



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Mikeitz

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Mikeitz/Chanukah

Chanukah: The Secret 36



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

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ABSTRACT

Chanukah, the celebration of light over darkness, is happening today as much as it happened in the original story. Today, as then, there are forces of darkness trying to extinguish the innate light. Today, as then, there are elements attempting to profane the sacred, defile the pure, slaughter the peaceful and live.

Then it was the Hellenistic Greeks in Israel; now it is terrorists throughout the Holy Land, Paris and San Bernardino. Perhaps their ideology is different than that of the Greeks, but the goal is nevertheless the same: to extinguish the light.

Today, as then, light is and will always prevail and be victorious. Even a little light will extinguish much darkness.

The secret to this reality is found in the number of candles we light over Chanukah.

$$1+2+3+4+5+6+7+8 = 36$$

Thirty-six is the secret formula for light overcoming darkness. Thirty-six is the equation that will guarantee our victory.

And this is taught to us by none other than a great sage who suffered a terrible tragedy a few days before Chanukah.

CHANUKAH: THE SECRET 36

1. Dark Humor (Joke)

Question: How many terrorists does it take to change a light bulb?

Answer: None. Terrorists don't change light bulbs. They declare darkness as the new standard.

2. Lighting Up the World

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Chanukah!

Chanukah, the Festival of Lights, reminds us of our most essential reality and core belief: We are here to light up the world, to illuminate our environments, to turn life's dense matter into menorahs burning bright with spirituality.

As mad and sad as it sounds, in this perplexing world it is possible to forget that we are here to bring light. We often can even confuse light with darkness. For some reason (better left unexplored here), the world sometimes blurs the line between light and dark, right and wrong, choosing instead to stand on a vague pedestal upon an oblique stage while speaking muffled and murky words of foggy uncertainty into an obfuscated microphone of opaque echoes and mumbled thoughtlessness.

Confusion is a result of not being certain and clear about what we stand for, what we consider to be true and just, the values and morals we hold sacred. When we are uncertain of the light, we inevitably are also uncertain of its antithesis – the darkness, and thus we muddle the two.

It is also possible, probable really, that it is simply easier to blur the line between light and darkness, to straddle the fence, to remain uncommitted in our choices. After all, if I don't know for certain what is light and what is dark, how then can I make a decision to commit myself to light?

Did you hear the one about Harry, who proudly announces: I used to think I was indecisive. Now I'm not so sure.

Enter Chanukah, when light and darkness are clearly defined: As the sun sets and it gets dark outside we ignite a menorah, illuminating the blackness of the night with light. Chanukah declares that dark is dark and light is light, and we will not succumb to the dark - we will illuminate it with light.

That is clarity. This is the miracle of Chanukah - the ability to distinguish between light and darkness, which empowers us to light up even the blackest of nights or darkest situations.

3. Current Events

If, instead of a rabbi, I were a pollster, and I conducted a poll of our holy community, asking you to opine as to what you would consider to be the epitome of darkness today, I would venture to predict that one hundred percent of our communal body would immediately flash to recent events - the carnage in San Bernardino, the slaughter in Paris, the suicide attacks in Israel, the horrors of 9/11, the barbarism of ISIS & Co. I am certain that you would all assert that the snuffing out of innocent lives, innocent candles, is the epitome of darkness.

One need not be a moral savant to see this. One needs simply to be honest.

The Festival of Lights comes in a time of shimmering darkness. It is no accident that the ISIS flag is black. It is no mistake that pitch black is the nemesis of pure light.

Obviously we must do everything possible militarily to respond and prevent any further attacks. But the Chanukah lights teach us that the battle and the victory is much more than a military one. It is about an ideological battle, and the victory of light over darkness, higher values and standards over primitive hatred and violence. We must mobilize our faith in light to wage war against the extremists who have embraced a dark ideology. Only light can respond to and dispel this darkness.

Only our menorahs can turn night into light.

But how can the menorah do this? What is the secret of its light? What is the hidden quality that is revealed on Chanukah?

It all begins at, well, the beginning.

4. 36 Hours of Light

The Talmud¹ teaches that the 36 hours from when Adam was created Friday morning until Saturday night, were filled with a special, unceasing light. That is, the sun did not set that first Friday night, there was no darkness of night, until Saturday night. This original light was so powerful that Adam could see with its luminance from one end of the universe to the other.

After that 36-hour period, the Creator concealed that special light for the righteous in the Time (World) to Come.

This establishes that a) the original state of human existence was – and, more importantly, *is* – light, and b) there is an intrinsic connection between light and the number 36.

5. 36 Secret Saints

Another fascinating phenomenon numbered 36 involves a group of secret, mysterious righteous souls, called the “*lamed vav tsaddikim nistorim*,” or in brief: the *lamed-vav’niks*:

*He shall withdraw to have empathy upon you, for the Lord is a God of righteousness; fortunate are all who wait for Him.*²

¹ Chagigah 12a. Yerushalmi Berachot 8:5. Genesis Rabbah 11:2.

² Isaiah 30:18.

Who are those that wait for Him?

The Talmud states:

Said Abaya: "The world never has less than thirty-six righteous saints who receive the Divine Face (Presence) in every generation, as it states: *Fortunate are all who wait for Him*. The numerical value of "for Him" – *lo* in Hebrew – is thirty-six.³

Lo is composed of a *lamed* (with the numerical value of 30) and a *vov* (with the numerical value of 6). There are 36 hidden righteous people (*tzadikim*) who, in every generation wait for God and receive the Face (*penimiyut*, innermost essence) of His Presence.

Once again we find the number 36 and once again it involves revelation and luminance.

These 36 *tzadikim*, or the *Lamed Vavniks* as they are commonly called, are a legendary phenomenon and many stories are told about those who were thought to be among that number.

Now, let me ask you: What do these two Talmudic factoids (that the light shone for 36 hours and that in every generation there are 36 hidden lights) have to do with Chanukah?

And what do they teach us about light?

6. The Mystical Light x 36

A story is told about the great scholar and mystic Rabbi Elazar ben Yehudah of Worms, also known as the Baal HaRokeach, and a terrible tragedy that struck his family three days before Chanukah.

In 1196, during the third Crusade, as Rabbi Elazar was sitting at his desk, engaged in his writings, two murderous villains burst into his home. They killed Rabbi Elazar's wife, their two daughters, Belet,

³ Sanhedrin 97b. Sukkah 45b.

thirteen years old, and Chana, six years old, as well as a young son and his teacher. Rabbi Elazar himself was severely wounded, but he survived.

This was a very cruel blow for Rabbi Elazar. He mourned his family, and the loss of his wife was particularly felt by him, for she was an extraordinary woman, wise and learned, very charitable and hospitable, especially to Torah scholars.⁴

This is incomprehensibly and painfully reminiscent of the murderous attacks that occur today. Then terror struck Rabbi Elazar, snuffing out innocent candles as they lay asleep at home, and the same happens today in Israel and, more and more, throughout the world.

Who better than Rabbi Elazar to teach us how to combat darkness and terror, the taking of innocent loved ones?

What did he teach about Chanukah? One might think that Chanukah would forever be a reminder of his great sorrow, and associated with darkness, not light. But that is not what Rabbi Elazar, Baal HaRokeach, teaches about Chanukah.

He says⁵ that if we add up the total of how many candles are actually lit over the 8 days of Chanukah we arrive at, you guessed it, the number 36. On night 1 we light 1 candle, night 2 we light 2 candles etc. Which leaves us with the equation: $1+2+3+4+5+6+7+8 = 36$.

This, teaches the Baal HaRokeach, is the hidden power and profound significance of Chanukah: On Chanukah we get a taste of the original light that shone for the first 36 hours of creation and which is now concealed until the Time to Come. On Chanukah we get a taste of that extraordinary light – the Light of Redemption – by which Adam was able to see from one end of the universe to the other.

⁴ http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/112368/jewish/Rabbi-Elozor-ben-Yehuda-of-Worms.htm.

⁵ Sefer Rokeach, Hilchot Chanukah #225; Bnei Yissachar, Kislev-Tevet, Maamar II, Ohr Hatorah #8; Sfat Emet, Chanukah 5651.

7. Overcoming Darkness

As a concept, Chanukah is about light overcoming darkness. Originally it was the Jews over the Greeks. Now it is up to us.

When we realize and remember that light is our natural state – and that hidden somewhere among and within us is a pure light that shines in such a way that we can see from one end of existence to the other – then we live in on a whole other plane.

The forces of darkness can never make us dark; our light will destroy their darkness and dispel their toxic night.

Chanukah symbolizes this. We did it back then, and we can do it now.

Whenever murderers raise their black flag of night – be they Greeks, Crusaders, Nazis or ISIS – we can raise our 36 candles of the menorah higher, a symbol of eternal light and illumination.

8. Act like One of the 36 (Personal Lesson)

The thirty-six hidden souls of every generation are secret, concealed, hidden. You may be one of them; your spouse may be one of them; your child may be one of them; your neighbor – yes, *that* neighbor – may be one of them. Or all of you may be four of the secret 36 righteous individuals who hold up the universe.

The only way to know is to live like one.

It is your purpose – the purpose of each one of us – to bring into this world the light of the 36 – the 36 hours, the 36 righteous saints, the 36 candles of the eight days of Chanukah. Here are three ways (of many) to be and bring the light.

1. Light the Menorah. Better still, host a menorah-lighting ceremony and Chanukah party in your home. Invite family, friends, coworkers, neighbors and share the light. Especially in this Hakhel Year of Assembly. At this party relate a touching idea or two, and inspire the crowd to be lights in their own individual spheres as well.

2. Be like Oil. Oil does not mix with other liquids; it instead rises to the top. Often times we are uncomfortable being outwardly Jewish and would rather keep it hidden and concealed so that we may blend in and mix with so-called normal society. Perhaps that approach works in “normal” times, but it doesn’t work in times of need. With terror and darkness proliferating over the world, we must be like oil, we must stand out and rise to the occasion. We must shine and outshine; we must shine outward for the entire world to see. We need not be embarrassed or afraid to offer a message of light to the people around us. When we stand out and are outstanding, we will be respected more. Of course, it must be done in an elegant, sophisticated and respectful way, but shine we must. Like oil, we cannot water down our product; we can only rise to the occasion.

3. Challenge Yourself. The Menorah in the Temple was lit with pure olive oil. It is especially beautiful to light our menorahs today with pure olive oil. Olive oil is created when the olives are squeezed under pressure, for when the olives are pressed and challenged only then do they release their purest essence. We too – when faced with challenges – must challenge ourselves, squeeze and shake ourselves out of our comfort zones. We cannot afford not to. And when we do press ourselves, the result is the deepest, purest, most refined and sublime essence. And then, like pure olive oil, we shine the brightest.

Like teabags, we don’t know how strong we are until we are placed in hot water.

Often the light is concealed, but on Chanukah it is advertised. Light up the night and let the world see. Imagine if a menorah blazed on every corner? Imagine if every single one of the seven billion people on earth were busy with being a beacon of light – darkness would be banished forever.

Let us use our gifts to make this dream a reality.

9. Light The Night (Conclusion)

The Haftorah of Shabbat Chanukah contains a vision of the Golden Menorah in the Temple:

And he said to me, "What do you see?" And I said, "I saw, and there it was, a menorah all of gold, with an oil-vessel on top of it, and seven lamps thereon; seven channels to the lamps that were on top of it. And two olive trees near it; one on the right of the vessel, and one on its left."

The Golden Menorah of Zachariah is a prophecy that we can realize today into reality. We do so by remembering that light is our original state, and night but a superimposed layer of concealment.

And that our actions of light today will surely usher in the era of "a Time to Come," as the Talmud puts it, when the original light of creation will once again be revealed – and for much longer than 36 hours! Amen!

Happy Chanukah and Shabbat Shalom!

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