

TOWARD A MEANINGFUL CHANUKAH

THE KABBALAH OF CHANUKAH

8 Insights for 8 Nights

Presented by Simon Jacobson and the Meaningful Life Center





NIGHT 1: ILLUMINATE YOUR HOME

“...Illumination begins at home”

(Excerpt from a letter by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson.)

Chanukah, the Festival of Lights, recalls the victory — more than 2100 years ago — of a militarily weak but spiritually strong Jewish people over the mighty forces of a ruthless enemy that had overrun the Holy Land and threatened to engulf the land and its people in darkness.

The miraculous victory — culminating with the rededication of the Sanctuary in Jerusalem and the rekindling of the Menorah which has been desecrated and extinguished by the enemy — has been celebrated annually ever since during these eight days of Chanukah, especially by lighting the Chanukah Menorah, also as a symbol and message of the triumph of freedom over oppression, of spirit over matter, of light over darkness.

It is a timely and reassuring message. For the forces of darkness are ever present. Moreover the danger does not come exclusively from outside; it often lurks close to home, in the form of insidious erosion of time-honored values and principles that are the foundation of any decent human society. Needless to say, darkness is not chased away by brooms and stick, but by illumination. Our Sages said, “A little light expels a lot of darkness.”

The Chanukah Lights remind us in a most obvious way that illumination begins at home, within oneself and one’s family, by increasing and intensifying the light of the Torah and Mitzvos in everyday experiences, even as the Chanukah Lights are kindled in growing numbers from day to day. But through it begins at home, it does not stop there. Such is the nature of light that when one kindles a light for one’s own benefit, it benefits also all who are in the vicinity. Indeed, the Chanukah Lights are expressly meant to illuminate the “outside”, symbolically alluding to the duty to bring light also to those who for one reason or another, still walk in darkness...”



NIGHT 2: LIGHT UP THE WORLD

As the sun sets and the shadows of night descend, we kindle the Menorah creating light in the darkness.

“The flame of God is the soul of a human being,” says the Torah. As flames warm and illuminate their environment, so too you can use your soul to infuse life with warmth and light. Unlike all other physical entities that are drawn earthward, the dancing flames flicker upward defying gravity. Likewise your soul, not satisfied with mere physical comforts, aspires up toward something beyond.

Chanukah is not just about lighting up our own lives. By placing the Menorah in the window of your home or at your doorpost, you allow the light to radiate into the dark street, illuminating your surroundings. Chanukah reminds us of our ability and responsibility to effect the world around us and prompts us to shine light into the lives of others with daily acts of goodness and kindness. Just as a flame lights another without diminishing itself, so too by sharing yourself you become enhanced rather than diminished. Every day we must increase illumination of ourselves and our environment — each day adding another good deed, lighting an additional flame.



NIGHT 3: PIERCING THE DARK

Listen carefully to the flames and they will tell you a story, a story that will empower you to live a more profound meaningful life, enabling you to rise up toward challenge and overcome difficulty.

Chanukah tells yet a deeper story, a story that penetrates the darker shadows of our lives. The Menorah shines a tunnel back through time to the aftermath of a great victory in which a small band of Jews defeated the might of the Greek Empire. In amongst the debris of the desecrated Temple the Maccabees searched ceaselessly until they found a single sealed cruse of oil that miraculously burnt for eight days.

When you are defiled, when your inner Temple has been desecrated and there is no oil to be found, you have the power to reach deeper inside and discover light. The soul always remains intact like a “pilot light.” When you light your Menorah under such difficult circumstances, creating light in the darkest moment, that light can never be extinguished. The light that has dealt with challenge, that has transformed pain into growth, is a light that transcends nature and transforms darkness into light.

This power to transform darkness must come from a place beyond the conventional. We therefore light eight candles, the mystical number of transcendence and infinity, one beyond the number seven that represents the natural cycle. In order to pierce darkness with light, you can’t just rely on the natural, you need to reach a deeper resource which is the eighth dimension.

These elements of Chanukah — the eight flickering flames, the miracle of the oil, the light shining into the dark street — beckon us to connect to the power of our soul. Our soul rises like a flame toward that which transcends itself, not only repelling darkness as is the nature of all light, but transforming the darkness into light.



NIGHT 4: EDUCATING CHILDREN WITH PURITY

The word “Chanukah” comes from the word “initiation.” Chanukah celebrates the renewal of the service in the Holy Temple after it was liberated from the Greek defilers, purified, and rededicated as the seat of G-d’s manifest presence in our world.

Chanukah thus serves as a model for all initiations, including the most significant initiation of all — education, a child’s initiation into life (indeed, chinuch, in the word Chanukah, is the Hebrew word for “education”). The uncompromising insistence on purity and perfection which Chanukah represents imparts an important lesson regarding the essence of the educator/initiator’s task.

Compromise is anathema to education. To a mature tree, a gash here or a torn limb there is of little or no consequence. But the smallest scratch in the seed, the slightest nick in the sapling, results in an irrevocable deformity, a flaw which the decades to come will deepen rather than erase.

Virtually every life is faced with demands for compromise — some tolerable, others not. The educator who wishes to impart a set of values and priorities that will weather them all must deliver, in word and example, a message of impeccable purity, free of even the slightest and most “acceptable” equivocation.



NIGHT 5: AWAKEN OTHER FLAMES

It's the fifth night of Chanukah, and five flames are glowing the night away.

Five flames? Aren't there six?

Six? Oh, you mean the shamash*. He doesn't count.

Night after night, the shamash dutifully goes about his task of kindling lights. Each evening, he welcomes the newcomer and settles him into his rightful place in the growing row: two flames, three flames, four flames. The shamash coaxes them to life and then stands watch over them, lest one falter and require a fresh boost of light.

Still the shamash doesn't count. An imparter of light to others, he never attains the status of a Chanukah light in his own right.

Despite — indeed because — of this, the shamash towers above all the other lights of the menorah. To forgo one's own luminary potential in order to awaken a flame in others — there is no greater virtue.

** The shamash — the "attendant" candle that is used to kindle the other lights — sits a bit higher or lower than the other candles, on the ninth branch of the menorah.*



NIGHT 6: OIL VERSUS WINE

“Oil permeates the entire substance of a thing.”

(Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De’ah 105:5)

“When wine enters, a secret emerges.”

(Talmud, Eiruvim 65a)

Oil is in. Oil shuns superficiality — you won’t find it riding a fad or angling for a photo opportunity. When oil comes in contact with something, it saturates it to the core, permeating it in its entirety. When set aglow, oil is the master of understatement. Soundlessly it burns — not for the oil lamp is the vulgar cackling of firewood or the faint sizzle of candle wax. Its light does not burst through the door and bulldoze away the darkness; instead, it gently coaxes the gloom to shimmer with a spiritual luminescence.

Wine is a tabloid reporter. Wine is a boisterous brute who slithers past the security guard of mind to loosen the lips, spill the guts, and turn the heart inside out. Wine smears the most intimate secrets across the front pages of life.

Chanukah is oil; Purim is wine.

Chanukah is the triumph of the Jewish soul. The Greek rulers of the Holy Land had no designs on the Jew’s body; it was the soul of Israel that they coveted, seeking to indoctrinate her mind with their philosophy and her spirit with their pagan culture. The Jew fought not for the freedom of his material self but to liberate his spiritual identity from Hellenist domination.

Haman and his cronies did not bother with such subtleties. They had one simple goal: the physical destruction of every Jew on the face of the Earth. Purim remembers the salvation of the Jew's bodily existence.

On Purim we pour out the wine. Purim is a noisy party, a showy parade, a costumed extravaganza. Purim celebrates the fact that the Jew is more than a soul — he is a body as well. Purim celebrates the fact that our Jewishness is not only an internal spirituality but also a pragmatic reality; that it not only permeates our beings from within — it also spills out into the externalities of our material lives.

Chanukah is commemorated with oil. Chanukah celebrates the innerness of the Jewish soul, the essence which permeates and sanctifies every nook and cranny of the Jew's life. Chanukah celebrates the secret glow of the spirit, which, rather than confronting the darkness, infiltrates it and transforms it from within.



NIGHT 7: CHANUKAH: AN AMERICAN HOLIDAY

Given America's current political turmoil, it seems timely that the very founding of this country and the perpetuity of this nation's values is based on a theme celebrated by Jews every year at this time. What does Chanukah have to do with the founding of America?

The festival of Chanukah commemorates the victory that occurred over 2000 years ago when a small band of Jews, in the name of freedom from oppression and freedom of religion, battled the largest army in the world and were victorious.

In 1789, a group of revolutionaries, in opposition to the great world powers of that time, wrote the Bill of Rights in order to safeguard the basic individual freedoms of Americans — freedom of religion, speech, and press. Religious persecution was the impetus for many to leave the shores of Europe for the New World, so it is not surprising that the First Amendment stressed the importance of freedom of religion. The Founding Fathers understood this to be central to all other liberties as it embodies the freedom to pursue your own belief system, your personal way of finding transcendence.

The message of Chanukah is as relevant today as it was two millennia and two centuries ago. Every year we celebrate the power of freedom over oppression with the kindling of the Menorah, symbolizing the victory of light over darkness. Chanukah teaches us four lessons about freedom.

The illuminating lights of Chanukah remind us that the way to eliminate darkness — to rid the world of selfishness, negativity, hatred, and greed — is to kindle the lights of knowledge, generosity, faith, and love.

The Menorah is placed in the window of one's home or in a public place so that the light shines out into the street. This public display represents our responsibility to bring the light of freedom, morality, and spirituality not only into our own homes, but also into the lives of others and into the world.

On a more personal level, a flame represents the soul of a person, the G-dliness that is inherent in each of us. Every person has an individual contribution to make, a unique way of illuminating the world. Chanukah celebrates the power of the soul reminding us that although there are six billion people in the world and many forces that de-personalize our lives, each flame, each soul, brings a special and distinctive light into the world.

The eight flames of the Menorah tell a unique story. 2200 years ago in Jerusalem, when the Jewish soldiers entered the Temple that had been desecrated by their enemies, they found only a small cruse of olive oil to light the Temple Menorah. The oil that was sufficient to last for only one day miraculously lasted for eight. The number eight mystically represents transcendence and infinity, one beyond the number seven which represents the natural cycle. There is a natural limit to all human endeavors, to all human knowledge, but Chanukah introduces the eighth dimension, the power of transcendence that enables us to go beyond our natural limitations and transform darkness into light.

The festival of Chanukah calls us all to revolution, a revolution of light fought for over centuries by all people seeking true freedom. The Festival entreats us to reclaim our most basic freedom, the freedom to rise above our subjective, limited perspective and reach for the above and beyond. As Americans and as citizens of the world, it is our duty and privilege to add to the forces of light both at home and abroad in a steadily growing measure.



NIGHT 8: RISE ON YOUR OWN

Our sages tell us that the Holy Temple in Jerusalem was a physical, three-dimensional model of the spiritual architecture of the soul. The Temple consisted of numerous domains, chambers, and “vessels”; each of these corresponding to another element of the inner life of man and illustrating that element’s function and purpose.

The menorah, the seven-branched golden candelabra which was kindled each afternoon in the Holy Temple, represents man’s potential to “kindle lamps”: to generate sources of illumination within his own self, in his fellow man, and in the material resources at his disposal.

The eighth chapter of Numbers opens with G-d’s instruction to Aaron: “When you raise the lamps, they should shed their light towards the face of the menorah.” In his commentary on this verse, Rashi dwells on the Torah’s use of the phrase *behaalotecha*, “when you raise.” Why does the Torah employ this obscure synonym for “kindle”? Rashi explains that the Torah wishes to refer to the flame’s nature to gravitate upward and rise, and also to instruct the Kohen (priest) who lights the menorah’s lamps to hold the fire to the wick until “the flame rises on its own.”

These three words — *shalhevet olah me’eileha* (“the flame rises on its own”) — contain some of the basic lessons to be derived from the menorah.

The Flame

The menorah’s lights are usually referred to as its *neirot*, “lamps.” Here, Rashi uses the word *shalhevet*, “flame.” While the term *neirot* can apply to both lit and unlit lamps, *shalhevet* means a “live,”

light-producing flame. Indeed, for many hours of each day, the menorah's lamps were without flames. Each morning, the lamps were cleaned, filled with the purest olive oil, and given new wicks. In this state they stood most of the day, awaiting the flame-bearing Kohen who came to kindle them in mid-afternoon.

In those interim hours, the lamp was in its most complete and perfect state: its gold pristine, its wick fresh, and filled to capacity with the finest oil. Nothing of substance was lacking. Indeed, lighting it only sullied its luster, charred its wick, and used up its fuel. But in its unlit state, the lamp was dark, its luminary potential locked within. It might have been perfect in itself, but it was of no benefit to that which lay outside of itself.

Man, too, can be a *ner* without a *shalhevet*, a lamp without a flame. He might achieve a personal perfection — an ornate vessel, fine-tuned talents, and abundant potentials. But the purpose of life is to be a blazing lamp — to ignite one's talents and potentials so that they illuminate one's surroundings.

This is the first lesson of the menorah: that the goal of personal perfection alone will never suffice to satisfy the striving of our soul. Intrinsic to our nature is the quest to be a "flame" — an illumination to our surroundings.

Rises

"The spirit of man gravitates upward."

While the space we inhabit possesses three dimensions and six directions, our deepest strivings tend upward. When children compete over who is "bigger," it is their vertical height which they compare. When men and women of all ages speak of their desire for self-betterment, they do so in terms of "climbing the ladder," "reaching upward," and "raising" themselves to "new heights."

Thus King Solomon describes the human soul as a “lamp of G-d.” Of the Four Elements (fire, water, air, and earth), only fire gravitates upward. Like a flame forever straining at its tether, the human soul is forever pulling upwards, straining at the wick (i.e., the physical body) which binds it aground.

What is the deeper significance of this “vertical” striving? Certain achievements can be described in terms of growth “length” and “breadth.” We might expend much effort and toil in extending and broadening our accomplishments — but all on the same plane, all along the lines which define our present reality. The spirit of man, however, thirsts for more. The “lamp of G-d” within us does not allow us to reconcile ourselves to our present reality, whether it is a reality bounded by habit and convention, or even by the most basic dictates of our nature. Intrinsic to the human condition is the quest for transcendence, the striving to “break the mold” in which we are formed and remake ourselves as something more — something “higher” than what we are.

This is the second lesson of the menorah: that life is not only a “flame” but also a flame that “rises.” That no matter how extensive our gains in the space we have carved for ourselves in this world may be, we must constantly search for new areas of achievement. Personal perfection is not enough; nor is leadership as a “luminary” in any defined field. Our inner essence as a “lamp of G-d” demands that we perpetually reinvent ourselves, that we constantly strive to break free of our present plane of existence to reach for something “higher.”

On Its Own

A lamp cannot ignite itself: it requires a fire, an external source of energy, to set it aglow. But the objective is that its flame should “rise on its own” — that it be transformed into an independent source of light.

This is the third lesson of the menorah: that when we act as “lamplighters” — whether in the endeavor to ignite our own potentials, to ignite

the “lamp” in our fellow man, or to create luminaries out of the materials of our environment — the objective must be to generate a flame which “rises on its own.”

In terms of our effort toward self-improvement, this means not to suffice with “resolutions” and behavior changes which must be constantly imposed by force of will. Rather, one should strive for a transformation of one’s nature and character, so that the new behavior becomes the natural, instinctive way to act.

In teaching and influencing one’s fellow, the objective should be to establish him or her as a self-sufficient luminary in his own right: to assist in developing his talents and abilities so that his lamp independently glows and, in turn, kindles the potential in others.

The same is true concerning our effect on the physical world. When we utilize the materials and resources of our world toward good and G-dly ends, we imbue them with sanctity and G-dliness. Here, too, a physical object can be made not only into a passive vessel of light, but into a “lamp” that is an independent source of illumination.

For example, instead of just talking to our children about charity or involving them in our own charitable activities, we can help them fashion a *pushkah* (charity box) and install it in their room. Each time the child places a coin in the box, it is assisting him and training him in an act of charity. A piece of wood or plastic has thus been formed into a “luminary.”

Furthermore, even when it is not actually being used to perform a charitable deed, the charity box continues to act as a “lamp” which illuminates its surroundings. As a permanent fixture in his room, it acts as a constant reminder to the child of his responsibility towards others. A physical object has become “a flame which rises on its own,” an independent source of guidance and enlightenment.

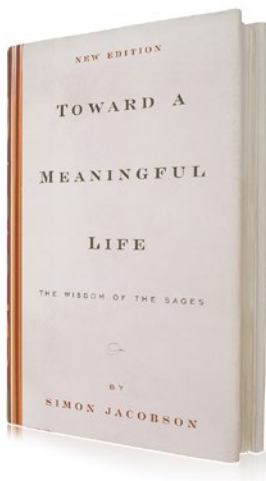
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