



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Vayeishev

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

December 8, 2012
Vayeishev-Chanukah

**Twilight Zone: Bringing Light
Into Darkness**



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

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ABSTRACT

For the Jewish people, this period in history is – to paraphrase Dickens – the best of times and in some ways most difficult times. Never have we experienced such a renaissance of Jewish life, both here and especially in Israel. Never have Jews enjoyed such freedoms and comforts, to openly practice their faith and educate their children as they see fit without the fear of oppressive regimes. Yet, we face unprecedented rates of assimilation, ignorance and apathy.

Israel is thriving on one end, but increasingly isolated on the other. It is not “Night,” but there are dark clouds above our heads.

In Italy, violent protesters are massing at the Great Synagogue of Rome accusing the Jews of their country’s economic woes. In Hungary, some in the parliament want to make a list of the Jews who pose a “security threat.” In France, anti-Semitic incidents are up 45 percent, and it is not possible to walk the streets of Paris identified as a Jew. On top of that, the UN, with a vote of 138 to 9 and the blessing of most Western powers, has accepted Palestine as a (non-member) “state,” despite the fact that half of it is ruled by a terrorist organization bent on destroying Israel. The Jewish nation and Jews in many places in the world are isolated more than ever.

Into this twilight – a confused mix of light and dark – comes Chanukah, which begins tonight with the lighting of the first bright candle after darkness falls.

What lessons does Chanukah teach us about our discom-bobulated times?

This sermon connects the current time with the story of Chanukah and the story of Joseph, whose stellar rise from a dark pit to the brightest light, “from prison to the throne,” teaches us to deal with our own challenges. It explains how darkness is part of the light.

TWILIGHT ZONE

Bringing Light Into Darkness

1. Good and Bad News

Did you hear the one about the guy from *Chelem* – *Chelem* is a town of fools on whose back many a joke has been made; every city has its *Chelem* section – who leaves his house carrying an umbrella. He meets his friend and as they walk together it begins to rain. “Why aren’t you opening your umbrella?” asks the friend. “Because the umbrella has holes in it,” answers the *chochom* (“wise one”) from *Chelem*. “So then, why did you bring it with you?!” asks his incredulous friend. “Because I didn’t think it was going to rain”...

Life seems to be filled with paradox. Whenever there is some good news, there usually is also some not such good news.

It reminds me of the Rabbi making an appeal in his Synagogue to fix the broken roof. They needed \$100,000 for the job. “My dear friends,” declares the Rabbi, “I have good news and bad news. The good news is that we have the money.” All the congregants began to smile in relief, feeling off the hook. “The bad news is,” continues the Rabbi, “that the money is in your pockets.”

2. Twilight

For Jewish people, this period in history is – to paraphrase Dickens – the best of times and in some ways, most difficult times. Never have we experienced such a renaissance of Jewish life, both here and especially in Israel. Never have Jews enjoyed such freedoms and comforts, to openly practice their faith and educate their children as they see fit without the fear of oppressive regimes. Yet, we face unprecedented rates of assimilation, ignorance and apathy.

Israel is thriving on one end, but increasingly isolated on the other. It is not “Night,” but there are dark clouds above our heads.

Consider some of the events of the past few weeks, and you will see what I mean:

1. In Italy, a mass protest against the country’s economic woes turned ugly in mid-November when the demonstrators took their complaints to the Great Synagogue of Rome, accusing the Jews of being responsible and shouting anti-Semitic slogans. As the demonstration turned violent and police clashed with the protesters, the residents of the Jewish Ghetto trembled in their homes.¹
2. In Hungary, a week later, the leader of the Jobbik Party, the third largest party in the country’s parliament which enjoys wide public support, proposed that a list of Jews who work in the Hungarian government be drawn up as they pose “a national security risk to Hungary.”²
3. At about the same time, Hamas, the terrorist organization that runs Gaza, began lobbying missiles into Israel. Before the conflict was over, nearly 1500 fell, some landing as far as Tel Aviv.

¹ <http://www.timesofisrael.com/protesters-chant-anti-semitic-slogans-outside-rome-synagogue/>

² Jerusalem Post, November 29, 2012.

³ <http://www.timesofisrael.com/anti-semitic-attacks-in-france-rise-45-percent-this-year/>

4. November ended with the United Nations voting 138 to 9, to admit Palestine as a (non-member) “state,” despite the fact that half of it is ruled by Hamas which is bent on destroying Israel. The vote was a slap in the face of the Jewish nation, especially since voting for resolution were not just Muslim countries but many Western powers, including France, Spain, Switzerland, Denmark and Italy.

5. Many of these Western powers followed their vote by recalling their ambassadors from Israel and threatening sanctions, when the Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu announced the building of additional homes in the Judea area of the West Bank.

Certainly, more and more each day, the Jewish nation finds itself isolated as do pockets of Jews in many parts of the world. Anti-Semitic attacks in France, for example, have risen 45 percent this year, and it is no longer possible to walk the streets of Paris identified as a Jew.³

Mixed together with the blessings of our times there are also dark clouds massing above our heads.

But into this twilight – a confused mix of light and dark – comes Chanukah, which begins tonight [this Saturday night] with the lighting of the first bright candle.

What lessons does Chanukah teach us about our discombobulated times?

3. The Bright Light of Chanukah

The story of Chanukah also began in a dark time – and it was “Night” back then.

The Greeks had unleashed the first campaign of religious persecution in recorded history and, in reaction, the Jews loyal to Torah rebelled. The result was a war that lasted twenty-five years and challenged the might of the Greek Empire.

The most conservative estimates say that it was a fight of about 12,000 poorly armed people against 40,000 professional soldiers. And miraculously the Jews won.⁴

When the victors arrived at the site of the desecrated Temple, they found only one cruse of pure olive oil with which to light a make-shift menorah. That one cruse should have lasted, at most, one day but it lasted eight,⁵ emphasizing the victory of light over darkness.⁶

Today, we light the Chanukah menorah (or *Chanukiah* as some call it) at nightfall for eight nights, placing it in a window or door, or some other place visible from the street. In this way, we publicize the miracle – of the victory of light over dark, of the few over the many, of the weak over the strong – as we continue to transform darkness into light.

4. The Story of Joseph

In the Jewish calendar, Chanukah corresponds to the Torah readings (*Parshat Vayeishev* and *Parshat Miketz*) which relate the story of Joseph – another story which begins in darkness.

Having aroused the jealousy of his brothers, Joseph finds himself captured by them and thrown into a pit. Though at first they mean to kill him, they relent and sell him into Egyptian slavery instead. Undaunted, Joseph does well as a slave, rises through the ranks, only to be falsely accused of assaulting his master's wife.

Thrown into prison, he distinguishes himself among the prisoners, and even interprets the dreams of the Pharaoh's baker and vintner. Through an odd twist of fate, his ability to analyze dreams leads to his freedom:

⁴See *Crash Course in Jewish History* by Ken Spiro, chapters 28-29.

⁵Talmud, Shabbat 21b.

⁶ See *Torah Ohr Chanukah 32b; 38b; 42a. Shaarei Orach, B'chof Hei B'Kislev, ch. 53. 59.*

One night the Pharaoh is disturbed by an intense dream of seven fat and seven lean cows, and then another dream of seven thick and seven slim stalks. And, when no one can interpret the dreams satisfactorily, Joseph is brought out of prison. He interprets the dreams as a prediction of seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. As a result, he is charged with overseeing the management of the empire's grain storehouses and given the title of viceroy of Egypt, a position second only to that of the Pharaoh himself.⁷

So this is a story of a stellar rise from a dark pit to the brightest light, "from prison to the throne."⁸

5. Two Types of Light

Of course, there are different types of darkness and different types of light.

The mystics explain that we have two types of light – direct and indirect. Direct is any type of light that shines directly – for example, the sun, fire, flame, light-bulb. The indirect does not radiate light; it is hidden and concealed. It is a powerful light but we have to work to reveal it, and it is even greater than the direct light.⁹

The direct light does not always have the power to vanquish darkness, but the indirect light – because it *comes from* darkness – does.

The indirect light comes out in a crisis, and by virtue of its origins, it is stronger. It is a light that is revealed when we manage to pass a test, as we did all those many years ago at Chanukah and as Joseph did.

⁷ Genesis chapters 37-41.

⁸ Ecclesiastes 4:14.

⁹ Ecclesiastes 2:13.

6. The Pressure of a Test

Dark times test us. They bring with them uncommon worry and uncommon pressure, which combine to show us what we are made of.

In this context, the advice of the sages comes to mind. They said that the true character of a man comes out in *kiso, kaso, koso* – literally, “his pocket, his anger and his cup.” They meant that when a person’s pocket/wallet is affected, when he is angry/upset, and when he is tipsy/drunk, that’s when his true colors emerge.

Or, as Eleanor Roosevelt said, “A woman is like a tea bag. You don’t know how strong she is until you put her in hot water.” Without hot water, without pressure, you don’t know.

We can say the same thing not just about women, but about the Jewish people as a whole.

And this is exactly the message of Chanukah.

To make the fuel for the Temple menorah, the olives had to be pressed. Olive oil does not come out without pressure. Some of the most valuable and beautiful things emerge from pressure, darkness and pain – take the diamond for example, or the birth of a child.

A butterfly emerges from a cocoon. It was once a caterpillar. It has to go through a period of darkness, a state of near death, and to struggle to break free until it emerges as a beautiful butterfly.

The same is true of anything worth having in life, a period of darkness and confusion is necessary for the next stage to emerge. Creativity is the child of frustration. Every revelation and paradigm shift is preceded by a void and vacuum, as the “old skin” sheds, making place for a “new layer.”

7. The Ferris-Wheel of Life

Everything that is happening on the outside is also happening within. The dark and the light are both reflected in the world at large and in our personal lives. And that makes it so much more meaningful, because even if we can't always change the world directly, we can change ourselves.

We have stages in our lives when we are in the light and when we are in darkness. On the simplest level this means our moods. There are times when we are up and optimistic, and there are times when we feel aimless and despondent, when we feel we are in a dark place. This is part of the human condition.

As one Chassidic Master said, "Life is like a Ferris-Wheel. Don't be depressed when you are on the bottom because the wheel will turn. But don't be arrogant when you are on the top, because the wheel will turn again."

Incidentally, have you heard the joke about the woman who went on a Ferris-Wheel while her husband, who was afraid, waited below? Well, something went wrong and, when the machine came to a jolting halt, she fell out right at his feet. Concerned, he asked, "Are you hurt?" She replied, "Of course, I'm hurt. I went around three times, and you didn't wave once!"

When we appreciate the cycles of life, we accept that every transition – by its nature – will bring some pain, disorientation, confusion and even loss. But this discomfort is necessary for growth. When things are good, we have a tendency to want to hold onto that state, but if we managed to, we'd never move forward.

Life is a long journey which sometimes moves through light and sometimes through darkness. What we learn from the story of Chanukah and from the story of Joseph is that the darkness has a purpose and it can bring out some of our greatest strengths.

8. Growing Through Pain

People who have grown through challenges and through pain achieve a dimension of refinement and awareness and insight that can never be equaled by those who did not go through what they did.

Likewise, those who have fallen and hit bottom, and then repented the errors of their ways, are much better people than they would have been had they never fallen.

In fact, the Talmud states¹⁰ that there are two ways of doing *teshuvah* – of returning to God through repentance. One is returning from fear of punishment; the other is returning out of love. The first kind of repentance is good and will certainly transform the person's future. But returning to God from love is a passionate act which actually transforms the past.

It does so by turning the negative energy that had been unleashed by transgression and transforming it into a form of positive energy¹¹ – literally, it does so by turning darkness into a beacon of light.

The radio talk show host, Joey Reynolds, a recovered drug addict, has devoted his life to helping others. He says himself that he would not be doing all the good that he does today, if he had not hit bottom and come back. He might have lived a quiet life as an investment banker and that would have been fine. But because he did not live a quiet life, because he suffered, fell and returned from the pit, he has been able to achieve so much more.

Incidentally, serious addictive personalities are usually very passionate people. Calm, even-tempered people don't obsess like addicts do. So an obsession and any type of compulsion is a very powerful energy. Of course, it can be highly destructive, and the key is to channel it into positive and constructive activity.

¹⁰ *Yuma* 86b.

¹¹ See Tanya chapter 7.

9. The Holy Force of Sexuality (Optional)

The same applies to sexuality – a very potent force in society.

While other religions view sexuality as a necessary evil (without which procreation of the species would not be possible) and consider celibacy a higher value, Judaism considers sexuality – the highest expression of intimacy – a holy force.

Indeed, in the day when the Temple in Jerusalem stood and the Jewish Supreme Court, the Sanhedrin, was operational, neither the High Priest, nor the Chief Judge could be celibate – they had to be married.

Yes, sexuality is a potent force, and it can be easily distorted, but this is true for any force of passion and holiness – the more powerful, the more potential damage it can do, but also the more light it can bring into the world. And, because it is so potent, it must be treated with extra care, with extra caution.

The place of the most intense holiness was the Holy of Holies in the Temple. No one could enter it except the High Priest, and then only once a year on Yom Kippur when he had to purify himself especially for the task. This intense degree of holiness could not tolerate the tiniest blemish. It was as sensitive as an eye is to one speck of dust or to one stray eyelash.

As we all well know – a grain of sand on the hand is nothing; a grain of sand in the eye is irritating if not painful. It is all relative, of course ... as Einstein taught us ... and as the Yiddish Theory of Relativity illustrates: “Three hairs on your head are not much. But three hairs in your soup?”

So, wherever there is a lot of holiness, there is the possibility of a lot of distortion. And this is why sexuality is so highly regulated in Judaism ... because it is the most potent force in existence. And such potency can cut two ways – it can create life and bring the most amazing beauty into the world, or it can destroy life.

When properly channeled it will reveal its light, if not, it can lead to greater darkness.

10. In Times of Darkness

Today, despite all our great achievements and technological breakthroughs, psychologically and spiritually we often find ourselves in darkness, so that we sometimes feel that we are stumbling around, not knowing where to turn and what will be. This is especially true regarding relationships, intimacy and the deeper forces at work in our psyches. But this very darkness presents us with a tremendous opportunity.

Because what happens around us may not be within our control, but what happens in our personal lives is certainly within our control.

Chanukah teaches us that we have the power to not only vanquish darkness but to transform it. When things are going badly, we have to know that this is an opportunity to discover redemption. We may not be able to do it alone, we may need someone to help us who is objective and wiser – someone who has been through fire and returned. But help is always available, because God makes sure of it. There is always someone to pull us out of the pit, to throw us a rope.

And especially now, we can use the special power of Chanukah to pierce the darkness.

11. The Everlasting Menorah

Chanukah menorah commemorates the Temple menorah. Of course, the Temple was destroyed two thousand years ago, its menorah darkened ever since.

But the light of Chanukah has never been extinguished and never will, as Nachmanides writes: “These [Chanukah] lights will never disappear.”¹²

Can the effect be stronger than the cause? This is an example when it is true. This is an example of how darkness creates a greater light than light does.

¹²Nachmanides on Numbers 8:2.

Chanukah was born in dark times, and yet its light still burns, and its flames have burned through crusades, inquisitions, pogroms and the Holocaust. As we well know, Jews have gone to great length to light the Chanukah menorahs in the concentration camps and gulags, because in that terrible darkness the light of Chanukah burned especially bright.

Natan Sharansky, in his book *Fear No Evil*, tells the story of lighting a make-shift the Chanukah menorah in the Soviet gulag, where it was promptly confiscated. He went on a hunger strike to get it back. And so he was summoned to the camp director's office, and there he struck a deal to be allowed to light the menorah in the sole presence of the director – a certain Major Osin – which allowed Osin to save face in front of the gulag's population. Sharansky describes the bizarre ritual that followed:

Major Osin was an enormous, flabby man of around 50, with small eyes and puffy eyelids, who seemed to have long ago lost interest in everything but food. But he was a master of intrigue who had successfully overtaken many of his colleagues on the road to advancement ... I could see that he had enjoyed his power over [the prisoners,] the zeks and liked to see them suffer. But he never forgot that the zeks were, above all, a means for advancing his career, and he knew how to back off in a crisis ... As I looked at this predator, sitting at an elegant polished table and wearing a benevolent smile, I was seized by an amusing idea.

"Listen," I said, "I'm sure you have my menorah somewhere. It's very important to me to celebrate the last night of Chanukah. Why not let me do it here and now, together with you? You'll give me the menorah, I'll light the candles and say the prayer and, if all goes well, I'll end the hunger strike."

Osin thought it over and promptly the confiscated menorah appeared from his desk ... "I [also] need eight candles," I said. (In fact I needed nine, but when it came to Jewish rituals I was still a novice.) ... Osin took out a handsome inlaid pocketknife and deftly cut me eight candles [from the one large candle available].

I arranged the candles and went to the coat rack for my hat, explaining to Osin that "during the prayer you must stand with your head covered and at the end say 'Amen.'"

He put on his major's hat and stood. I lit the candles and recited my own prayer in Hebrew, which went something like this: "Blessed are You, God, for allowing me to rejoice on this day of Chanukah, the holiday of our liberation, the holiday of our return to the way of our fathers. Blessed are You, God, for allowing me to light these candles. May you allow me to light the Chanukah candles many times in your city, Jerusalem, with my wife, Avital, and my family and friends."

[And] inspired by the sight of Osin standing meekly at attention, I added in Hebrew: "And may the day come when all our enemies, who today are planning our destruction, will stand before us and hear our prayers and say 'Amen.'"

"Amen," Osin echoed back. He sighed with relief, sat down and removed his hat. For some time we looked silently at the burning candles.

Some way of turning darkness into light and vanquishing formidable enemies!

So when you look at the flames of the Chanukah tonight [Saturday night], and all the following eight nights, listen to what the flames tell you. They will tell you that we live in a world of paradoxes; a twilight in which light and darkness are often intertwined, but that light always prevails as long as you fuel and feed it.

They also tell us that no one can extinguish the flames – not any enemy past or present – and that they will burn through good times and through terrible times.

They tell us that even the darkness feeds the flames. They behoove us to look at today's challenges – from within (like assimilation, ignorance and apathy) or from without (like the anti-Semitism we are witnessing) – as wake-up calls, to awaken us from our complacency and light even brighter flames to counteract the darkness. A little light dispels much darkness.

That's the power of Chanukah – invincibility that comes from passing through darkness.

Indeed, my friends, the Chanukah flames teach us many things. Listen to them well. They have much to tell us.

May we always be blessed with abundant light. But at times when things may be a bit hard, may Chanukah empower us that our lights burn ever brighter to vanquish the night. Indeed, *it will be so* if we want it to be so, for we have the power to transform darkness into light. Amen.