

What is the Light of Hanukkah?

- 1) Our rabbis taught: when the first human (Adam) saw the daylight hours were becoming shorter and shorter, he said, "Woe is me! Perhaps because I have sinned, the world is becoming dark around me and is returning to chaos (*tohu va-vohu*). This is the death sentence declared upon me by Heaven!" He sat for eight days in fasting and prayer. After the winter solstice when he saw the days becoming longer and longer, he said, "This is simply the way of the world!" He went and made an eight-day festival . . . He established them for the sake of Heaven, and they [the pagans/Rome] established them for idolatry. (Talmud, *Avodah Zarah* 8a)

Here is a rabbinic text explaining the origins of some unknown eight-day festival, smack in the darkest part of winter, celebrating the return of light to the world...hmmm...curious. I don't think I am going out on a limb to propose the idea that one of the origins of the holiday of Hanukkah has nothing to do with the Maccabees, nor the miracle of the oil. These are highly particularistic stories. Rather, Hanukkah has, in its distant past, the most universal of messages. It is a holiday about experiencing fear, vulnerability, and darkness and not being consumed. It is a holiday that reminds us that light and security will return again, as sure as we know darkness will return. These are the cycles of life. The challenge is remembering that the darkness will, in fact, retreat. So this too, like the story of the oil, is a story of profound faith. (Rabbi David Hoffman, 2009)

- 2) Traditional Chanukah lights have three elements: oil, wick and fire. The fire ignites the wick, and the oil (or, today, the wax candle) provides fuel for a continuous flame. To succeed in any endeavor, we need the same three elements: The creative spark (the flame) must be given form (the wick), and the form must be given sustenance (the oil or wax). The Hebrew words for flame, wick and oil are נר (*ner*), פתיל (*petil*), and שמן (*shemen*). Taken together, the first letters of each word-- נ-פ-ש (*nun-phay-shin*)—form the Hebrew word *nefesh*, or soul. A candle is a symbol of the soul. As we kindle the Chanukah lights, let us pay attention to each element—the creative spark of the flame, the wick that gives form to the flame and the oil that keeps the flame alive. (Rabbi Dan Ehrenkrantz, 2008)

- 3) **And we are not permitted to make use of them, but rather only to see them...** (*Hanerot hallelu*): And it says that the mitzvah is to see the Hanukkah lamp. This means that the Hanukkah lamps give light for each Israelite soul so that it will be able to see itself in the manner of self-seeing needed by every human being, as it is said, "Look at three things and you will not come to sin": the miracle of the lamps was to give illumination to everyone whose eyes had grown too dark for seeing. The Talmud states: "Lamp light is good for making an inspection" – i.e., lamps are used for searching out things, for it is written, [A person's soul is God's lamp] which searches out all the innermost parts... "The innermost parts" refers to the point of vitality in each soul that comes from the blessed Holy One, as it is written, and He breathed into his nostrils the soul of life (Genesis 2) – it searches the holes and cracks in a person's soul, trying to find a proper place to spread out and give light. Thus is exactly like the lamp-light searching for oil in the wick. And in the midrash [the word *hor* – "hole"] is explained as deriving from the word *herut* – "freedom" – as in *send him free*. For this point [of vitality] - called *God's lamp* - expels that which masks [the truth]. Even if a person is enslaved to the evil inclination and is unaware of the truth, s/he shall be able to see with the help of God's lamp, which is the mitzvot, which are called *lamps*. (*Sefat Emet* Hanukkah 1871)

- 4) Someone who cannot afford to buy both a light for Hanukkah and a light for Shabbat should buy a light for Shabbat, since the Shabbat-light is a matter of *shalom-bayit* (maintaining well-being in one's home). (*Shulhan Aruch, Orach Hayyim 578:1*)

The reason given by the Talmud for lighting a candle or lamp Shabbat is that light brings feelings of joy and well-being (Shabbat 23b and 25b). In those days, before light fixtures, the Sabbath lamp was sometimes the household's only source of light. Without a Shabbat lamp, once the sun went down on Friday night, a person's home would be dark.

Hanukkah is known as "the festival of lights." But we don't light the menorah to keep ourselves from sitting in the dark. Instead, the rabbis explain that the purpose of lighting a candle or lamp on Hanukkah is to publicize the miracle of the oil in the Temple that lasted for eight days, and the equally miraculous military victory of the Maccabees over the Greeks. Set on the windowsill and shining outwards, the Hanukkah lights send a message of hope to the world: it is possible for the few to triumph over the many, and tyranny can be successfully opposed.

Two lights with two directions. The Shabbat lamp fills our homes with light and creates a sense of well-being for those who live inside. The Hanukkah lamp directs the light outwards, sending a message of hope to the world. In fact, the outer-directed message of the Hanukkah lamp is so important that Jewish law forbids us to use its light for reading, illumination, or any other purpose besides "publicizing the miracle." Ideally, we ought to have the benefit of both lights, one inner-directed and one pointed out to the world. This would mirror our own commitments to meeting our own needs as well as those of others. But when forced by lack of resources to choose one type of light over the other, the tradition instructs us to prioritize the Shabbat light... (Rabbi David Rosenn, 2001)

5) There is a debate in the Talmud between Hillel and Shammai about how the candles should be lit. Hillel says that we should light one the first night, two the second, and so on. Shammai says that we should start with eight candles the first night and then light seven the second, and so on. I would suggest that Shammai is following his general overriding principle—to tell the truth. The truth is that we live in a world of ever-diminishing expectations. The moment we are born we begin to die. Each day brings us one day closer to our last day. Similarly we saw in the section on the Omer [a teaching about compassion: “Shammai and Hillel debated what to say to a bride on her wedding day. Shammai held for the truth: if she is beautiful, say so, if not, describe her as she is. Hillel held that every bride is beautiful”]...For Shammai, truth is the ultimate value. Hillel says that every bride is beautiful in the eyes of those who love her on her wedding day. Similarly, for Hillel there is a deeper sense of truth at issue here. The deeper truth is that our lives become ever richer and fuller with the passage of time, not increasingly diminished. The light of Chanukah reminds of the potential that lies within each moment. The present can be filled with light and that light can increase no matter where we are in the span of our lives. Like life, light can pierce any darkness. It became the custom to follow Hillel’s opinion that we light an additional light each night to make known the miracle of Chanukah; that is, our light can grow exceedingly bright beyond any reasonable expectations.

(Rabbi Michael Strassfeld, *A Book of Life*)