LIGHT A CANDLE

(Ilene Semiatin, December 2019)

Here in the northeast, it's winter. And, lately, we progressive Jews are dealing with darkness and cold in more than a figurative way. Living within a much larger civilization where most people are not Jewish, we lately have been feeling unsettled and vulnerable. No increase in security could adequately shield us from the stream of anti-Semitic acts we have seen, and our eco-consciousness isn't enough to stave off our fears of environmental ruin.

Each winter, we retell the story of the Maccabees. We recently celebrated Chanukah, marking the rededication of our people after one of the bleakest episodes of our history. Such tales help us remember that we can lift ourselves into the light of self-determination. This time of year, we also study the life of Joseph as told in the book of Genesis. Actually, Joseph has a lot to teach us about what it means to live meaningfully in the world as progressive Jews.

According to the Torah, Joseph was at the height of his powers when his old nemeses, his long-lost brothers, turned up. Decades before, they'd thrown him in a pit and seen him carried off to slavery. They had thought (hoped?) he was dead. And now they turned up in Egypt, where after a roller coaster of experiences, he had become the Pharaoh's viceroy. Joseph wasn't kind to them. He created false allegations of robbery and confronted them, and they had no idea that the powerful and terrifying figure facing them was their own brother.

But then suddenly Joseph decided to turn his back on the rancor, reconcile with his family, and save them from famine by bringing them to Egypt.

This was the first time in the Israelite story that a decision was made to preserve our people as a remnant inside a larger culture. It was the first time someone made a conscious choice to perpetuate the people of Israel – not just continue the bloodline, but to create Am Yisrael, a people of Israel, living among strangers in a strange land.

Joseph could have just let his brothers go home. But he envisioned a path where Jews could survive inside a foreign culture. And this actually is how we've lived most of our history.

The Maccabees too envisioned that Jews could live within an overwhelming, dominant culture. But to survive in the Chanukah narrative, we needed to band together, know exactly how and when to fight, and most important of all, light a flame.

Chanukah teaches us that light is a miracle because it can burn, even when there's barely any fuel to feed it. And the Shammash candle, the one we use to light all the others, is capable of creating endless light by igniting other flames, all without shortening its own life by even a second.

Joseph ended a cycle of darkness. He became the Shammash for our people, igniting a small flame that ultimately made it possible for a remnant to survive, and eventually allowing us to reach Sinai. The Maccabees took peoplehood to the next level, teaching us how to be strong without giving up our essence, how to fight for the light.

We at Bet Am have great examples we can follow. While we are caught up in the politics of polarization or the despair of environmental angst, while we face our demographic nightmares, we at Bet Am can band together, figure out exactly how and when to take action, and most important, we can light a candle. We can take what is eternally shining right through the center of our lives and use it for good in the world. We can each light plenty of other lights with our individual small, steady flames. And when we put our flames together as a community, we create miracles, with one another and in the larger world.

Chanukah, which we recently concluded, tells us that we must continue to light candles in the darkness and be one another's fuel. At Bet Am Shalom, we strive to be a community of purpose, keeping the vital fire of human dignity and progressive Jewish life burning. I am proud to be part of this community of spiritual connection and action. Together, we burn bright.

Wishing you a luminous 2020 -- a year of strength, love, action, and light.