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Hanukkah: Fighting Against the Darkness

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Photo from Getty Images

It was dark when I woke up, the baby stirring by my side. Darkness was not a surprise. It was Dec. 12, 2012, and I'd seen plenty of early mornings in the five-plus months since my son had been born. But Jon, my husband, was still sleeping and he'd earned it with a late-night diaper change. Trying not to wake him, I wiggled out past the bassinet and scooped up my son for his morning feeding.

In the living room I grabbed my phone so that I could time the feeding and maybe check Facebook. But then I saw something odd: multiple missed calls. I worked from home in Los Angeles, and it wasn't unusual for clients back East to call before dawn. But even clients who forget about time zones usually stop with one call, and I had missed three.

That's when I realized something was wrong. The calls had come in after midnight, and they were from Jon's stepmother in Connecticut.

"Howard had a heart attack," she said, worry and fatigue clear in her voice. "We're at the hospital."

By the time we called her back my father-in-law was in a medically induced coma and there was a good chance that he was brain dead. Jon absolutely had to go to him.

There is no good time to get that kind of call, but mid-December 2012 was an especially bad time for our little family. On top of the baby and our jobs, we were eight days away from closing on our first house and 11 days from moving in. We were constantly answering questions from our agent, our sellers and the myriad third parties that buying a house requires. At night we were putting everything inessential in boxes before trying desperately to get the baby down. There were no slow days.

You can't stop the planet from spinning away from the sun but you can light a defiant candle. And it's a mitzvah to put it in your window, because when the world is at its coldest and darkest, everyone needs to see that tiny miracle.

And it was the fifth night of Hanukkah, a fact that concerned me more than Jon. I was raised nominally Episcopalian with a great deal of skepticism. Jon is Jewish in an unshakeable but secular way. We were planning to raise our son Jewish, but without him there I didn't really know how to do that. I couldn't even remember all the words to the prayer you say when you light the Hanukkah candles. Now I was going to have to manage everything on my own.

The next day Jon went straight to the airport after signing the escrow papers on our house. Neither of us had any idea when he would return. I gave him an extra-long goodbye hug, with our son in a stroller because we hadn't been able to find a baby-sitter for the signing on short notice. The escrow office had been kind about it and the baby had slept, but I knew I couldn't count on that luck to last.

Indeed, my son chose that very night to start peeing through his overnight diapers. We were up twice before dawn, with bonus insomnia for me. The next day, the doctors confirmed my father-in-law was brain damaged. Jon looked into his father's finances and found an enormous mess. We discussed inviting his distraught stepmother to move in with us.

And then the Sandy Hook school shooting happened.

The senseless murder of 20 young children — and the six brave women who had tried to protect them — felt outrageous. Politicians promised action and gun control quickly became the only topic of national conversation. My father-in-law's hospital was too far from the school to receive any of the victims, but Jon said it felt like the entire state of Connecticut was in mourning.

Of course, he had other reasons to feel that way. By then, it was clear that Jon and his stepmother would have to end life support, a horrendous decision made banal by concerns about funeral timing and access to bank accounts. I worried about how Jon felt, but I was also stressed out and secretly angry with him for leaving, which in turn made me feel guilty.

And now, there were heartbreaking pictures of a murdered child everywhere I looked. I had my own tiny, vulnerable child to keep safe and here was incontrovertible evidence that I couldn't, no matter how careful or wealthy or suburban I was.

That evening was Shabbat as well as Hanukkah and a Jewish friend dropped by to help me say the bracha (blessing). It was the seventh night and we had two menorahs, so with the Shabbat candles they created quite a blaze. I turned off the lights in the living room and held my son up to see the light show.

Then a funny thing happened: It made me feel better. All that light felt like a bulwark against the scary things lurking in the dark of the wider world. And that, I realized, was the point — the meaning of not only Hanukkah but Christmas and Diwali and any other winter holidays built around lights. You can't stop the planet from spinning away from the sun but you can light a defiant candle. And it's a mitzvah to put it in your window, because when the world is at its coldest and darkest, everyone needs to see that tiny miracle.

With help from my mother and brother, I moved into the new house the day before Jon got back to L.A. We covered the mirrors right away, and our housewarming party was a shivah minyan.

But seven years later, we've built plenty of happy memories over that inauspicious start. And unlike the apartment where I received those voicemails, it has a front window with a little table where I'll put the lit candles this year. Because when it's coldest and darkest, everyone needs to see that little bit of light cutting through.

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