



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

# CHANUKAH

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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December 8-16, 2012

Chanukah

**To Be the Wick or the Flame?**



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

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## **ABSTRACT**

Are you a wick or a flame?

As much as you try to be positive, at times it seems so difficult to bring light into this dark world. Yet we all have that capacity. Within us all lies an eternal spring of hope – a “pilot flame” that burns continuously. But on the other end of things, we are also consumed by our material concerns and survival – let’s call that the “wick.”

The physical wick and the spiritual flame constantly compete for our attention. That struggle is the story of our lives – to be the wick or to be the flame? The fascinating thing is that both are necessary, as indeed no flame can burn without the wick which provides its fuel. Some of us may be more wick-oriented and others flame-oriented, but each of us contains both and requires both to accomplish our mission in this world.

This sermon discusses powerful lessons from Chanukah’s flames, explaining how to take these lessons and put them to relevant use in our lives – in the business world, in our closest relationships, in educating our children – how to ignite our wick, reveal our unique light and illuminate our surroundings, even the darkest crevices.

**TO BE THE WICK OR THE FLAME?  
LIFE TRANSFORMING CHANUKAH LESSONS**

**1. Happy Chanukah (Humor)**

Happy Chanukah everybody!

Stuffed with latkes? Looking forward to being stuffed with latkes? To gathering around the menorah? Singing those old favorites like *Oy to the World?* Or, *Schlepping through a Winter Wonderland?*

And did you all receive a lot of Chanukah presents this year?

Last year, my mother gave me two sweaters for Chanukah. And, of course, the next time I visited her, I made sure to wear one. As I greeted her, instead of the expected compliment, she said, "What's the matter? You didn't like the other one?"

Not my mother ... just a joke. My mother is much smarter than that. Last year, she gave me two *identical* sweaters.

This year, I am not sure what she has in store for me...

I noticed though that I didn't get as many cards this year. It seems that with e-mail hardly anybody sends anything through the post anymore. But about a week ago I was standing in line at the Post Office behind an elderly woman, and I heard her request fifty stamps for her Chanukah cards. The postal clerk asked her, "What denomination?" Upon hearing the question, she gasped, "Has it come to this? Well, okay then. Give me 6 Orthodox, 12 Conservative, and 32 Reform."

Fortunately, though the different denominations have different ways of doing things, we all celebrate Chanukah pretty much the same way.

## 2. The Relevance of Chanukah

On Chanukah, we light an eight-branch menorah for eight consecutive nights. And most of us love this holiday.

We all know the miraculous Chanukah story ... that some 2,150 years ago, the Greeks had unleashed the first campaign of religious persecution in recorded history and, in reaction, the Jews went to war. Against all odds, they won. When the victorious Jews recaptured the desecrated Temple in Jerusalem, they set up a make-shift menorah, but only one cruse of pure oil – enough to keep the menorah lit for one day – could be found. Miraculously, that oil stayed lit for eight days until more pure oil could be produced and delivered. And this is the miracle we celebrate to this day.

All that is very nice. We bask in the shining candles, recalling warm childhood memories. And so Chanukah is a pleasant and nostalgic experience for most of us. But truthfully, what does it matter today? Just how relevant is Chanukah to our modern lives?

To find the relevance, said one Hassidic Master, “You have to listen to the flames.”

There is a message in these flames, and they are whispering to us. What are they telling us?

They are telling us that, with God on our side, though we are few and weak, we can be victorious over the many and the strong. They are telling us that no matter how potent are the forces of evil and injustice, goodness, kindness and righteousness can triumph. And they are telling us that no matter how dense the darkness, it can always be transformed into light.

### 3. Light and Modern Physics

It is the relevance of light that I want to talk about today.

In modern physics, light represents a unique force. Not only is it the fastest entity – is there anything faster than the speed of light? – but it is also paradoxically both a wave and a particle. As such, light is endlessly fascinating to science.

Long before the advent of science, light was endlessly fascinating to Jews. In the Temple in Jerusalem, the menorah was so positioned that its light would shine out through specially constructed funnel-shaped windows. And, far and wide, everybody could see it shining bright.

Besides the menorah in the Temple, Jews always kindled lights at home – whether at the start of Shabbat or holiday, or at its end, or in memory of a deceased love one. So kindling flames was always an important Jewish ritual steeped in deep significance.

And this is because in Judaism the flame is symbolic of the human soul.<sup>1</sup> And if the flame represents the soul, then the wick represents the body. Because it takes both these elements – the flame and the wick – to create light. The wick alone is an inanimate object, but the flame which flickers with life cannot exist without the wick feeding it fuel.

### 4. Two Archetypes

So the wick and the flame are metaphors for the two archetypes within us:

- The wick is essentially our physical aspect, our body, our materialistic pursuits which engage us in this world.
- The flame is our spiritual aspect, our soul, always reaching upwards in defiance of gravity.

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<sup>1</sup>“The soul of a human being is a candle to God.” (Proverbs 20:27)

Without the wick, the flame would fly into the night and disappear. The flame needs the wick, not only to nourish it, but to keep it attached to this earth, to keep it grounded. (When you take away the wick, the flame expires ... just as when you take away the body, the soul expires.)

And, of course, this principle applies to any kind of energy. To use it for our benefit, we have to contain it, ground it. Otherwise, it dissipates or is destructive. Electricity, for example, needs a container - a light-bulb, an appliance - to be useful. Without a ground, electricity is at best useless and at worst a killer.

## 5. Balance of Wick and Flame

In a perfect world, there is a balance between the wick and the flame. In balance, the wick does its job, and the flame gives off light. Out of balance, either the wick dominates - and then we are like dead matter, like static fuel that is yet to be ignited, because our soul is trapped and not actualizing its potential. Or, the opposite can happen. The flame dominates and a spiritual fire burns out of control, destroying rather than illuminating. It is only when the two are in balance that there can be a light that illuminates and warms the world.

These two forces within us - the physical and the spiritual - are constantly involved in a tug of war. And it is up to us to keep them in the proper balance.

Unfortunately, most of us spend more time paying attention to the demands of our physical side, which is chiefly concerned with survival. Survival includes eating, sleeping, working and so forth - all of our existential needs which are so consuming and which occupy most of our time. They represent the wick of our lives.

But the other side - the flame side - will not be denied. This is the yearning for meaning, the yearning for a deeper understanding, the yearning for love, the yearning for transcendence. If stifled inside the body, this side is going to make itself felt in a desperate attempt at finding expression.

If you become entangled in the rat race, and your transcendent side is ignored and suppressed, you will feel the side-effects. You are bound to feel a tremendous frustration at not being able to please everybody who is insisting that you satisfy their needs and demands – your boss, your spouse, your family. You will feel consumed by the materialistic world, while a part of you feels starved.

But if you go too far in the other direction, you will experience other problems. If you become so focused on transcendence that you ignore your basic needs, you can lose grounding in a very real way. Certainly hermits and ascetics, who eschew the world to live alone on the mountain top, lose touch with this world and sometimes with sanity.

The Torah warns against this in the story of the spies/scouts who were sent to reconnaissance the Promised Land in order to assess the Israelites' readiness to enter in. The scouts were spiritual, flame-driven people. And there they saw so many wick-driven people, they decided this was not the place for them. They said they'd rather stay in the pristine wilderness, in an oasis of spirituality.<sup>2</sup> But God condemned their attitude.

Why? Because that is not the purpose of existence. The purpose of existence is to enter into the world of the wick and turn it into a flame. Not to escape into the world of the spirit.

## 6. We Need Each Other

Now comes Chanukah to teach us just how much the wick needs the flame and vice versa. How much we need each other. Because some of us are more wick than flame, and some of us are more flame than wick. But we can help each other to achieve balance.

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<sup>2</sup> Numbers 13:27-31.

For example, educators and mentors are flame-oriented, they are the lamp-lighters, while business people are wick-oriented – they are the ones who are turning wicks into cash and helping support the lamp-lighters. Of course, we all embody some of this and some of that, but I am talking about which side dominates.

So, if we find that we are constantly tipping to one side or the other, and having a hard time maintaining a balance, we can find partnerships that help us achieve it. For example, an artist – consumed by the flame of creativity – needs a businessman to ground him and get his work out to those who will be inspired by it. And the businessman, if his life is only about selling wicks, needs to divert some of his God-given talents toward more spiritual pursuits, such as fundraising for charity, for example.

Exactly how it is meant to work, we see from the example of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, especially from the partnership of the tribes of Issachar and Zebulon.

The members of the tribe of Issachar were known to be primarily scholars, while those of Zebulon were primarily sea-faring merchants.<sup>3</sup> So they made a partnership. And each understood their blessings – Issachar understood they were more flame-oriented and that they needed the wick for balance. And Zebulon understood that they were more wick-oriented and that they needed the flame. So Zebulon agreed to support the scholars of Issachar and the scholars of Issachar agreed to trade some of their accrued merit in exchange.<sup>4</sup> Of course, both studied and worked, but each allowed their God-given proclivities to dominate while recognizing that they needed balance – hence their partnership.

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 49:13-14 and Deuteronomy 33:18-19.

<sup>4</sup> *Midrash Rabba Bereishit* 99:9, cited in Rashi on Deuteronomy 33:18. See also *Ramah Yoreh De'ah* 246:1, and the commentaries there.



## 7. Givers and Takers

In our world, we see tremendous imbalance and very little partnership. The wick people tend to hoard and hold onto the material. And the flame people tend to want to live insulated from the material world, being selfishly spiritual. But it is only when they are balanced that either type can truly give to others.

Which brings us to the question: Are you a giver or are you a taker? Most people are actually some of both, but the question is what are you more of?

The theory of social evolution, also known as social Darwinism, sees the driving force of humanity as survival, because only the strongest/fittest ultimately survive. This theory considers any seemingly altruistic act as inherently selfish. It posits that some people realize that to survive they need to be nice to others and share with them, and therefore – for that selfish reason – they are inclined to engage in unselfish acts.

The Torah couldn't disagree more. While the Torah acknowledges that the body is driven by survival, it unequivocally denies that that's all there is to a human being. The Torah maintains that the human being – at the core – is divine, having been created in the divine image.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the human being is fundamentally good, altruistic, a giver.

Yes, the giving soul is trapped in a taker's body, but that is the challenge of life. We are constantly trying to achieve the right balance, because we cannot be satisfied or fulfilled if we are too skewed.

On Chanukah, as we watch the wick and the flame, we see that the body and the spirit can join forces, become balanced and give off a beautiful light that not only illuminates, but warms. The lights of Chanukah illustrate this perfect balance in a most beautiful way.

Let us now examine how we can apply this lesson of Chanukah and make it relevant in our lives – whether in our closest relationships, in the business world, or in educating our children. How we can ignite our wick, reveal our unique light and illuminate our surroundings, even the darkest crevices.

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<sup>5</sup> Genesis 1:26-27.

## 8. Wick and Flame in Relationships

First, let's talk about relationships.

There is a technique in marital therapy where partners at odds with each other are asked to list their needs and examine how the other partner is meeting those needs. Then they are asked to compare their lists and see how far off they are in understanding each other.

While it is helpful to see what the other thinks he or she is missing, there is a basic flaw to this approach – the assumption that a relationship is primarily about need-fulfillment.

A relationship is about giving. Not about taking.

As Katherine Hepburn so famously said: “Love has nothing to do with what you are expecting to get – only with what you are expecting to give, which is everything.”

The essence of any relationship is giving. Because the essence of the soul is to be a giver. If you are revealing your soul – if your flame is giving off warmth – then you are naturally giving. And you are giving to many people, not just your spouse and family, though first and foremost to them.

Now, if you are revealing your soul and you are giving, then your loved ones' needs are automatically fulfilled.

A life driven by needs is wick-driven. A life driven by giving is flame-driven.

## 9. Wick and Flame in Business

What about business?

Those who are blessed to understand the world of the wicks, the world of commerce, have unique skills and knowledge to deliver. They are more skilled at the existential, whereas the flame people are more skilled at the transcendental.

It is well known that business people resist investing in creative projects – such as music, art, movies, books – and when they do, they insist on various safeguards in order to maintain control, because they know that artists rarely respect the bottom line.

The artists are driven and satisfied by expressing their art; that's their passion. No matter what it takes; no matter what it costs. But their ambition generally ends there. Yes, they want their work sold but most of their energy has been expended in the creation of the art with little left for its distribution. The business people must sell that artwork, must package it, must make it accessible and marketable, but the artists rarely appreciate and want to be involved with any of that.

So who is selfish? The artists who only care about expressing themselves or the business people who are trying to sell that art, to share it with others?

Yes, the business people want to make money, but in the process they are driven to getting the art before a larger audience.

In Kabbalah, there is a concept that the source of the container is higher than the source of the light. We assume that the flame is the more powerful force while the wick is secondary. But the Kabbalah says it's the other way around.

This suggests that the business people – who are packaging the light (so to speak) and distributing it to the widest possible audience – are doing something more profound than the artists who are transmitting the energy and giving off the light.

## 10. Wick and Flame in Education

And now we come to education – the process of imparting knowledge, ideas and values.

But is that all there is to education? To impart information? Or is it to ignite and illuminate?

I would suggest that true education is about illuminating and empowering the students' minds so that they can go on to learn on their own without teachers, listening to the voice of their own soul.

When you turn on the light in a dark room what happens? The room does not essentially change, but the light illuminates what was always there. So it is with students and teachers. By illuminating the students' minds, true educators bring awareness to their students, showing them the tools they already possess and only need to learn how to use.

This is what turning the wick into a flame is all about. It is taking raw matter and converting it into something that will eventually produce light. So true education is meant to teach the students to think, to gather information on their own, to prioritize, analyze and synthesize. And then to go forward and illuminate their corner of the world.

## 11. To Be a Lamplighter

There is a wonderful lesson in the instructions God issued to Aaron, the High Priest, when He commanded him to light the menorah in the Sanctuary.<sup>6</sup> Aaron had to light each flame and then wait. He had to make sure it caught and could rise on its own. Only then could Aaron walk away and light the next flame.

Why was this so critical? Because we are not just talking about igniting flames, but about igniting lives, about igniting souls.

And, of course, that is the function of educators – to be lamplighters.

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<sup>6</sup> Rashi on Numbers 8:1-3.

If the educators do their part in igniting the minds of their students, they have empowered them. And then, even when the educators are not present, the students have the tools to forge on with life.

This metaphor of lighting the menorah carefully – waiting patiently as each small flame hesitates, catches, hovers and finally rises upwards – applies to all of us.

Because we are not just talking about lighting up a room – in which case we would not care how you flip the switch – we are talking about illuminating this world, and bringing light and warmth to others.

We are all lamplighters. By giving off our own light, we are helping to ignite the dormant light in others.

This is what we learn from the great men and women of the Torah – Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob, Leah and Rachel, Moses and Miriam. They were all lamplighters. They lived by the principle that the material universe has enormous potential for light and warmth.

Now if you live by this principle, you automatically convey it to others and ignite their minds. And though you pass the light from yourself to others, your own flame is never diminished. If you give away anything physical, you will have less of it, but your flame can light a thousand other flames and never be diminished in the least. Quite the contrary: every new flame lit adds power to the original flame.

You have the potential to ignite something in every person that you meet. And if you ignite another flame, you create a ripple effect – each flame igniting another flame and another flame. And when many flames come together, they join as one in generating tremendous light and warmth in the world.

As you [continue to] light the lights of Chanukah, think about these ideas – watch the flames and listen to the story they tell. They have so much to teach you, your families and all of us. Amen.

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