



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Mikeitz

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December 20, 2014

Mikeitz

**Is Chanukah A Religious
Holiday?**



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

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ABSTRACT

Is Chanukah a religious holiday?

The core theme of Chanukah is oil. One little cruse of pure olive oil was discovered and it miraculously burned for eight days. Today, we light menorahs (preferably of oil) and eat foods fried in oil, latkes and jelly doughnuts – great for your soul, not so much for your waistline.

So Chanukah seems to be less about religion than it is about oil.

Oil – as well as water, bread and wine – represent different aspects of Torah. Water and bread represent the revealed aspects, such as what to do and how to live, while wine and oil represent the hidden layers, like why to live and what happens when we do.

The revealed gets into the divine mechanics; the secrets get into the divine soul.

Chanukah – and its emphasis on oil – is all about touching the deepest secreted levels of the divine and the deepest, secreted levels of our selves. This is how we light up the dark night.

Two powerful stories on Chanukah in the Russian gulag reveal this hidden secret.

This is not “religious.”

This is simply divine.

IS CHANUKAH A RELIGIOUS HOLIDAY?

1. Happy Chanukah!

Happy Chanukah to one and all! Something so beautiful blankets the world during the eight days of the Festival of Lights – palatable warmth and special illumination permeating our lives. Being served up with a mound of latkes and a pyramid of fried jelly doughnuts doesn't hurt either.

Of all the Jewish festivals sprinkled throughout the year like powdered sugar on a doughnut, Chanukah seems to be the least “religious” of all the holidays. “Religious” is a big word, but its simple meaning is that it refers to an organized system of rituals and religious actions. All Jewish festivals are brimming with rituals – from *matzah* on Passover to *lulav* on Sukkot to the *Megillah* on Purim – yet on Chanukah we light a few candles, say an extra prayer or two, and that's it.

Indeed, where most Jewish holidays prohibit us from working or from acting as we do on regular mundane workdays, Chanukah does not. Whereas all other festivals have a formal a meal, Chanukah has parties with activities such as *dreidel* spins and handing our *gelt* to children – deeds no one would deem overly religious.

Last night we made *Kiddush*, washed our hands and had a Shabbat dinner. We will do the same today after the prayer service has concluded. This is how the mitzvah of Shabbat is observed every week. On Chanukah, there is no mitzvah for such a formal religious observance.

It is for this reason that even devoutly secular Jews, who wouldn't even venture on Yom Kippur into a zip code that contains a synagogue, will suddenly smile when they see a Chanukah menorah. And, if you walk down the streets of any big city, you will find menorahs perched in many a store window and building lobby.

This begs the question: Is Chanukah a religious holiday?

2. Three Rabbis (Joke)

At a rabbinical conference, three rabbis get to talking about how everyone comes to them with their problems but they have no one to go to with their problems. And they agree to share their problems with each other.

The first rabbi says, "I'm addicted to Manischewitz. When no one is looking, I swig that stuff like it's nobody's business and, by the time *Kiddush* comes around, there's nothing left."

The second rabbi says, "I'm a compulsive gambler. To feed my compulsion, every month I take all the money from the central community *pushkah*, charity box, and run off to Vegas and its blackjack tables."

The third rabbi says, "My constituents tell me their deepest, darkest secrets in confidence and I divulge them to everyone. My problem is that I cannot, for the life of me, keep a secret."

3. A Secret about Secrets

Let me tell you a secret about secrets.

Secrets are unknown things, messages that are concealed, layers that are hidden. We only reveal our deepest secrets to the people we are closest to, people whom we trust the most. And we only reveal them when it is necessary and appropriate.

Everything on the surface is revealed – our faces, words and actions are there for all to see. But then there are many more layers beneath the surface, concealed parts that no one sees. There are "dark" secrets that we hide because we are ashamed, but there are also "light" secrets that we don't even know we hide because they are just so deep. Our essence, our core, our souls are such deep "light" secrets.

Just as there are layers to everything, some revealed, others hidden, some known, others secret, so too in the Torah there are many layers – there are aspects that are revealed and aspects that are secret. There are even layers that are hidden from the secrets.

The revealed layers refer to the aspects of Torah that tell us what to do and what not to do, how, when, where to do it and how, when, where not to do it. The secret layers contain the parts of Torah that explain the psyche of creation, the purpose of humankind, the meaning of it all, and the mysterious, holy process of the Creator.

In the mystical literature, it is well documented that bread, water, wine and oil represent various levels of Torah.¹

Bread and water are requirements for human life and sustenance. Wine and oil are not required but bring joy and pleasure. Bread and water represent the revealed layers of existence. Wine and oil represent the hidden levels of reality. As we see from the process itself, when you look at a grape or an olive, you do not see wine or oil – the wine is concealed within the grape and its potential must be revealed, and the oil is certainly hidden within the olive and only by crushing the olive can the pure oil, hidden within, be extracted.

Water does not hide anything. With water what you see is what you get. Bread, too, is pretty much always revealed – true, you have to grind the grain into flour, but it's still the same grain, revealed and hiding nothing.

4. Revealed and Hidden Torah

When applied to Torah, the bread and water elements represent the revealed aspects of the law, the requirements of what is and what is not allowed – that is, they represent the technical structures of Torah and its commandments. Such as: give ten percent to charity, do not mix milk and meat, make a blessing when you eat. These are the technical, operational and mechanical aspects of Torah.

Like bread and water, these revealed elements are required so that we can live by them, doing the divine deeds and implementing the divine plan.

¹ See *Likkutei Torah*, Shir Hashirim p. 24dff; Imrei Binah, Shaar Kriat Shema, ch. 53ff. Et al.

But then there are also the concealed elements of Torah, the mystical beyond, the divine thought process – the *why* to the law's *what*. Like wine and oil, these hidden levels increase the Torah's vibrancy and pleasure, but it is possible to observe the Torah without them. Like wine and oil, these concealed layers are extracted only through effort, through squeezing the grape and crushing the olive.

Now, within the concealed layers of Torah, there are differences between the secrets and the secrets of the secrets. And this is represented by the difference between wine and oil.²

Wine is only drunk at special occasions, and then in moderation; and oil is never drunk, only perhaps drizzled once in a while, sparingly, upon delicate foods. Indeed, it isn't tasty or healthy to guzzle pure oil straight up.

Wine symbolizes the hidden elements of Torah that are enjoyed at certain times, and that's why we make Kiddush on wine at certain soulful times, like Shabbat and the holidays. In these moments of heightened spirituality, we access the secrets of Torah, the intoxicating vibrancy of the Torah's soul.

5. Oil and Chanukah

Then there is Chanukah, when there is no mitzvah to make Kiddush on wine, or even *Hamotzi* on bread. Indeed, for this reason (and the fact that, unlike most holidays, many people do work on Chanukah) there is a false perception that Chanukah is a "minor holiday."

Nothing could be farther from the truth. It is precisely in the darkness of a winter night, precisely in the depths of work and matter and physicality, that the deepest truths of Torah, its most concealed layers, are revealed.

² With regard to this and the following see Sefer Hasichot 5752 vol. I, p. 195ff.

This is why the miracle of Chanukah revolves around oil. Finding a small cruse of pure, unadulterated olive oil with the High Priest's seal was the first part of the miracle. The fact that this cruse of oil, sufficient for one day, burned for eight days, was the second part of the miracle.

And today we commemorate this miraculous event by lighting menorahs, igniting the oil, as well as by eating foods fried in oil, such as latkes and jelly donuts.

Today, in a time of spiritual darkness, we do not see God. We have been exiled for two thousand years from our home, and in this exile, Judaism has been turned into a great-aunt whom we visit once a year in her old age home (if even that). Today, the greatest of all miracles is to find a drop of pure, unadulterated olive oil within the wreckage, to discover the core nucleus of who we are in this world of spiritual darkness, to uncover the deepest secret of our souls.

We find it on Chanukah, when one small measure of purity, our secret essence, is revealed and burns supernaturally for much longer and much brighter than we could have ever imagined.

My illuminated friends, this oil in many ways is much deeper than the wine, bread and water that we experience throughout the rest of the year.

6. Joseph, Revealer of Secrets

Perhaps another Master of Secrets, of whom we just read in our Torah portion, may accentuate this point.

Nothing could be as dark as Egypt, a place of necromancers, idolaters and confinement. Thrown into this pit devoid of spiritual light was a young man named Joseph. But when Joseph was brought in front of Pharaoh, he blew Pharaoh's mind. He revealed to Pharaoh a spiritual light the likes of which Egypt had never seen. As the Torah states:

So Pharaoh said to his servants, "Will we find one like this, a man in whom there is the spirit of God?" Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has let you know all this, there is no one as understanding and wise as you."³

Joseph was thus made the Viceroy of Egypt. As was custom in the land, Pharaoh bestowed upon Joseph a title, *Tzofnat Paaneach*.⁴ The commentaries discuss the meaning of this name at length.⁵

The great 11th century Torah commentator, Rashi, cites Targum Onkelus that this is a Hebrew translation of an Egyptian name meaning "Revealer of Secrets."⁶ This is why, when Pharaoh saw the light that emanated from Joseph's being, he called him this name - *Tzofnat Paaneach*, the "Revealer of Secrets."

Joseph was a man of God who, for whatever providential reason, was sold into Egyptian slavery. In this epitome of darkness, Joseph tapped the reservoir of his soul, the secrets that are hidden therein and taught the darkness what light means. In Egypt the secrets of the universe were concealed under a million layers of pagan ash; it took a Godly man like Joseph to blow away the dark soot and reveal the secret light of divinity.

7. Exile Darker than Egypt

Today, we live in an exile that in many ways is much darker than Egypt. Thank God, we do not have to endure the physical persecutions and material slavery that our ancestors did endure. Today, our darkness is spiritual, concealing the meaning, purpose and soul of life. Today, our challenge is in connecting with our heritage, our Torah and our God. Today, our challenge is passing on these eternal truths to our children.

³ Genesis 41:38-39

⁴ Genesis 41:45.

⁵ See Ibn Ezra, Radak, and Shorashim, who see it as an Egyptian name meaning "The Lord of Life," or "Lord Speaks Life."

⁶ Indeed, R' Yosef Rosen, the Rogatchover Gaon, wrote a commentary on the Torah, Talmud, and Rambam - as well as numerous responsa - called *Tzafnat Paaneach*.

Today, our challenge is not only in keeping the commandments (the revealed aspects of the Torah represented by water and bread) but also in connecting with the divine soul within those commandments and understanding how they bring about a world of divine knowledge and Godly reality (the secret aspects of the Torah, represented by wine and oil).

If Joseph was a “Revealer of Secrets” in dark Egypt, we must be the “Revealers of Secrets” in today’s darkness. To such an extent that even the Pharaohs of the world realize that, *“Since God has let you know all this, there is no one as understanding and wise as you.”*

8. Illuminating the World

Chanukah, the lighting of a menorah, accesses the most secret elements of the Torah so that we may illuminate the darkness. The oil is representative of the deepest layers of Torah, and it is this that we ignite on Chanukah and celebrate by eating latkes and donuts.

As the Talmud teaches,⁷ the mitzvah of lighting the menorah should be for the purpose of advertising the miracle, revealing the secret and conveying the depths of Torah to all the world.

It is not enough to have the secret light. We also must bathe the world in it.

9. Chanukah in the Gulag⁸ (Story)

Now, let me tell you a story about a man who did just that.

⁷ Shabbat 23b.

⁸ Adapted from “The Fifth Night” by Yanki Tauber http://www.meaningfullife.com/torah/holidays/3c/The_Fifth_Night.php.

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 Lubavitch 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. Over the next two weeks, we’ll save half of our daily ration of margarine 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 and exited without a word.

10. Chanukah in the Gulag (Optional Story)

In his book *Fear No Evil*, Nathan Sharansky relates a moving story - which demonstrates the hidden secrets embedded within a Jewish soul, only to be revealed by Chanukah:

December 1980. Natan (Anatoly) Sharansky's ninth Chanukah in Soviet Prison. Sharansky is serving in a Siberian labor camp as a Prisoner of Zion. In his ongoing efforts to retain his Jewish identity under the cruelest of conditions, he fashions a small wooden Chanukah menorah, with which to light the Chanukah candles. On the sixth night of Chanukah, the authorities confiscated the menorah. "A camp is not a synagogue. We won't permit Sharansky to pray here," they said.

"I was surprised by the bluntness of that remark," related Nathan, "and immediately declared a hunger strike. In a statement to the procurator general, I protested against the violation of my national and religious rights, and against KGB interference in my personal life.

I was summoned to Major Osin's office two days later, in the evening. Osin – a staunch Communist -- pulled a "benevolent" smile over his face as he tried to talk me out of my hunger strike.

"What's the problem?" I said. "Give me back my menorah as tonight is the last evening of Chanukah. Let me celebrate it now, and taking into account your assurances for the future, I shall end the hunger strike."

But a protocol for its confiscation had already been drawn up, and Major Osin couldn't back down in front of the whole camp. As I looked at this predator sitting at an elegant polished table wearing a benevolent smile, I was seized by an amusing idea.

"Listen," I said, "I'm sure you have the menorah somewhere. It's very important to me to celebrate the last night of Chanukah. Why not let me do it right here and now with you in the privacy of your office!"

Osin thought it over and promptly the confiscated menorah appeared from his desk. He summoned Gavruлик, who was on duty in the office, to bring in a large candle.

"I need eight candles," I said. Gavruлик took out a knife and began to cut the candles into several smaller ones.

I arranged the candles and went to the coat rack for my hat. I lit the candles and recited my own prayer in Hebrew which went something like this: "Blessed are You, G-d, 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 the candles. May You allow me to light the candles many times in your city, Jerusalem, with my wife Avital, and my family and friends."

I added, "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'."

Sharansky suddenly heard someone declare loudly in Hebrew: "Amen!"

He took a look. It was Major Osin...

You see, Osin was a Jew. A soul who, like so many others, was in captivity by the Communists. But for a single moment, Osin - who like millions of Jews in the Soviet Union was forced to live his life crouching to Communist propaganda - was praying for the day when he can liberate his soul.

The oil of Chanukah - oil concealed in the belly of an olive - revealed the secret, the *pintele yid*, hidden in the belly of Osin.

11. Is Chanukah a Religious Holiday?

So now let me ask you:

Is Chanukah a religious holiday? And what does the word "religious" even mean?

The mitzvah of Chanukah, of bringing light into darkness, touches the very core of humanity. Even a person who does not, for whatever reason, gravitate to the revealed elements Torah, the water or bread of Torah ... even a person who, in other words, is not "religious" in the formal sense ... and even one who does not relate to the "wine" elements of Torah, the *Kiddush* we make on Shabbat or the holidays ...

even such a person will readily acknowledge the idea of bringing light into the world, of lighting candles, of making the world a brighter place.

Chanukah light reveals the secret place hidden within each of our souls. Even a Jew who may be serving as a major in the Communist system will be awakened by it; and even an evil gulag guard will be touched by it.

In this sense, if “religious” refers to adhering to all of the revealed aspects of Torah, then Chanukah is not a “religious” holiday. Chanukah is the miraculous celebration of the secrets of light being revealed for all the world to see.

Shabbat Shalom and a *Freilichen Chanukah*, a Happy Chanukah!

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