



**CHAG v' CHESED:**  
*Inspired by the Jewish commitment to justice for 30 years*

**AJWS**  
**at 30**

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## Rosh Hashanah 5776

### *Darkness Into Light*

By Rabbi Ken Chasen

What a gift it would be if we were able to engage in the powerful self-work of reflection and repentance of the Days of Awe without distraction. However, most of us feel so consumed by our busy lives that scant time remains for attending to the content of our souls. And then there is the condition of our world, which kindles in us a disturbing sense of futility. We see the ever-growing injustices of hunger and homelessness and racism...the trampling of human rights and human dignity...the subjugation of young women. These scourges are spreading everywhere, from our own city streets to the most remote corners of the globe.

At times like these, it is tempting to surrender to feelings of hopelessness. What, we wonder, can we possibly do to stem the tide of injustice all around us? In attempting to answer that question, especially at this time of year, I am reminded of a story found in the Jerusalem Talmud: The Jews approached the prophet Isaiah in a time of great darkness, asking, "Our master Isaiah, what will come for us out of this night?" Isaiah replied, "Wait until I ask." After seeking an answer from God, Isaiah returned to them: "God said, 'The morning comes, and also the night.' There will be morning for the righteous, and night for the sinful." They demanded to know when. Isaiah replied, "When you wish it, God will wish it. If you desire it, so, too, will God." Exasperated, the people asked, "So what stands in the way?" Isaiah responded, "Your lack of repentance. Return...come..."

If the prophet is right, all is not lost, no matter how dark the night may seem and how vast the injustice in the world may appear. The words and deeds of repentance that will fill the coming High Holy Days have a potentially transformative power on us—both through our prayer and through our actions. By reshaping ourselves, we chip away at the massive task of reshaping humanity and the world that is in our care. Our prayers and reflections throughout this season of the High Holy Days are surely not enough, but if they mobilize us to take action to effect change in ourselves and in the world, then there is hope that humankind as a whole may soon be capable of moving permanently from darkness into light, one act of justice at a time.

My own great-grandmother, whom we called Bubbie, achieved such a transformation. While she was alive, I thought of her simply as the little old lady with the Eastern European accent in our family; but when I finally learned her story after she had died, I discovered that she had overcome a seemingly insurmountable obstacle in her youth.

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Bubbie was a young mail-order bride—and when she got to this country and met the man who had brought her here, she didn't like him. I can't even imagine how powerless she must have felt. Yet somehow, she mustered the courage to ask her "fiancé" if she could go to work in order to buy her way out of the arrangement—and incredibly, he allowed her to do it. And because she succeeded, she ended up marrying my great-grandfather instead—which, of course, is what made my own life possible.

We know that globally there are 14 million young women today who are pressured or forced to marry before they are ready to get married. They may never have the option my Bubbie took upon herself to shape their own lives. We need to rise above our feelings of powerlessness and help transform our world from a place of darkness into a place of light. We can do this by learning, speaking out and standing in solidarity with these millions of young women around the world.

According to the sages in the Talmud, the Days of Awe can help us achieve this. Let us rededicate ourselves to the soul-baring work of repentance as we welcome the year 5776—and not just for our own self-improvement, but for the imprint that our growth will leave upon this world beset with oppression. This year, let us envision that humanity's fate directly depends upon our truthfulness about ourselves, to a greater extent than ever before. If we begin by transcending the darkness that resides deeply within us, perhaps we'll succeed in illuminating the darkness that resides deeply around us. Together, we can replace this shadow with radiance.



**Ken Chasen** is Senior Rabbi of Leo Baeck Temple in Los Angeles. He is an outspoken commentator and author on a wide variety of subjects pertaining to Jewish life and an activist in support of issues such as immigrant rights, affordable housing, environmental sustainability and Israeli-Palestinian coexistence. Rabbi Chasen's writings have appeared in a wide variety of national and international publications, including the *Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Variety*, *Reform Judaism* and *The Jewish Journal*. In addition, he serves on the adjunct faculty of the Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion, and he is a nationally-recognized composer whose original liturgical and educational works are regularly heard in synagogues, religious schools, Jewish camps and sanctuaries across North America and in Israel.

### Background on Child Marriage

Annually, 14 million girls around the world are married before they turn 18. Child marriage—also known as early or forced marriage—deprives adolescent girls of the freedom to make informed and independent choices about their lives, relationships, education, economic pursuits and bodies. Many parents view child marriage as the key to obtaining future security for their daughters, often not realizing that they will be more likely to drop out of school, experience domestic violence, live in poverty or die in childbirth.

### AJWS's Response to this Issue

AJWS supports local and national organizations that are working to end the practice of child marriage in India, a country that is home to one-third of the world's early marriages. This effort emerged from AJWS's more than 15 years of experience supporting Indian social change organizations working to achieve equality for women and girls. These groups are engaging adolescent girls and their communities to address the root causes of the practice, including gender inequality, poverty and limited sexual health education. Last fiscal year, we supported **34 grantees for a total of \$1.8 million** in grantmaking in this area. This includes 24 local organizations, five national organizations and five research organizations. Visit [our website](#) for background on AJWS's approach to child marriage and stories from our grantees in the field.

**About this Publication**

This essay is part of American Jewish World Service's Chag v'Chesed ("Celebration and Compassion") series. Written by prominent leaders in the Jewish community, Chag v'Chesed draws on teachings from the holidays to inform our thinking about Judaism and social justice. AJWS is committed to a pluralistic view of Judaism and honors a broad spectrum of interpretation of our texts and traditions. The statements made and views expressed in this commentary are solely the responsibility of the author. To subscribe to Chag v'Chesed, please visit [www.ajws.org/cvc](http://www.ajws.org/cvc).

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Inspired by the Jewish commitment to justice, **American Jewish World Service (AJWS)** works to realize human rights and end poverty in the developing world. AJWS advances the health and rights of women, girls and LGBT people; promotes civil and political rights; defends access to food, land and water; and aids communities in the aftermath of disasters. We pursue lasting change by supporting grassroots and global human rights organizations in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean and by mobilizing our community in the U.S. to advocate for global justice. Working together, we strive to build a more just and equitable world. For more information, visit [www.ajws.org](http://www.ajws.org).

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