:
they find nothing in the end but an ordinary baby,
born at midnight, born in poverty, and the baby's cry, like
bells ringing,
makes people wonder as they wander through their lives,
what human love might really look like,
sound like,
feel like.

Now is the moment of magic,
and here's a blessing:
we already possess all the gifts we need;
we've already received our presents:
ears to hear music,
eyes to behold lights,

hands to build true peace on earth
and to hold each other tight in love.

Miracles abound.

They are everywhere, when you stop and think about it.
If you think miracle means a divine intervention against
the laws of physics, well, that's a definition I find much
too small.

If you think miracle, instead, means something that takes
your breath away,
something that, the more you consider it, the more
amazing - not the less, but the more amazing -
it becomes, then, miracles are everywhere.

If you think of a miracle as that which gives you hope,
then, there you go.

When the rain clears and the sun comes out,
when Ruby has the courage to introduce herself, one
more time,
when the rebels have the courage to stand up,
when the faithful have the courage to get down on their
knees,
when the gardener puts in bulbs in mid-November,
when the heart opens to another, even though it's been
wounded before,
when people of conscience cry out,
though the moral arc is long, they help bend it toward
justice,
when a child is born,
when a journey is begun,

when roots are put down,
when you write that note, pick up that phone,
when you get up after being knocked down,
and try again,
that's hope, that's a miracle,
that's wondrous.

There's a song, The Cold December,
El Desembre Congelat, (uhl duh-ZEHM-bruh coon-zuh-
LAHT)
that the choir's going to share with you:
Fear and doubt denying,
shines a light,
in spring and winter both,
shining through the midnight clear,
bless us with your radiance!

Hope is a wonder.
Wonder is a source of hope.

Wonder is a source of hope.
Hope is a source of wonder.

When we are amazed by the possibilities of life,
we feel that sense of hope that, hey, you know,
there's more here than we expect.
Maybe we don't have all the answers.
There are things that feel miraculous,
that stun us into silence,
that move us into song,

that makes us trust the universe, life, the holy,
trust enough to hope, to believe, and even, even
to work that our hopes might be realized.

And that goes the other way;
As wonder gives us hope,
the experience of hope itself is a wonder.

About this:
is there anything more inspiring than someone who
believes in their future,
and does something about it;
something about someone who holds onto hope, who is
guided by it,
that is wonderful to us, and helps us have hope, too?

There's that old story of Pandora and her box;
the evils that come out when it's opened:
war and suffering and greed and confusion.
And last, hope -
the remedy against it, the balm for our souls,
the motivation to try to live our own best lives and do
something for the world we share.
Of course, an alternative reading of that myth is that
hope is just another one of the evils;
what keeps us complacent, a false drug.
But I reject that reading of the story,
and I reject an understanding of hope as a passive
emotion
through which you just sit back and think, it'll be alright.

I mean, maybe. But if you do something, you dramatically improve your chances!

The hope that stirs your soul is powerful, and real, and motivational,

a sense that yes, things do get better, but only through effort.

And maybe they'll get better through the effort of others, or random chance - that happens,

but why not lend a hand and participate?

The ancients didn't need to hope that the sun would come back,

they knew it would,

they measured and counted and were sure.

But they knew winter wasn't over yet,

and they didn't **just** hope for enough food,

they had previously planted and harvested and made a stockpile.

They hoped for an early spring, and a good harvest,

but they worked, together, to make that real.

And they celebrated their common effort.

The Jewish rebels who threw off the Syrian oppressors and reclaimed the temple,

they didn't hope for a savior to come and lead them.

They rose up together.

They hoped the oil would last,

but they also got the high priests busy making new oil as fast as they could while keeping the ritual.

There's hope, and there's work.

And if you look around today,
you see hope at work all the time -
folks who get out of bed and face the day,
raise children, plant sequoias, care for their city, town,
go to physical therapy, even though it's a pain,
because they hope to be moving freely again,
folks who fall in love, move to a new place, break free of
bad patterns,
come to church for the first time,
forgive another and begin again,
people who hope, and I am amazed.

It is a wonder, a part of being human, that we believe in
possibility.

The sense that life can be better, the world can be better,
that good and wondrous things will come to us,
is like an invitation, like a song that sings in us,
a sense of calling.

It does not require us to act, but it invites us to do so,
not out of guilt or fear of what might go wrong,
but from a desire and longing of what might go right.

Emily Dickinson famously put it this way:

"Hope" is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -
And sore must be the storm -
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm -

I've heard it in the chilliest land -
And on the strangest Sea -
Yet - never - in Extremity,
It asked a crumb - of me.

I've heard it in the chilliest land.
In the midst of the longest night.
When the army is bearing down and you think all is lost.

I said that hope makes you work, but here's the paradox:
When you think,
I can't, I can't do this,
I won't get healthy,
I won't have enough money,
the world is falling apart and it's never going to get
better,
I'm never going to be happy -
that's when you need to just stop.
Stop moving, stop striving, stop working;
stop obsessing over what's wrong.
Turn off the electronics.
Just hold still,
as solstice invites us.
Light one candle, and sit in the dark.
Don't make so much rustle that you blow out the flame.

Stillness.

Stillness.

And awareness.

Then look up at the stars.

Remember that under the cold ground,

roots and buds and seeds are waiting for their moment.

Look into the eyes of a child, a friend, a lover, a stranger.

Reach out to a friend,

who is, if they're a good friend, likely to say:

I love you.

It's going to be alright, somehow or another;

don't give up.

Everyone feels this way sometimes.

I love you.

Stars.

Flowers.

Friends.

Love.

These wonders give us hope, even in the chilliest land.

They're both miracles, of course, if your definition is large enough.

That the people stood together and found their freedom,

that the oil lasted long enough,

that in such a time of empire and conquest, a small group sitting atop a strategic crossroads

could have 100 years of relative freedom

they had won themselves - that's a miracle.

That the earth wobbles just the right amount,
so that we have seasons, and life, and wind and water
and land and grain and fruit,
nights and days, sunrises and sunsets,
it's a total miracle.

That folks dust themselves off, get up, and try again:
a miracle.

That we seek for meaning and purpose in our lives,
and keep doing so when it's hard,
because we know that the life of purpose is the life that
matters -
that's miraculous.

That we remember those we have lost and hold them in
our hearts in love,
that their spirit and their life still speaks through us,
a miracle, and a hope that we will live lives worthy of
such memory as well.

That we strive for justice, for all people everywhere,
especially where justice is least present.
That we laugh and sing and eat and be merry with one
another.
That newborns open their eyes and see.
That our hearts long for one another, and that longing
can be answered.

That we do not always insist on our own way, but can be filled with a spirit of humility and service.

That the bonds of our covenant hold us together in freedom.

That we imagine new worlds and new ways of being, that we discover and create and are restless for the future.

These things are wonders, wonders of life and love and the holy.

And they give us hope.

They give us joy.

This is the solstice.

The longest night.

The ancient pagans called it Yule.

And yes, there was time to sit in the dark and be still.

And then there was time to celebrate.

To celebrate hope.

And so you bring in the green trees and wreathes, decorate the meeting space,

or, as saying goes, deck the hall.

And you light candles.

And you eat and drink.

And you laugh, and cheer the year that is done and hope for the year that is coming,

and you dance,

and you sing.

Raise your voices in wonder.

Raise them in hope.

Celebrate all that is and yet might be.

Let us sing.