

BAAL SHEM TOV INSIGHTS

Issue 29: Chanukah

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson • Exclusive for Members

DO YOU LOVE LIGHT? Ice Candles

SUMMARY

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? Why do we project a false sense of confidence and invulnerability even when we are feeling insecure? If we love light and honesty, why are we so afraid of showing our vulnerability?

So let's ask the question again: Do we really prefer light over darkness?

In this fascinating insight we will learn from the Baal Shem Tov how to truly love light, and discover the secret how to illuminate every situation on life, even... the icy cold and the pitch black...

This will also teach us why Chanukah is celebrated with light, even though it seems that the primary miracle was winning the battle against the Greeks.

Power of Light

Chanukah happened because the few and weak Maccabees were victorious over the many and mighty Greeks. Chanukah also celebrates the miracle of finding a small cruse of oil that ended up burning eight days. But that miracle could not have happened if they had not won the war. Why then do we celebrate Chanukah with lighting the Menorah - which seems like an incidental benefit of the much larger miracle of winning the

battle against the enemy? Why is the celebration of light the central focus of Chanukah, with little mention of the victorious battle?

What is it about light that captures the essence of this holiday?

What Do You Prefer: Light or Dark?

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The Love of Light

The Tzemach Tzedek related: The Baal Shem Tov was very fond of light. "*Or*" ('light') is the numerical equivalent of *raz* ('secret').¹ Whoever knows the 'secret' contained in every thing can bring illumination.

On one occasion, the students of the Baal Shem Tov had only a single candle and, despite their efforts, could not obtain any more. Knowing how much their master loved light [and warmth],² they were distressed by their inability to provide the illumination he desired. They did not know what to do.

When the Baal Shem Tov entered the room and heard that they could not find candles, he said: "*ober lichtig darf doch zayn*,"³ "but it has to be bright after all." "*ba Idden badarf zein lichtik. Mein avodah iz lichtik machen ba Idden.*" "My task is to beget light by Jews." He told his disciples to go outside and collect the icicles that hung from the roof. He then instructed them to arrange the 'ice candles'⁴ about the room and light them. The ice burned and illuminated the room.

...why is it that we so often choose darkness over light, we choose to live in darkness and denial, in ignorance and deflection, rather than face the truth?

[After telling the story] The Tzemach Tzedek, with a note of yearning in his voice, said: "For the Baal Shem Tov's chassidim, icicles burned and yielded light. Today's Chassidim sit in well-

heated and well-lighted rooms, and yet it is cold and dark..."

When the Rebbe Maharash told the story to his son, the Rebbe Rashab, he added: "Not only did the ice not melt, it illuminated and warmed!"

The Rebbe Rashab concluded with saying: "My grandfather (the Tzemach Tzedek) revealed in his Chassidim the soul's 'eternal burning flame,' that the ways of Chassidus should illuminate their Chassidic homes. Wherever they may be across the wide globe and in all corners of the earth, they should be successful in illuminating everything with the light of Torah."

Who Doesn't Love Light?

Now the question that begs is this: What is so novel about the Baal Shem Tov's fondness for light? Who in the world doesn't love light? Is there anyone that would prefer darkness over radiance? So why does this story make such a big deal of the fact that the Baal Shem was very fond of light?

Denial

Let's review the assumption that most people prefer light over darkness. If that is the case, why is it that we so often choose darkness over light, we choose to live in darkness and denial, in ignorance and deflection, rather than face the truth? Why do we so often and so easily choose our comfort zones rather than face reality?

Do we really prefer light over darkness? Or does it simply sound good and politically correct?

Perhaps we enjoy light as long as it's comfortable and doesn't challenge us. Obviously, it's more pleasant to walk around in the bright light than to grope around in the dark shadows. Only as long as it doesn't disrupt our comfort zones. As soon as the shining light of clarity exposes our weaknesses and disturbs our (perceived) equilibrium, we suddenly do not welcome its glowing presence. When we live a lie cover-up and deception is needed to conceal the

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lie. And so begins the vicious tumbling cycle of one lie needing another lie to protect itself. Until we are left with an utter distortion of what is true. At some point we begin believing our own lies, and consider them as truth. The Baal Shem Tov calls the "double concealment" (*"haster aster"*) - a concealment so profound that it conceals the concealment, convincing us that darkness is light and the concealment is actually revelation!⁵

Furthermore, the darkness can be so intense that we can actually convince ourselves that we are lovers of light!

A True Lover of Light

Enter the Baal Shem Tov: A man who was truly fond of light. Not only when it is comfortable and cozy. But always. And his love of light was not isolated to a warm feeling, but he actually did something about it - he fought for light, he did whatever it takes to bring light into any given situation.

How? What made the Baal Shem Tov unique in his love for and commitment to light? He mastered the deeper meaning of light - (the numerical equivalent of) *raz* ('secret'): He knew the 'secret' contained in every thing - the hidden script and inner energy within every life experience, even dark ones. And thus, in his love and commitment to the light within everything, he was able to bring illumination wherever he went.

Ober lichtig darf doch zayn

As witnessed in the abovementioned story:

One cold and dark night the students could not find more than one candle to provide illumination and warmth. What would most of us do under the circumstances? We would simply suffice with the one candle and that would be it. The students distressed but could do little more.

The Baal Shem Tov, however, who knew the secret (roz) light contained in every thing, was able to see the light that was concealed and trapped even in the ice. He recognized how every challenge in life - even the cold and the dark - is a spiritual opportunity that contains enormous light. Our job is not to be deceived by the external iciness and to tap the potential it offers us to grow.

Ice Candles

And thus - the Baal Shem, Tov instructed his disciples - to go outside and collect the icicles that hung from the roof, and arrange the 'ice candles' about the room and light them. Lo and behold: The "eiz licht" ("ice candles" as matter of speech) turned into actual "ice candles" - the ice burned, flooding the room with light!

The Baal Shem Tov's achievement was multifold: The miracle was not only that

he was able to provide light without candles. Or that the one candle was able to illuminate with the power of many candles (as in the miracle of Chanukah). The miracle was also not that the ice melted and disappeared in face of the light and warmth. Or that the ice remained ice, but it not affect the illuminating warmth inside. The true wonder was that the ice *itself* - as it remained ice - became a source of light, illuminating and warming the room!

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Chanukah

The central celebration of Chanukah is marked by light because the war of the Hellenic Greeks

was against light - against spiritual radiance and the ability to transform darkness into light and coldness into warmth. The Greeks celebrated rational wisdom and philosophy. They had no issue with Torah and mitzvot as long as they were seen as a system of human wisdom and morality. What they radically opposed was the Divine and spiritual nature of these disciplines - they wanted to make the Jews "forget **Your** Torah and violate the decrees of **Your** will."

Therefore the celebration of the Chanukah victory is all about the victory of light, the "candle of mitzvah and light of Torah."⁶ And indeed, the victory expressed itself in the discovery of a little cruse of pure oil - amidst all

the defilement - and this pure oil (which on its own would only burn for a day) would burn for eight days, demonstrating not only the conquest of light over darkness, but the power of light that comes out of darkness. The ability to transform cold ice into light warmth, as the Baal Shem Tov showed.

The Lesson for Us

What does this story teach us?

The Tzemach Tzedek did indeed bemoan the fact that unlike the Baal Shem Tov's chasidim, for whom ice burned and yielded light, today we sit in well-heated and well-lighted rooms, and yet it is cold and dark...

Yet, the lesson in this story is not just to teach us how far away we are from the Baal Shem Tov and his students. Indeed, as the Rebbe Rashab concluded (cited above), the Tzemach Tzedek then proceeded to reveal the flaming soul in his students, teaching them how to bring light into their lives wherever they may be across the world.

So, clearly we can learn much from the Baal Shem Tov's story, even in our "cold and dark" times.

And when you think about it, the lesson to us is very clear:

He knew the 'secret' contained in every thing - the hidden script and inner energy within every life experience, even dark ones.

Light is everywhere. Sometimes it is revealed and obvious. Sometimes it is concealed and hidden.

It is our mission - our gift and blessing - to love light and reveal it everywhere. The way to do so is by recognizing that what you see is not what you get. Within everything, even within dark and cold places, there are enormous amounts of light and energy. Waiting to be tapped.

Even if all you see are frozen icicles hanging on your roof, when you perceive the hidden light within everything, even the icy candles turn into flames!

Chanukah Lights

What lesson can be more powerful as we watch our own Chanukah flames burning in the night?

Look at your candles closely. Listen to the story they are telling us. They have many tales to tell. But one that stands out is the Baal Shem Tov's message to us all:

Love light.

Be persistent and do whatever it takes to bring illumination and warmth everywhere you go.

Even when it is cold and dark and things may seem hopeless, always know that there is light hidden everywhere, in everything and in every moment.

We may not understand how and why, but even the frozen icicles around us contain a secret - a secret light. If you look close enough you can find ways to transform the coldest and the darkest into the brightest light.

Love light.

And do something about it.

Sources: Sefer HaSichot 5700 p. 174 (cited in Hayom Yom Elul 6). 5706 p. 40. Likkutei Sichos vol. 15 p. 384. Igros Kodesh vol. 19 p. 41.

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FOOTNOTES

¹ Tikunei Zohar 19; Zohar III, p. 28b.

² He also would instruct to warm the ovens even in the summer, it should be warmer and warmer (Sefer Hasichos 5706).

³ “Mein avodeh” in the original Yiddish, which can also be transacted as: My mission, my duty, my work.

⁴ In Yiddish icicles are called “eiz lichtlech,” “ice candles.”

⁵ See Baal Shem Tov Insight #16.

⁶ Mishlei 6:23.