



Hanukkah 5784 | December 2023

Night Six: The Paradox of Miracle **Yali Szulanski, Class of 2025**

–

The mother in the world is awake at night, and she feels desperately alone. Her loneliness envelops the room she is in, stretches upwards and outwards into the universe, and its energy converges with the loneliness of millions of mothers, awake with their children—and so many who will never find sleep again because their children are gone. All of them are begging for the miracle to come.

Nothing makes sense right now. One day it will all make sense.

We live in a moment where we are both in the past and in the future—and quite disbelieving of the present. As a counselor for children and their families, I find myself both saying that the kids I am seeing are exhibiting heightened levels of anxiety than I have ever seen, and that it will surely be fine again in a few generations.

This is where we are—we speak of finding light in future generations, as so much darkness descends upon us in this one. We are in both grief and hope. We are in both certainty and doubt. We are in both stringencies and leniencies. We are both stressed and calm. Every day, we are searching for light while simultaneously acknowledging the darkness.

How many times a day do we say that we are fine, good, okay when we are far from it?

Perhaps the cracks in our voices give us away, or the furrows that form in our eyebrows—now a permanent fixture in so many of us as we think through the possibilities and pitfalls of the next day, hour, minute. With so much darkness trying to extinguish our light, we are afraid, and we stand apart as we observe each other. We are waiting for one of us to discover the miracle, to bring it forward, to share it with us in a gentle way so that we may again sleep at night, so our hearts can dream.

Almost every conversation now is tinged with anticipation:



Hanukkah 5784 | December 2023

Will you have a miracle for me?

Will you give me permission to exhale?

The Jewish people are used to living in a state of paradox. From a young age, we learn to balance our joy in the celebration of life with the deep suffering that is our birthright, born from the painful history of our people. Most of our holidays ask us to hold both triumph and tragedy together in one celebration—we carry the stories of thousands of lives lost, while at the same time praising the mighty, the few, and the strong who perpetuated our survival. This paradox we live in acts as a great witness to the truth—it comprehends the fullness of life, which is sometimes beautiful and sometimes terrible.

On Hanukkah each year, we envelop ourselves in the narrative of miracle, of lights pushing away darkness, and the small triumphing over the mighty, when in reality, those moments of joy were juxtaposed with tremendous pain.

War is not new to our people. Our history consists of interlocking stories of deep struggle, persecution, and survival. It is part of every holiday we celebrate, and it is the miracle of finding lasting light at the end of a war. Even amidst the rubble and despair that was the war with the Greeks, we still celebrate Hanukkah. This image is particularly resonant in the times we live in now. The images of the destruction of Israel are not only in our past, they are our present. We are screaming for our safety, our right to exist, and our nationhood while we are being shouted over, our faces ripped from telephone poles, and our very humanity questioned.

I search for the words from my faith's teachings, as many of us tend to do in times of struggle. I come back to the age-old idea from [Leviticus](#): “vehahavta lereacha kamocho” — “love your neighbor as yourself.” This should be a simple ask, really, that we treat each other with respect and grace. It is a tenet that exists across religious and cultural lines, but its mandate fades when the head fills with rage, and the soul with worry.

Today, then, I also add, “On three things does the world stand: On justice, on truth and on peace,” from [Pirkei Avot 1:18](#). It is a simple saying by a rabbi from many centuries



Hanukkah 5784 | December 2023

ago, but it suggests that without the simple agreements of keeping justice, truth, and peace with each other, our world becomes anarchical and full of danger. Without a peace in which we recognize each other's humanity, no one is safe. War will rip deep ridges in all of us.

In describing the mitzvot connected with Hanukkah, the Talmud explores the idea of miracle, declaring that since all were present at the time of the Hanukkah miracle, all are obligated to observe and commemorate. These rituals involve fire, oil, and much delicious food. There is, and should be, an immense amount of joy in Hanukkah. And yet, the celebration itself contains a paradox—we survived, but so many and so much had to be lost for us to survive. And yet, we are still here, and that alone is worth celebrating.

When we teach our children that these miracles are diamonds in deep muddy waters of painful history, we teach them that they can get through hard times, that they can do hard things, and that they can become growth agents, and solution makers. If we can sit with what is hard, we can truly celebrate what is miraculous.

In this moment, we are deeply in a paradox. The paradox is that we are together in our aloneness. We are together in our waiting for the miracle, both personal and communal. We don't know what end will come, or when, or what it will look like. We might dream of normal, and yet we have forgotten what that is. There are children who will never have known another normal. We remember when—and then we stop—because we don't want to crumble. There is a lot that keeps us up at night these days—a lot that can weigh our hearts, dampen our spirits, and pull at our skin. There is also so much within us that keeps us going. We are strong, we are loving, we are kind, we are wise—we are here, together.

The impacts we can make, both big and small, happen through the ways in which we show up not only for our own communities, but also for those that feel far away and those that we might not understand. All of this all matters, and it all adds up. When we make meals, provide support, go on missions of solidarity—or simply sit quietly so someone can grieve—we are contributing to the light growing, to the healing to come. We can think big, knowing and hoping that we have what it takes to create change, and we can perform small actions that get us there.



Hanukkah 5784 | December 2023

Allowing ourselves to feel joy, even in times of great sorrow, is courageous and vulnerable. When we enter a dark room, the first thing we search for is light — such is true of our emotional selves as well. When there is darkness, whether it is within us or in the world, we yearn for the slightest bit of light. We can feel real despair, and still be in our moments of celebration. We can be in darkness, and still wish for light. We can celebrate the miracles that have been, even if we do not know when the next one will come.

Yali Szulanski is an educational wellness consultant, a trauma-informed emotions specialist, teacher, and writer. She is the founder of The "I Am" Project/The Neshima Initiative, through which she integrates emotional wellness practices in classrooms, camps, and community organizations. Yali received her Master's in Psychology and Education from Teachers College, Columbia University, with a special certification in Spirituality-Mind-Body Integration. Yali is also the Youth Director at The Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.