

# Thoughts for Hanukkah 2008

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by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

I recently had a conversation with a newly-retired person who told me that he tries to find ways "to kill time" now that he no longer works full time. I thought: this man may have 20-30 more years to live; should he be devising ways to "kill" this amount of time?

Might he be planning something more constructive with the time that God allots him?

Life presents all of us with a question: what next? This question applies not merely to someone who has retired from his job, but to each individual at every stage of life. We reach one plateau, achieve a particular goal--but then what?

In the "al ha-nissim" passage that we include in our Hanukkah prayers, we recall that the Almighty helped our ancestors fight off their oppressors and granted the Jewish people a great victory. The passage continues: "ve-ahar kakh"--and afterwards, the Jews entered the Temple, lit the Menorah, and established the holiday of Hanukkah. The key phrase is "ve-ahar kakh", afterwards. This phrase reminds us that after having achieved one level, we need to move on to another higher level. Life should not be lived passively. We should not be thinking about "killing time". Each morning when we wake up, we need to remind ourselves: and now what? What have I planned as my next step in life?

Life is an ongoing process of renewal, of facing new struggles, making new discoveries. A thoughtful and pious life is not only a source of happiness to the person living such a life, but also impacts on others. Our ancestors lit the lights in the Temple, and thus gave inspiration to all future generations. Their understanding of "ve-ahar kakh" enabled future generations to play their roles on the stage of history.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, first Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Israel, once asked: who is on a greater spiritual level, a person on the tenth rung or the thirtieth rung of the spiritual ladder? The obvious answer would be that the person on the thirtieth

rung is on a higher spiritual level. But Rabbi Kook answered: it depends which direction the person is moving. If the person on the tenth rung is climbing and growing day by day, he/she is spiritually alive and energized. If the person on the thirtieth rung is moving downward, he/she has lost spiritual elan and will continue to sink unless he/she can re-direct upward.

As we step on each rung of the ladder of life, we need to evaluate whether we are moving upward or whether we are letting ourselves move downward. With each step, we need to focus on what comes next, on how we can reach the next higher level, on how we can use the time God grants us in a meaningful and constructive way. This requires planning, self-discipline, and a focus on spiritual growth. We can succeed.

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