The Wisdom to Shine

Rabbi Dan Moskovitz
Temple Sholom - Vancouver, BC Canada
December 12, 2025

There is a moment near the beginning of this week's parashah that seems almost serene.

Jacob is weary from years of conflict, grieving Rachel, yearning for stability, and pouring his hope into the son Joseph, the first child of that most desired union with Rachel, who now at age 17 carries her memory.

It's with this as context that Jacob gives the *ketonet passim*, the coat of many colors to his precocious but most loved son Joseph. And a great musical is born.

It's a garment that announces identity. The midrash teaches that the coat isn't only a sign of favoritism. It is a symbol that makes Joseph unmistakably visible in a world not prepared to receive him with generosity.

The coat becomes

• a source of pride,

• a trigger for resentment,

• and eventually a garment Joseph learns to shed.

Joseph begins as a boy drawn to the spotlight the coat attracts. Over time he becomes someone entirely different. His visibility shifts from flamboyant to purposeful. From “Look at me” to “This is who I am, and this is what I must do.”

That shift marks his growth, and it opens a question that feels very close to us this year. What does wise visibility look like for Jews in a moment when being seen can draw admiration, misunderstanding, or danger? Joseph’s journey helps us navigate that question with honesty and courage.

Joseph loves the coat. Why shouldn’t he? It is filled with colour. It reflects possibility. It marks him as someone with dreams. Yet wearing it also places him in the crosshairs of others who cannot bear its brightness. The Torah does not fault him for loving it. It simply shows the cost of carrying a public identity in a world that responds unpredictably to difference.

His brothers cannot bear the sight of him, and their first instinct is to strip him of his coat and erase the identity it proclaims.

They throw him into a pit and sit down to eat. That detail still shocks. And when I re-read it this year I was reminded of the stories from former hostages kept bound and starving in the tunnels of Gaza while their Hamas captures eat plentifully in front of them. Both the story and the reality show how quickly a human heart can harden. They also reveal how abruptly a safe life can change.

For many in our community, that feeling has become familiar this year. People who once walked through the world with uncomplicated Jewish pride now tell me quietly that they are uncertain how their identity will be received by classmates, neighbours, coworkers. Some describe second thoughts about wearing a Magen David. Others say they hesitate before placing a mezuzah on a new home. These are not people questioning their Judaism. They are questioning whether the world around them is the same world they thought it was. A world that accepts their Judaism, let alone its Zionism woven brightly, boldly inseparably into it like the colorful threads of Joseph’s coat.

Joseph's coat stands at the heart of that struggle because to be visibly Jewish is to carry something beloved and meaningful that is sometimes misread. It is to stand in a story larger than ourselves, while navigating the reactions of a world time and again tells us its not ready to fully welcome that story.

Hanukkah brings this tension right to our front windows. The mitzvah of the menorah is a mitzvah of visibility. We are told to place it where others can see its light. Visibility is not an optional flourish. It is part of the mitzvah itself because light is meant to move outward. It is meant to be shared.

But Jewish law never confuses visibility with recklessness. The Talmud adds to this mitzvah that when there is danger, the menorah may be placed on the table inside. The tradition holds visibility as an ideal shaped by wisdom. Courage does not ask us to disregard our surroundings. Wisdom does not ask us to hide from the world altogether. Our story has survived because our ancestors learned to hold both truths at once.

This year, as with last year, many have asked me: Should I put my menorah in the window? Is it safe? Is it wise? The question arrives with tenderness and responsibility.

Joseph had to learn the hard way what it means to read the room. His early visibility was pure expression. As he matures, his visibility becomes an act of leadership. He learns that being seen is not a performance. It is a responsibility.

The Haftarah, a prophetic companion to our parashah, deepens the point. Unlike Joseph, Amos came from the edges of society, a shepherd and a fig farmer who no one saw or took much notice of, that is until he found his voice. Amos, like all prophets was a reluctant one. But he stood up and spoke out, his authority grew from the urgency he felt when he saw a community drifting away from justice. He's the working class

Everyman whose life is shaped by the very institutions now beginning to crumble around him. It's too much for him to bear in silence.

Amos tells us that, “when danger exists, a lion roars”. The world may pretend nothing is happening, but the roar insists otherwise. Lions don’t roar over nothing. And when you hear one you better pay attention or you’ll soon be dinner.

Amos is calling out societies that grow so accustomed to injustice they can no longer hear their own alarms, and he reminds us that those alarms often come first from people who feel the danger most directly. Not the privileged but the vulnerable.

This year, our community, like Amos has been roaring. Not from panic, but from responsibility. Our students have shared what they hear in their classrooms. People have been harassed on the street. Others have faced vandalism in their neighborhoods. When a community with radar for danger attuned over thousands of years of persecutions roars with alarm something real is happening; and it is wise for all to listen.

Earlier this week, I brought that roar with me to Ottawa when I spoke briefly with the Prime Minister. I told him what many of you have told me: that the rise in antisemitism is unacceptable and that sympathy alone cannot keep a community safe. We need action. We need accountability. We need laws with teeth and we need them enforced with consistency. I told him we need leadership willing to say clearly and publicly that the safety of Jewish Canadians is not negotiable.

I invited him to come to Vancouver and speak from this pulpit to the entire nation directly. To make clear that safeguarding minority communities, and the Jewish community at 1% of the population but the target of 70% of all hate crimes is the very definition of a vulnerable minority.

Safeguarding the Jews of Canada, as few in number as we are is foundational to the moral fabric of this country.

I sent the same message and invitation in a letter to our Premier. And I similarly wrote to our Mayor thanking him for being an incredible ally to our community and urging him to share his quiet support more loudly and publicly. To be a shining light and example like Mayor Bryan Paterson of Kingston Ontario recently did. If you missed his video message to that community you'll find it on my Facebook page or YouTube. It's what every elected official should think and say.

The brief conversation and subsequent letters I wrote were not about fear. They were about partnership and responsibility. For Jews to place our menorahs in the window with confidence, we need to know that the city, the province and the country we call home are committed to ensuring that no family has to second-guess a simple display of faith.

So what do we do with the menorah this year? What do we model for our children? What does it mean to shine wisely?

Hanukkah emerges from a time when Jews were pressured to assimilate or vanish. The Maccabees responded with devotion and strategy. Their courage was grounded in realism, not bravado. They did not win by ignoring danger. They won by fighting back wisely, asymmetrically and refusing to surrender their identity.

Every flame of the menorah echoes that balance. If you personally feel it safe to place your menorah in your window this year, you send a message that light does not retreat from darkness. You affirm that being Jewish is not something to conceal. You add your light to the city around you, and you do so with a mature awareness of the moment we live in.

And if you choose to place your menorah deeper inside your home, because your read of the room and the moment is, it's not safe, you still fulfill the mitzvah fully. You protect your family. You act with responsibility. You carry forward our tradition in a way our ancestors would understand.

The light is no less real. The commitment is no less strong. And our leaders should hear that wise caution as a roar of warning. When Jews are compelled to hide their light the whole of society is diminished.

But I want to widen the frame as I close. In the coming weeks, our city will continue to glow with Christmas lights. They will spill from houses and balconies and front yards, bright and abundant, a public expression of joy, belonging and faith.

Soon after, red lanterns for Lunar New Year will appear in windows and storefronts across Vancouver, welcoming blessing and renewal. And as winter turns toward spring, Muslim families will prepare for Ramadan with *fanous* lanterns that glow warmly in their homes, symbols of hospitality, holiness, and the turning of a sacred season.

These lights are part of the rhythm of our city. They are welcomed. They are received with warmth. They belong. No one hesitates before placing them in a window.

And I yearn for the day when a Jewish home can blaze with that same confidence. When a menorah in the window feels as natural, as secure, and as publicly embraced as a Christmas tree bursting with lights, a row of red Lunar New Year lanterns, or the warm glow of a Ramadan *fanous*.

That longing is not a complaint. It is a vision of what a healthy multicultural city should look like. A city where every tradition can shine without hesitation. A city where difference is not merely tolerated but cherished. A city where the vulnerability of minority communities is met with proactive protection, not resigned sympathy.

The Jewish community cannot build that alone. To create a Vancouver where Hanukkah light can shine as boldly and brightly as any other seasonal display, civic leadership must take responsibility for shaping the conditions in which that courage is possible. It requires policy. It requires enforcement. It requires moral clarity long before crisis

arrives. And it requires the willingness to say publicly that the safety of every minority community is not an aspiration, it is an obligation of public life and leadership.

Hanukkah teaches that light is communal work, one candle kindles many others. When leaders protect all who dwell here, it becomes possible for each of us to place our light in the window not as an act of defiance, but as an expression of belonging. That is a city, province and nation that is a shining example for all. We are not there yet, in truth we are not even close. But if one small cruse of oil can last for 8 days, then one spark of moral leadership can spread from coast, to coast, to coast.