



# 2018 CANTERBURY MEDALIST RABBI DR. MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK'S ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

First, to Becket. To Bill, to Montse, to Mark, all the lawyers and staff of the Becket Fund. I'm so grateful to you. Not only for the extraordinary honor that you've bestowed on me this evening, but also for one of the great privileges of my life, which is affiliation with all that you do. Being on the board of the Becket Fund allows me to experience the extraordinary pride produced by the small word "we." Wherever I am, speaking, at any place, the synagogue or an interfaith gathering, or any other place, I get to say, "I'm on the board of the Becket Fund." We represented the Little Sisters of the Poor. We fought for a Sikh who sought to wear his turban while serving in the U.S. Armed Forces. We fight for the religious liberty of Mormons and Jews and Muslims and all people of faith in America. And my favorite we: we won that case at the United States Supreme Court.

I feel with pride my affiliation with Becket each and every day, and words cannot adequately express what I owe all of you for this privilege. To Robby. As I had the opportunity of saying at Princeton last week, "You have been for me an intellectual pole star." I call Robby, Professor Robert George, my rebbe. Which is Hebrew for my revered rabbi, mentor, and teacher. Once, thanks to him, I attended an interfaith conference at the Vatican and in my remarks there, I called him my rebbe. Which may be the first time that anyone ever received rabbinic ordination at the Vatican, but it is actually an illustration of the bridges that he builds and of the role model that he has been for his students of all faiths.

And so as I said last week, to Robby, we, your students are so filled with gratitude to you for the faith in God that you exemplify in public and private life and also for the faith that you have shown in us, in those you have taught and impacted so profoundly. I want to express my gratitude to the chair of the dinner, Roger Hertog, whose friendship and guidance has been such a blessing in my life for so many years. And to the entire Templeton family, thank you for all that you do on behalf of faith and freedom. Thank you. To the leadership of Congregation Shearith Israel and Yeshiva University and all from Shearith Israel and Yeshiva

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Ladies and gentlemen. In preparing my remarks, I was reminded of the old joke about a rabbi giving a sermon. And he is speaking and speaking and speaking, and at long last he looks up and perceives his audience drooping. And he apologizes to the synagogue for his lack of brevity, and he adds by way of explanation that he is going on for a long time

because he does not have a watch. And at this point from the back of the synagogue someone yells out, “Rabbi, there’s a calendar behind you.” And so, in preparing this reflection, I sought inspiration from the Jewish liturgical calendar. You thought I would say, “I learned to be brief.”

It is this Sabbath afternoon, Shabbat afternoon, that Jews all over the world will read the eighth chapter of Bamidbar, the book of Numbers, which describes the kohen gadol, the high priest, kindling the menorah, the golden lampstand, the candelabra of the mishkan, the tabernacle in the desert, and ultimately the mikdash, the Temple, in Jerusalem. As it does for many faiths, lamps, flames, candles play a profound role in Jewish ritual. Jewish women kindle Sabbath candles right before sunset on Friday, their sacred lights effusing the Jewish home. We end the Sabbath by kindling another flame, a beacon of hope for the week ahead. And of course, most famously, we kindle candles on Hanukkah, remembering the very same miraculous menorah in 165 BCE in the Second Temple, which only had enough oil to provide a day’s worth of light, and stayed lit instead not for one day but for eight days.

And if a small, flickering flame is so sublime, so spiritually uplifting, it is because we all intuitively understand what is best expressed in Mishlei by the Book of Proverbs. “Ner Hashem Nishmat Adam,” or in English, “The soul of man is the candle of God.” “The soul of man is the candle of God.” It is a powerful and enduring image. The human soul is a candle kindled by the Creator. Like a candle’s flame, the soul’s sanctity is so easily extinguished when buffeted by the winds of change, by the zeitgeist, by social pressure or by persecution. And yet like a flame, the soul, if protected, if sustained, if fueled by freedom, by faith, by courage, contains within it an infinite amount of power that can spark and inspire without diminishing, that can defy all expectation.

I had occasion to ponder this Biblical verse from Proverbs some months ago when I presided over the lighting of the Chanukiah, the menorah, the Hanukkah lamp, of my synagogue at a Hanukkah celebration in the White House. My congregation, Shearith Israel, is America’s oldest Jewish congregation. We don’t like to talk about it except pretty much every day. That’s right. And the menorah had been lit annually in America since 1730, and all

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Amsterdam. The governor, Peter Stuyvesant, was less than enthused, writing in part, I'm quoting parts of it, that "the Jews who have arrived would nearly all like to remain here, but we have for the benefit of the land in general deemed it useful to require them in a friendly way to depart." The Jews persisted, they resisted, and they stayed, and they called themselves the Remnant of Israel, Shearith Israel. Separated by thousands of miles from any established Jewish community, they remained loyal to the faith of their fathers. In 1730, they achieved the right to build a synagogue, wherein they set a Hanukkah lamp aglow. Patriots in 1776, they fled their homes and synagogue when the British took Manhattan, fleeing, as one historical account put it, "across the plains of Harlem and Washington Heights," to serve in Washington's army, to serve in the Revolution in Pennsylvania, where they also publicly protested the state's ban at the time on Jews in the legislature and celebrated and supported the United States Constitution, that in 1787 ruled out at the federal level any such exclusion.

In America, and nowhere else on Earth, they fought for and achieved the freedom to be citizens without sacrificing their Jewishness, public or private, in any way. And now, their Hanukkah lamp, embodied into their Jewishness, was being lit in the White House, the home of the American people. Only in America.

And rightly understood, every menorah similarly embodies an American idea. Unlike Sabbath candles, which are intended to illumine the Jewish home, the Hanukkah lamps are placed in the window to be seen by the public, Jew and non-Jew alike. And originally until recent times and in Jerusalem today, Hanukkah lights were kindled not inside but outside the door of Jewish homes, right outside the door. And the verse in Proverbs allows us to understand the lesson of this ritual. "The soul of man is the candle of God." Lighting candles outside the doors of our homes expresses that when people of faith leave their homes and enter the world, they take their beliefs and their religious identity with them. They do not check their beliefs at the door when they enter the public square. Their souls, the candle within each person, illuminates their path wherever they may lead.

And this understanding of faith and of its role in society is deeply American. When George Washington became president of the United States, the Catholics in America at the time all came together and sent President Washington one letter of congratulations. The Quakers all came together and sent him one letter. The Baptists came together and sent him one letter. The Jews could not agree who would write the letter, and so they sent him three letters. There's maybe 1,000 Jews in America at the time. Three letters. And thank God they did,

penned a separate, exquisite response to each one. I will cite two of

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another enjoy the exercise of their inherent natural rights.” And to the Jews of Savannah, he concluded his letter by speaking not only of civics but also of religion, and Washington wrote, “May the same wonder-working deity who long since delivering the Hebrews from their Egyptian oppressors planted them in the Promised Land, whose providential agency has lately been conspicuous in establishing these United States as an independent nation, still continue to water them with the dews of Heaven and to make the inhabitants of every denomination participate in the temporal and spiritual blessings of that people whose God is the God of the Bible.” And he uses the Hebrew name of God that we traditional Jews do not pronounce. That is Washington’s closing words.

So we welcome you, Washington, in saying, not only as Americans, but as Jews, your faith, your story inspires us. Your beliefs are a blessing to our society. He did not say to them, as the French Assembly said to the Jews in the Emancipation, “We will give you everything as Frenchmen, but we will not give you anything as members of the Jewish nation.” He was saying instead that when Jews participated in every aspect of America, they brought their faith, their beliefs, their religious identity with them, as all faiths do, and this Washington welcomed, because he believed, as he wrote in his Farewell Address, that reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.

Washington is saying that when we leave our homes and enter society, our souls, like candles, guide us, light the way for us. And here’s the important point: that fact for Washington enhances society, is a blessing to society. And this ultimately is what religious liberty is all about. As the Hanukkah lamp reminds us, when we leave our houses of worship or our homes and enter the world, our souls come with us. When the Little Sisters of the Poor enter society and seek to serve, they bring their souls with them. When an evangelical Christian builds a company and employs people, he brings his soul with him. When Catholics heal in a hospital or create a college or an adoption agency, they bring their souls with them. When Jews or Mormons or Sikhs or citizens of any faith seek to answer or serve society, they bring their souls with them. Their faith is the candle within. Its suffuses all they do. And when the state demands disloyalty to one’s faith as the price for entering society, that is an assault on the human soul, and that is intolerable, because “the soul of man is the candle of God.”

Thus, as we gather this evening, let us draw inspiration from the menorah in the Temple about which Jews will read this Shabbat afternoon. The candelabra was flickering flames in bees, famously lasted so much longer than predicted, a reminder that

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bring all of us here in closer together.

Several years ago, Archbishop Chaput, whose presence today is such an honor, visited the main study hall at Yeshiva University, witnessing hundreds of young Jewish men pouring over pages of the Talmud. The archbishop went back to Philadelphia and delivered an eloquent homily to his flock about faith's endurance in the secular age, and he said, "I saw in the lives of those Jewish students the incredible durability of God's promises and God's word. Despite centuries of persecution, exile, dispersion, and even apostasy, the Jewish people continue to exist because their covenant with God is alive and permanent." "God's word," said the archbishop, "is the organizing principle of their identity. It's the foundation and glue of their relationship with one another, with their past and with their future." "And the more faithful they are to God's word," he said, "the more certain they can be of their survival." I found the archbishop's words and message so moving, because it illustrates how today in America, people of faith inspire each other, sustain each other, so that an alliance over central issues such as religious freedom can also form without in any way diminishing our real religious differences. It can also form a genuine fellowship.

One exquisite example of such fellowship can be found in the extraordinary memoir of Anatoly or Natan Sharansky called *Fear No Evil*. And this memoir describes his many years of imprisonment in a Soviet Gulag. In the camp, two books inspired him and helped him to endure. First and foremost was the *Tehillim*, the Hebrew Book of Psalms that his wife had given him. The second was a Russian Bible owned by a fellow prisoner, a Christian dissident by the name of Vladimir or Volodya Porosh. Porosh taught Sharansky books of the Bible to which Sharansky had not had access in Soviet Russia, and in the process, Porosh himself reconsidered his earlier prejudices about Jews. These are Sharansky's words, in part, describing their Bible study together (he says as follows).

In part: "My efforts to obtain" — he says his efforts to obtain a Bible were fruitless. "But," he writes, "I was still able to enjoy reading the Bible with my Christian friend, Volodya. We called our sessions 'Reaganite Readings,' because President Reagan had declared that this year or the previous year the Year of the Bible." "And," he writes, "because we realized that even the slightest improvement in our situation would be related to a firm position by the West," and he writes, "especially by America, and we mentally urged Reagan to demonstrate such resolve." "The marvelous reading," writes Sharansky, "continued for an entire month, until they put us in different cells, and during that month," he writes, "the feeling grew stronger that no matter how different our paths or how different our prayers, we were praying to the same God who instructed us to fear no evil in the valley of death." What

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Two souls illuminating the darkness of their cell. Two men of

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One day, he realized that Hanukkah was coming, and with help, a crude menorah was constructed, his own makeshift menorah, which he lit every evening, adding an additional candle every night as is required. On the sixth night of Hanukkah, the authorities confiscated the menorah. Sharansky immediately declared a hunger strike, and he writes in a statement

to the Procurator General, "I protested against the violation of my national and religious rights."

He was summoned to the office of the Soviet officer that ran the Gulag, a Major Osin. Osin knew that a review of the prison was coming, and he wanted to get Sharansky to end his hunger strike. "Osin," Sharansky writes, "pulled a benevolent smile over his face as he tried to talk me out of my hunger strike." So Sharansky said, "Well, I'll tell you what. Give me back my menorah, as tonight is the last evening of Hanukkah. Let me celebrate it now, and I'll end my hunger strike." But a protocol for its confiscation had already been set up, and Osin couldn't back down in front of the whole camp. And so Sharansky writes, "As I looked at this predator, sitting at an elegant, polished table wearing a benevolent smile, I was seized by an amusing idea. 'Listen,' I said. 'I'm sure you have the menorah somewhere. It's very important to me to celebrate the last night of Hanukkah. Why not let me do it right here and now with you, meaning in private?' Major Osin thought it over and promptly, the confiscated menorah appeared from his desk. He summoned an underling and they brought him a candle." Sharansky said, "It's the eighth night of Hanukkah. I need eight candles." And so instead of bringing him eight candles, Major Osin took out a pocketknife and rendered the candle into what must have been eight stubs.

Sharansky placed the now tiny pieces of wax, what must have been tiny pieces of wax in his menorah, and then, out of whole cloth he invented a Jewish law. He told Major Osin that for the ritual to work, everyone present had to stand at attention, and that after the blessing was concluded, everyone present had to respond, "Amen," amen. Major Osin agreed and stood at attention waiting for his role in the ritual. Sharansky lit the candles and recited a prayer in Hebrew which went something like this: "Blessed are you, God, for allowing me to rejoice on this day, the holiday of our return to the ways of our fathers. Blessed are you, God, for allowing me to light the candles. May you allow me to light candles many times in your city, Jerusalem, with my wife Avital, and my family and friends." And then, with the uncomprehending but attentive Soviet officer standing at his side, Sharansky concluded his prayer in Hebrew with these words. He said: "May the day come when all our enemies who today are planning our destruction will stand before us and hear our prayers and say Amen."

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Immediately responded "Amen"

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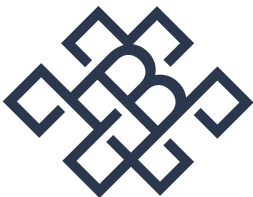
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from citizens as a price for entering society so that nothing but a degraded state of humanity remains. They choose to forget that Almighty God has made man free and that the soul of man is the candle of God. But we do not forget this, and tonight we celebrate it. And we, all of us here, express our profound gratitude to the leaders and the lawyers and the staff of Becket, to those on the front lines of the fight for religious freedom.

In the Smithsonian sits a colonial-era candle stand with a special brass reflector made to magnify its light. This candelabra belonged to George Washington, and according to family tradition it was by the light of this candle stand that Washington labored on his Farewell Address. No candles stand within it, so the Smithsonian reports. No candles stand within it today, but its light, the light of this candle stand, still radiates throughout America, reflected every day in the work of the Becket Fund. You, the Becket Fund, safeguard the souls of America's citizens, souls which are the very candles of the divine. You are the protectors of a flame of faith. You hold aloft the lamp of liberty. You are the bearers of the beacon that is the American idea. May God bless you, sustain you, and ensure your success so that America can be a beacon of faith and freedom for generations to come. And to this prayer, we assembled here can surely all answer "Amen." Thank you very much.



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