



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Vayeishev

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December 5, 2015
Vayeishev/Chanukah

**Chanukah: Crude Oil
vs. Olive Oil**



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

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ABSTRACT

The Middle East is synonymous with oil. The wealth of many a Middle Eastern country comes from petroleum, its unrefined crude oil that is found beneath the Arabian sands, and its refined petroleum products above ground. As has been well documented, this oil wealth is one of the primary sources for financing terrorism the world over.

Iran uses its oil to finance Hezbollah, while ISIS uses its captured oil wells to generate upwards of an estimated \$100 million annually. That’s nothing compared to Saudi Arabia’s estimated annual oil revenue of somewhere around \$200 billion, but \$100 million is a heck of a lot of money to fall into terrorist hands. A lot of mayhem and tragedy can be created with those amount of funds.

Imagine if those hundreds of millions of dollars went to civil services, education, fighting famine and disease – to bettering the human condition through creating light, peace and harmony. Do you know how many menorahs could be fueled by that kind of money and that amount of oil? Perhaps, with Chanukah upon us, an oil-centric festival if there ever was one, there is a way we Jews could inspire the world in general, and the Arab/Muslim oil-rich world in particular, to use its energy and resources to light up the world, not destroy it.

As the nations of the world and their leaders discuss global energy concerns this week in Paris, perhaps an episode from our Torah portion can teach us and the world how to turn the toxins of crude oil into refined perfumes and aromatic spices.

**CHANUKAH:
CRUDE OIL VS. OLIVE OIL**

1. Current Events

The past few months have revealed something fundamental:

The threat to Israel's security does not come from one, or even a few, terrorist factions; rather, there exists an underlying hatred of Israel and the Jewish people, an animosity that drives otherwise ordinary men, women and youth to take knives into their hands to attack innocent Jews as they walk to work, go to school, or simply stand on a street corner.

These aren't terrorists – that is, dedicated groups of individuals committed to terrorizing and undermining Jewish life. These are random folk, seemingly ordinary Muslims, who are responding to incitement in their communities and social media that it's a good thing to slice, stab and slaughter Jews.

The latest spate of attacks represent a fundamental change: in addition to being threatened by Hamas or Islamic Jihad, every single Arab man, woman and even every youth – some as young as 11! – is now a potential killer.

This is sad. This speaks volumes about the education in the Muslim world, about the objectives that drive it, about the purpose behind it.

It is not politically correct – it is, in fact, the opposite of political correctness – to say such things, but I would rather be alive and aware than politically correct.

Though the situation seems dire, it is not without hope. We Jews know that we can and will survive any challenge, without ever losing touch with our purpose or losing faith in our mission. The real question is if the Arab/Muslim world can survive its self-destructive behavior.

As Jews, as the Nation of Israel, a nation of light that is a “light unto all nations” (in the words of the Prophet Isaiah), we believe it is possible for the Muslim world to change its ways. And we believe we can help.

As with much in the Middle East (and most of the world), it can all be traced back to oil.

2. Oil Vey

The Middle East is synonymous with oil. The wealth of many a Middle Eastern country comes from petroleum, its unrefined crude oil that is found beneath the Arabian sands, and its refined petroleum products above ground. As has been well documented, this oil wealth is one of the primary sources for financing terrorism the world over.

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Imagine if those hundreds of millions of dollars went to civil services, education, fighting famine and disease – to bettering the human condition through creating light, peace and harmony. Do you know how many menorahs could be fueled by that kind of money and that amount of oil? Perhaps, with Chanukah upon us, an oil-centric festival if there ever was one, there is a way we Jews could inspire the world in general, and the Arab/Muslim oil-rich world in particular, to use its energy and resources to light up the world, not destroy it.

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3. Parshat Vayeishev

The children of Israel and the children of Ishmael have a long history. In past weeks, we have read in the Torah about the dynamic between Isaac, the father of the Jewish world, and his half-brother, Ishmael, the father of the Arab/Muslim world.

In this week's portion, *Parshat Vayeishev*, we read of another interaction between the Israelites and the Ishmaelites. This interaction is more of a transaction, a "business" deal between Jacob's sons and a caravan of Ishmaelite traders.

For certain reasons, not to be discussed for the moment, Joseph's brothers wanted to kill him, but Judah suggested that they sell Joseph into slavery instead. That's exactly what they did. Here is how the Torah describes it:

And they took [Joseph] and cast him into a pit – a pit that was empty without water in it. Then they sat down to eat a meal, and [when] they raised their heads they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with camels carrying spices, balsam and resin to take down to Egypt. And Judah said to his brothers, "What is the gain if we slay our brother and cover up his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites..."¹

The Torah does not share information arbitrarily. If a detail doesn't serve a practical purpose, if it doesn't provide a lesson for us to learn, the Torah will not tell us about it. Why then does the Torah specify the wares and baggage that the Ishmaelite traders were carrying – spices, balsam and resin? What lesson does that offer us?

The 11th century Torah commentator, Rashi, explains:

Why did the Torah describe [the Ishmaelites'] baggage? To let you know the reward of the righteous, for it is customary for the Arabs to carry only naphtha and tar, with emitting a foul odor, but here spices were arranged so that Joseph should not be afflicted by a foul odor.²

¹ Genesis 37:24-27.

² Ad loc, from Mechilta, Beshalach, 2:5.

Naphtha, as defined by wikipedia.com, “is a general term that has been used for over two thousand years to refer to flammable liquid hydrocarbon mixtures ... produced from petroleum distillates...”

Tar (also known as asphalt) “is a sticky, black and highly viscous liquid or semi-solid form of petroleum.”

Both naphtha and tar, the primary trading commodities of the Ishmaelite caravan, are petroleum products. Thus, petroleum is not a new ingredient to the Arab universe. Both naphtha and tar are highly toxic, as anyone who has driven by a highway construction crew can attest.

Yet, merited by Joseph’s righteousness, the caravan that transported him into slavery in Egypt, carried perfumed resins and spices instead of its usual toxic load.

What lesson does this have for us today? Perhaps Chanukah, as it is wont to do, could illuminate this for us, its menorah shedding light on our present day lives.

4. Chanukah Menorah

Chanukah begins this Sunday night. Chanukah’s well-known and brightly publicized mitzvah, the kindling of the menorah, anchors the Festival of Lights.

The Chanukah menorah can be lit in various ways. The Talmud teaches that pure and refined olive oil, *shemen zayit zach*, is the most beautiful and ideal fuel to use for one’s menorah.³ The menorah in the Holy Temple, which we remember while lighting our menorahs today, was fueled by highly refined olive oil whose purity was verified by the High Priest’s seal.

This, in fact, was the miracle of Chanukah: they could find but one cruse of pure olive oil, and that single cruse, normally sufficient for one day, burned for eight days, the minimum amount of time to obtain new pure olive oil.

³ Shabbat 23a.

For this reason it is also customary to eat oily foods on Chanukah, such as latkes (fried potato pancakes) and *sufganiyot* (fried donuts). Yes, Jewish dietary laws have very little to do with actual dieting.

For this reason, olive oil is the ideal fuel for kindling one's menorah, but what about other fuels? Are they kosher for kindling a Chanukah menorah?

There is a debate in the Talmud regarding other types of fuel, such as different waxes, vegetable oils or fish or animal oils, and alternative flammable materials.

Two of the fuels that are discussed and generally frowned upon are naphtha and tar. These are the two petroleum products that the caravans of Ishmaelite merchants lugged along when they traveled, but which were replaced by aromatic scents on that one trip when they brought Joseph along.

5. The Talmud

The Talmud quotes Rabbi Yochanan, speaking about the city of Tekoa, "Because they were accustomed to olive oil, wisdom may be found among them."⁴

Oil represents wisdom.⁵ The purest olive oil, product of the essence of the crushed olive, represents the purest of wisdom.

When ignited, this wisdom, this pure oil, shines cleanly and brightly, illuminating the universe. For this reason, the menorah in the Temple was lit with pure olive oil, and it is ideal and exemplary to use such olive oil in our own menorahs today.

⁴ Menachot 85b.

⁵ See Talmud *ibid.* Likkutei Sichot XV, p. 330 and sources cited in fn. #41.

This, by way of the inner spiritual lens, is what the Talmud was saying with regard to the appropriate fuels for the menorah. Perhaps, in a pinch one may use unsavory fuels such as naphtha and tar to light a menorah, but the mitzvah to the fullest is done with pure olive oil.

Because a menorah is all about generating light, the finest most sublime wisdom creates the finest most sublime light.

6. Turning Foul Toxins into Aromatic Spices

Both naphtha and tar are petroleum products. Both of them give off toxic fumes when ignited; they smoke unbearably, releasing toxins into the atmosphere.

Naphtha and tar are what the Ishmaelite would normally deal in, what the Arab caravans would normally transport and trade.

Enter Joseph, a righteous man. Because of him, the toxins were turned into spices of floral notes and pleasant aromas. By his mere presence, Joseph turned poisonous toxins into perfumed pleasures, naphtha and tar into balsam and resin.

This is the reason that the Torah tells us in minute detail what the Arabs traded and why when Joseph was introduced into their world. By living up to our inner lights, to our inner menorahs, we too can emulate Joseph, turning all the crude oils of life into pure spices. How? By tapping the pure olive oil of divine wisdom, as conveyed by our Torah.

7. Personal Lesson

The point of life is to refining the unrefined – to turn crude oil into olive oil, to turn foul smelling naphtha and tar into pure and refined olive oil – to burn like a menorah, not like smoldering tar.

If, instead of importing and exporting terror, the Arab/Muslim world would focus its vast reservoirs of oil and the hundreds of billions of dollars it generates on goodness and kindness, on building proverbial menorahs and casting literal light, imagine what the world would look like, how bright it would be, how peaceful and loving.

The only way to make this happen is for us to demonstrate it to them and lead by example. Each of us is a menorah. We must fill our vessels with the purest olive oil, the most refined wisdom and sublime ideas, with Torah and beauty. Even when we face the crude world and enter a toxic environment, we access our inner light to transform the toxins into refined perfumes and spices.

And then we will illuminate ourselves and the world around us, casting a peaceful, graceful and respectful glow.

We Jews must set the precedent and create the template. Then the nations of the world will be compelled to follow suit.

This is what our Torah portion tells us. Joseph was sold into slavery so that he could turn it into freedom. Joseph rode in the Ishmaelite caravan so that he could turn their foul naphtha and tar into aromatic scents and spices.

And we must do the same.

8. Light the Night (Conclusion)

Practically speaking, how can we turn the toxic crude oil, naphtha or tar into pure light? How can we Jews live so as to demonstrate to the world how to live?

The Torah verse preceding the one about the Ishmaelite caravan reads:

And they took [Joseph] and cast him into a pit – a pit that was empty without water in it.

We live in a world that all too often seems like a pit without water,⁶ which is a metaphor for Torah. We feel trapped in a pit without the water of Torah's wisdom.

It is in these moments and these situations that we must light our menorah. We light the Chanukah menorah as the sun sets and darkness descends, in order to illuminate the darkness.

This Chanukah, starting Sunday eve, each and every one of us should take it upon himself or herself to light a Chanukah candle with someone who otherwise may not do so – to invite someone to your home for a Chanukah party and menorah lighting, to do everything and anything in your power to bring more light.

Reach out to someone who may be shrouded in darkness – lonely, needy, hurt – and share a kind word, offer a warm and illuminating message. Light up the life of another.

When each of us does our part in transforming the toxins of naphtha and tar into pure light and spice, our actions create a ripple effect – the “butterfly effect” – across the universe.

Surely this will help bring peace to the Holy Land of Israel and, sooner rather than later, transform the entire globe – Israel's closest geographical neighbors included – into one cosmic menorah giving off many branches of divine light, all connected, fueled by the purest, most refined olive oil – that is, wisdom – the world has ever known.

Amen and Shabbat Shalom!

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⁶ This verse is also discussed in the same place in the Talmud (ibid) as Chanukah. See also Likkutei Sichot ibid.