Messengers and Messages: Thoughts for Shabbat Hanukkah, December 12, 2009

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A young man--a convert to Judaism--shared with me some of his frustrations. He had sacrificed mightily to become Jewish. He became estranged from his biological family, many of whom have strongly anti-Jewish attitudes. He changed his lifestyle to conform to the dictates of halakha. He put up with insensitive comments from rabbis and members of the Jewish community.

Perhaps his most poignant frustration was that he loved God, Torah and Mitzvoth and had sacrificed so much in order to become Jewish--and yet a large number of born Jews cared so little about Judaism! He told me: "So many Jews are messengers who have forgotten their message." The people of Israel received a message and a mission at Mount Sinai, and are supposed to be a light unto the nations. By living according to the teachings and ideals of Torah, we can convey the truths of ethical monotheism; we can set an example of moral living, strong family values, social justice, holiness.

Messengers who have forgotten their message: what a tragic dilemma! Most Jews today live in free societies where they have opportunity to study Torah and observe mitzvoth and participate actively in the life of their societies. Our message should be clearer than ever; our commitment should be powerful and enthusiastic.

A central concept connected with Hanukkah is "pirsumei nisa", publicizing the miracle. We kindle the Hanukkah lights in the synagogue. We place them near the windows of our homes so that passers-by can see them. It isn't enough simply to recount the story of Hanukkah: we need to publicize it by lighting our hanukkiot, by making a public demonstration of our message. The Hanukkah lights are visible reminders: we have a message, we celebrate that message, we share that message with others. We do not forget the sacrifices and heroism of earlier generations of Jews. We do not take religious liberty for granted; we are not careless or apathetic about our Jewishness.

The Hebrew word Hanukkah means "dedication", referring to the re-dedication of the Temple in the days of the Macabbees. It also suggests the need for ongoing dedication to our religious traditions, values and observances. The more we

study, the more we integrate Torah and mitzvoth into our lives--the more we internalize the message of Judaism. We become messengers who remember our message, who enlighten our own lives and who bring illumination to all humanity.

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Angel for Shabbat