



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## BEREISHIT > Miketz

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Miketz - Shabbat Chanukah

**Let There be Light**



## Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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### ABSTRACT

Sad as it sounds, we usually appreciate things most when we lack them. In our free, comfortable and “enlightened” world we can often be quite blinded. But today, on Chanukah, we celebrate one of the greatest gifts in life – one that is so often overlooked: The gift of light. Light is so much more than a candle. To appreciate light imagine a world without it – a life shrouded in darkness and confusion, a life devoid of clarity, wisdom, truth, objectivity, illumination, warmth, and much more.

Two riveting stories – one of Chanukah in the Gulag, and another of Chanukah in Auschwitz – capture the universal theme and powerful lesson of the Chanukah lights.

Listen to the flames, we are told. Listen to the story that the *lichtelech* tell us. It’s only one tiny flame, but lit at sundown, as the shadows of night descend, at the doorpost facing the street, the menorah reminds us of the power of light to eliminate darkness – to rid the world of selfishness, negativity, hatred and greed, by kindling the lights of knowledge, generosity, faith and love, not only into our own homes, but also into the lives of others and into the world.

The 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 transcendence, not only repelling darkness as is the nature of all light, but transforming the darkness into light.

## LET THERE BE LIGHT

### The Inextinguishable Chanukah Flames

#### 1. Do You Prefer Light or Dark?

Most people would say that they prefer light over darkness, clarity over confusion, vision over blindness.

But then why is it that we so easily go into denial over uncomfortable situations? Why do we so effortlessly gravitate to covering up and hiding our true feelings? Why do we so often prefer comfort over truth? Pride over honesty? If we love light and honesty, why are we so afraid of showing our vulnerability?

One night a fellow comes home and sees his neighbor looking for his keys out in the yard. "Let me help you find them," says the friendly neighbor. "Where do you recall losing them?" The man points to a spot 50 yards away. "So why are you searching for the keys *here*, when you dropped them *there*!?" The man replies: "because here is where the light is shining."

Denial always seems to be the first place we go to when we are lost. Instead of shining the light on the concealed root of the problem, we gravitate to the symptoms where the light is already shining.

This doesn't mean that we lack intelligence and don't value light, clarity and truth. It means that when we are subjective – and our comfort zones are threatened – our self interest can blind us to the truth and to the path that will lead us to what is right and healthy.

Consider this anecdote:

Sherlock Holmes and Dr. John Watson went on a camping trip. After sharing a good meal and a bottle of Petrie wine, they retire to their tent for the night.

At about 3 AM, Holmes nudges Watson and asks, "Watson, look up into the sky and tell me what you see?"

Watson said, "I see millions of stars."

Holmes asks, "And, what does that tell you?"

Watson replies, "Astronomically, it tells me there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, it tells me that Saturn is in Leo. Theologically, it tells me that God is great and we are small and insignificant. Horologically, it tells me that it's about 3 AM. Meteorologically, it tells me that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. What does it tell you, Holmes?"

Holmes retorts, "Someone stole our tent."

One can be very intelligent and still miss the point. Oscar Wilde said: "There are people who know the price of everything, but the value of nothing."

Our own intelligence can end up contributing to our blindness. How often do we get caught up in mind games and forget the primary objective?

Sad as it sounds, we usually appreciate things most when we lack them. Unlike times past, we live today in freedom and comfort. Our greatest challenges today can't be compared to the precarious lives of our grandparents and great grandparents living under oppression in the old home just 60 years ago. And yet, paradoxically, despite – or perhaps because of – our "enlightened" state we can easily take our blessings for granted and live in the dark, blinded to truth.

So today, on Chanukah, we celebrate one of the greatest gifts in life – one that is so often overlooked: The gift of light. Light is so much more than a candle. To appreciate light imagine a world without it – a life shrouded in darkness and denial, a life devoid of clarity, wisdom, truth, objectivity, illumination, warmth, and much more.

Here is a Chanukah story that teaches us the awesome power of light – appreciated so much more precisely because it came out of the dark shadows of the Gulag.

## 2. Chanukah in the Gulag

Born in the days of the Soviet Union, Nachman Rozman had abandoned the traditional Jewish life in his youth in order to join the Communist Party. He served in the Red Army, where he rose to a high rank, but then he was arrested for engaging in some illegal business and sentenced to a long term of hard labor in Siberia.

In the gulag, Rozman was drawn to a fellow Jew, a chassid, who awakened in him memories of the home and life he had forsaken. This chassid was none other than Rabbi Asher Sossonkin, a soldier in the Chabad army of teachers and activists who kept Judaism alive in Communist Russia in the darkest years of repression, and who spent many years in Soviet labor camps for his “counter-revolutionary” activities.

With Rabbi Asher’s aid and encouragement, Rozman began a return to Jewish observance under the most severe conditions. In the gulag, keeping kosher, avoiding work on Shabbat, or grabbing a few moments for prayer meant subjecting oneself to near-starvation, repeated penalties and a daily jeopardy of life and limb.

One winter, as Chanukah approached, Reb Asher revealed a plan to his friend: “I’ll get hold of a small, empty food can – the smaller the better, so it’ll be easy to hide and escape notice. We’ll save half of our daily ration of margarine over the next two weeks, for fuel. We can make wicks from the loose threads at the edges of our coats. When everyone’s asleep, we’ll light our ‘menorah’ under my bunk....”

“Certainly not!” cried Rozman. “It’s Chanukah, Reb Asher, the festival of miracles. We’ll do the mitzvah the way it should be done. Not in some rusty can fished out from the garbage, but with a proper menorah, real oil, at the proper time and place. I have a few rubles hidden away that I can pay Igor at the metal-working shed; I also have a few ‘debts’ I can call in at the kitchen....”

A few days before Chanukah, Rozman triumphantly showed Rabbi Asher the menorah he had procured – a somewhat crude vessel but unmistakably a “real” menorah, with eight oil-cups in a row and a raised cup for the shammash.

On the first evening of Chanukah, he set the menorah on a stool in the doorway between the main room of their barracks and the small storage area at its rear, and filled the right-hand cup. Together with Rabbi Asher, he recited the blessings and kindled the first light, as millions of their fellows did that night in their homes around the world.

On that first night the lighting went off without a hitch, as it did on the second, third and fourth nights of the festival. As a rule, the prisoners in the camp did not inform on each other, and their barrack-mates had already grown accustomed to the religious practices of the two Jews.

On the fifth night of Chanukah, just as the two Jews had lit five flames in their menorah, a sudden hush spread through the barracks. The prisoners all froze in their places and turned their eyes to the doorway, in which stood an officer from the camp's high command.

Though surprise inspections such as these were quite routine occurrences, they always struck terror in the hearts of the prisoners. The officer would advance through the barracks meting out severe penalties for offenses such as a hidden cigarette or a hoarded crust of bread.

"Quick, throw it out into the snow," whispered the prisoners, but it was too late. The officer was already striding toward the back doorway, where the two Jews stood huddled over the still-burning flames of their menorah.

For a very long moment the officer gazed at the menorah. Then he turned to Reb Asher. "*P'yat?* (Five?)" he asked.

"*P'yat,*" replied the chassid.

The officer turned and exited without a word.

### 3. Listen to the Flames

Listen to the flames, we are told. Listen to the story that the *lichtelech* tell us. It's only one tiny light, but its message is one of the most powerful in all of existence.

The special light of Chanukah is for everyone. It touches every heart, for it embodies many lessons – from the personal to the global, from the psychological to the theological.

Here are some of them:

Lit at sundown, as the shadows of night descend, the menorah reminds 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, or near the doorpost of the home, or in some other public place so that the light will shine 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.

Just as a flame lights another without diminishing itself, so too, by sharing ourselves, we become enhanced rather than diminished. Every day we must increase illumination of ourselves and our environment – adding another good deed, lighting an additional flame.

On a more personal level, a flame represents the soul of a person, the holiness that is inherent in each of us, because we were all created in the divine image.

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 flame of God is the soul of a human being,” says the Book of Proverbs.<sup>1</sup> And as a flame warms and illuminates its environment, so too, we can use our 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 our soul, not satisfied with mere physical comforts, aspires up toward something beyond.

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<sup>1</sup> Proverbs 20:27.

## 4. Deeper Narrative

Chanukah tells yet a deeper narrative, a tale 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 crucible of olive oil that miraculously burnt for eight days.

This suggest that when we are defiled, when our inner Temple has been desecrated and there is hardly any oil to be found, we have the power to reach deeper inside and discover light.

The soul always remains intact like a “pilot light.” When we light our 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.

Therefore, we light eight candles, the mystical number of transcendence and infinity, one beyond the number seven that represents the natural cycle. There is a natural limit to all human endeavors, to all human knowledge, but in order to pierce darkness with light, we can't just rely on the natural. We need to reach a deeper resource which is the eighth dimension of Chanukah – the power of transcendence that enables us to go beyond our natural limitations and transform darkness into light.

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 transcendence, not only repelling darkness as is the nature of all light, but transforming the darkness into light.

This transformative power is further explained by the following story.



## 5. Chanukah in Auschwitz

This story was related by a Holocaust survivor, who was an eleven-year-old child when these events occurred in Auschwitz. As he told it:

It was exactly sixty years ago. Time moves very quickly and very slowly for me ... and sixty years ago is both like yesterday and like one-thousand years ago. Those horrible days are frozen moments that never go away. Yet they are also very distant and apart - from another universe, another era.

I will never forget the last Chanukah in the barracks. Most of us were so consumed with scrapping together any morsel while avoiding the attention of the guards that we had no inkling which day in the year it was. Especially in those last weeks before the liberation, the Nazis were particularly unpredictable and cruel, and the chaos only made matters worse.

Yet there were a few who always knew the exact dates. They would tell the rest of us that today is Shabbat, or Passover, or another significant day. On this particular day a man would tell me that it was Chanukah.

That morning I went to the infirmary to try smuggling out some balm - anything to help relieve my father's open sores. His disease - I am not sure whether it was typhus or some other cursed ailment - was eating his body away, and whenever I could sneak over to see him I would see him silently struggling for some relief. As a child I was completely overcome by the sight of my suffering father.

That particular day, when I finally snuck over to my father's bunk - if you could even call it that, it was more like a cattle pen - he was no longer there. I became frantic.

An older gentleman, whom I did not know but whom I often saw talking to my father, came over to console me. He, too, did not know when my father was taken - and to this day I don't know if it was the disease or a Nazi bullet that took my father to heaven - but he was a calming presence.

He told me that today was Chanukah and we should celebrate the victory of the few who were weak over their powerful oppressors who were many. This is the meaning of the Chanukah candles, which demonstrate that light is stronger than any darkness. He concluded, "Your father would be very proud to know that you carry on his light despite the blackness around us."

I was so moved by his words – and all the memories it brought back from my earlier years in Lodz – that I enthusiastically proposed that we light the menorah tonight. He shook his head – it was too dangerous to try. I insisted and made off to get some machine oil from the factory.

I was so excited. And for this brief moment I was able to put aside my grief. Carefully, I made my way back to the barrack with my treasured bit of oil. Meanwhile, the strange gentleman had made some wicks, apparently from clothing or some other material.

Now we needed fire to light our makeshift menorah. I noticed at the end of one building smoldering cinders. We agreed that we would wait till dusk and at an opportune moment we would light our Chanukah lights.

But, as we were creeping over to the cinders, a guard, one of the especially ruthless ones, noticed us and grabbed away the oil and wicks we were concealing. He began cursing and shouting at us. A miracle seemed to happen when his superior barked some command that apparently needed his participation, and he ran off, but he took our precious fuel with him. He also shouted that he would be back to take care of us.

I was terrified. But the gentleman was absolutely serene. And then he said to me – words that are etched into my every fiber until this very day:

"Tonight we have performed a miracle greater than the miracle of Chanukah. We have lit a flame more powerful than the Chanukah lights.

"The miracle of Chanukah consisted of finding one crucible of oil, which miraculously burned for eight days. Tonight we preformed an even greater miracle: We lit the ninth invisible candle with no oil...

“Make no mistake. We *did* light the menorah tonight. We did everything in our possible power to kindle the flames, and every effort is recognized by God. God knows that we were deprived by forces that were not in our control, so in some deeper way we lit the menorah. We have lit the ninth flame – the most powerful one of all, so powerful that you can’t even see it.”

The man then promised me:

“You will get out of here alive. And when you do take this ninth invisible flame with you and let it go free. Let it fly like a bird.

“Tell the world – show them the light that has emerged even from the darkest of darkness. We had no physical oil and no spiritual oil. We were wretched creatures, treated worse than animals. Yet, we in some miraculous way we found a ‘crucible’ where none existed – in the hell fires of Auschwitz....

“At Auschwitz there was no oil. Not even defiled oil. No oil, period. Yet we still lit a flame – a flame fueled by the pits of darkness. We never gave up.

“Let the world know that our ninth flame is alive and shining. Tell every person in despair that the flame never goes out.”

As he finished these last words, the Nazi returned and viciously led him away behind one of the barracks. I never saw him again.

I escaped.

A few weeks later the Russians arrived, and we were liberated. And to this day I continue to tell the story of the ninth flame.

## 6. Amazing Story

This is an amazing story. And though I have yet to find mention of the “ninth” flame in Jewish sources – the concept is certainly in accord with Chassidic teachings which hold that the light of Chanukah is rooted in a place that is *beyond* light and darkness. Therefore, it has the power to illuminate and transform even the darkest places, as Psalm 139 states:

If I said, “Surely darkness will hide me,”  
Then the night would illuminate me,  
For darkness hides nothing from You [God],  
And the night shines like the day –  
Darkness is like light.<sup>2</sup>

[Amen.]

## 7. Universal Theme (Optional)

This story emphasizes another universal theme of Chanukah – that of freedom. For on Chanukah, as this Jewish boy learned in Auschwitz, we celebrate the dominance of spirit over matter and the victory of the virtuous few over an oppressive, corrupt majority.

And we celebrate this in public.

For this reason you may have noticed in recent years the public displays of Chanukah menorahs illuminating communities with the universal message of freedom.

But there was a time when Chanukah’s message was not universally embraced. That changed – most significantly with the American Revolution in 1776 and the adoption of the Bill of Rights to the U.S. Constitution in 1789.

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<sup>2</sup> Psalms 139: 11-12.

The Bill of Rights was meant to safeguard the basic individual freedoms of the human race – 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.

Thus the message of Chanukah is as relevant today as it was two millenniums and two centuries ago. Every year we celebrate the power of freedom over oppression with the kindling of the menorah, honoring the victory of light over darkness.

As the sun sets during these eight days, people around the world are lighting candles, each night adding a flame. As you do so too, I urge you to listen carefully to the flames and to their story, a story that will empower you to live a more profound meaningful life, enabling you to face every challenge and overcome difficulty.

Take a bit of time – sit near the flames and study them quietly. And join the rest of humanity that is trying to reclaim its most basic freedoms – whether in Russia or in Syria or on Wall Street.

For we all seek to rise above our subjective, limited perspective and reach for the above and beyond. As citizens of the world, it is our duty and privilege to add to the forces of good both at home and abroad in a steadily growing light that grows brighter and brighter each day. Amen.