



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

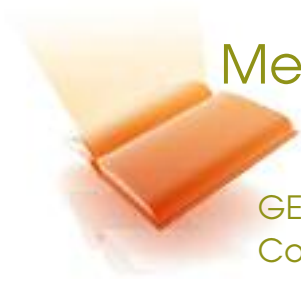
## GENESIS > Mikeitz

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December 31, 2016

Mikeitz/Chanukah

**The UN, Obama and  
Chanukah: Contemporary  
Lessons from the Natural &  
Supra-Natural Effects of Light**



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

GENESIS > Mikeitz/Chanukah > The UN, Obama and Chanukah:  
Contemporary Lessons from the Natural & Supra-Natural Effects  
of Light

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## **ABSTRACT**

What can Chanukah teach us about the latest attacks on Israel in the UN and by the Obama administration in its last weeks in office?

What can Chanukah teach us about Torah’s relevance to so many Jews who feel disenchanting with Judaism?

What message does Chanukah offer us that speaks to every one of our personal challenges?

The answer was given to us by Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, quoting a surprising source.

On this Shabbat of Chanukah we learn invaluable lessons from the lights we kindle – lessons that are both profoundly soulful, as well as tremendously relevant and practical to our day and age.

Sprinkled with some humor and a few disarming stories, we learn how Chanukah flames illuminate everything – from the UN to our personal lives.

## THE UN, OBAMA AND CHANUKAH CONTEMPORARY LESSONS FROM THE NATURAL AND SUPRANATURAL EFFECTS OF LIGHT

### 1. Chanukah's Message of Hope Today

Everyone is buzzing about President Obama's parting shots at Israel just weeks before he leaves office. The abstention at the UN condemning Israel last week. The allegations that his administration colluded with Israel's enemies to draft that resolution. Secretary of State John Kerry's talk the other day, lecturing Israel. Some are wondering at the timing of it all.

I therefore thought that a good place to begin my words today, on Shabbat Chanukah, is addressing the lessons Chanukah offers us in dealing with these and all other attacks on Israel and the Jewish people.

The bad and good news is that this is part of our history, and we have thank G-d not only survived but thrived.

Chanukah is a testimony to the enduring power of the Jewish people to brave and prevail over darkness in all its forms.

So let us first and foremost acknowledge, as we say in the blessings on the Menorah: Blessed are You, Lord our G-d, King of the universe, who performed miracles for our forefathers in those days, at this time." Just as in we experienced miracles in "those days," so too will we see them "at this time."

### 2. The House of Darkness

Beyond its general message of hope, Chanukah provides us also with a very relevant lesson in actually dealing with darkness – in all its forms – whether at the UN, or in our personal lives.

And, remarkably, this lesson was recently delivered to us by Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, quoting a surprising source.

In 2011 speaking before the United Nations General Assembly, Mr. Netanyahu said: “In 1984 when I was appointed Israel's ambassador to the United Nations, I visited the great rabbi of Lubavich. He said to me... you'll be serving in a house of many lies. And then he said, remember that even in the darkest place, the light of a single candle can be seen far and wide.”

In a Chanukah message this year Bibi, also known as Mr. Netanyahu, repeated this story, adding that the Rebbe actually used the expression that the “UN is a house of darkness. But a little light can dispel the greatest darkness.”

So there we have the message of Chanukah responding to the UN's latest resolution and Mr. Kerry's speech – both ironically happening during Chanukah:

We are people of light. We kindle lights and we celebrate light. No darkness in the world has vanquished us and no darkness will ever deter us. We will continue to be bearers of light, the light of truth, of hope, of peace. And we will illuminate the world around us with this light, even when it may be shrouded in darkness, distortions, prejudices and lies.

### 3. Light House (Joke)

This bright message of Chanukah also offers us personal lessons.

To appreciate some of these lessons, let me share the following transcript of an actual radio conversation between a US naval ship and Canadian authorities off the coast of Newfoundland in October 1995. (The radio conversation was released by the Chief of Naval Operations on Oct. 10, 1995.)

US Ship: Please divert your course 0.5 degrees to the south to avoid a collision.

CND reply: Recommend you divert your course 15 degrees to the South to avoid a collision.

US Ship: This is the Captain of a US Navy Ship. I say again, divert your course.

CND reply: No. I say again, you divert YOUR course!

US Ship: THIS IS THE AIRCRAFT CARRIER USS CORAL SEA, WE ARE A LARGE WARSHIP OF THE US NAVY. DIVERT YOUR COURSE NOW!!

CND reply: This is a lighthouse. Your call.<sup>1</sup>

#### 4. Torah as Light

Life is a stormy ocean. Waves smash up against our ships. Deluges of challenges rain down upon our decks. In the dark of the deep, on the roiling seas, life can often feel like a collision course.

When faced with an obstacle in our path, we can either try to move the obstacle, or move ourselves. Very often instead of adjusting to the challenging realities around us, we try to ignore them or get rid of them. The key to dealing with challenges is not to try changing or moving the challenge; it's to navigate around it.

That is lesson one from the lighthouse story above. Lesson two is that in the dark and sometimes stormy seas of life we were given a lighthouse to help guide our way.

The Creator of the World and all its seas, calm or stormy, gave us a guiding light and many lamps, lighthouses, by which to navigate life's currents and its fathomless depths. This guiding light is called the Torah, *Torah ohr*, and its lamps, are the mitzvot, the candles that anchor the light, *ner mitzvah*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.navy.mil/navydata/nav\\_legacy.asp?id=174](http://www.navy.mil/navydata/nav_legacy.asp?id=174).

<sup>2</sup> Ner mitzvah v'Torah ohr - Proverbs 6:23.

At times we may be concerned that the ships of our lives are on a collision course with the heavenly light that is meant to guide us. There are even some who mistakenly feel that the Torah and our modern lives are often incompatible.

This is due to the sad, and even tragic fact that many Jews today are simply unaware of the personal relevance in Torah and Judaism. When one's exposure to Torah is on a surface level (if at all), without awareness of the its deeper spiritual and psychological application, it's almost inevitable that Judaism will then be rendered as nothing more than a mechanical set of traditions and rules.

The lighthouse of Torah and mitzvot can then be confused as another wandering ship.

However, when you recognize the soulfulness of Torah and Judaism – then Torah rises to its rightful place as a beacon of light, a lighthouse, illuminating the dark seas. The Jewish experience then becomes like hearing music, which resonates and engages us, and speaks to the presenting issues in our lives, and guides us in reaching our destination.

Perhaps nowhere is this idea more clearly and beautifully demonstrated than with the two candle-centric mitzvot of Shabbat and Chanukah.

## 5. Shabbat of Chanukah

Today is Shabbat Chanukah. What do Shabbat and Chanukah have in common? Lighting candles. Yesterday evening, right before sundown, we lit seven Chanukah candles and, right after, Shabbat candles.

The lights of both Shabbat and Chanukah teach us a most vital lesson: Judaism is a lighthouse in a dark and often stormy sea.

Even when it may ostensibly appear on the surface that Torah and mitzvot are archaic and clash with the ship of contemporary life, Shabbat and Chanukah beckon us to look deeper and see how Torah and mitzvot are indeed a guiding lighthouse that illuminates and directs us in all areas of life.

## 6. The Talmud

The Talmud<sup>3</sup> teaches that those who regularly light Shabbat and Chanukah candles merit to have offspring who become Torah scholars.

In his commentary on this specific passage of the Talmud, the great 11th century commentator and sage, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, famously known by the acronym, Rashi, cites the source for this idea:

As it states in the Book of Proverbs: *For the candle is a mitzvah and Torah is the light*<sup>4</sup> – through the mitzvah of lighting the candle of Shabbat and Chanukah comes the light of Torah.

Thus, when we accustom ourselves to lighting Shabbat and Chanukah candles we will merit to have the Torah light within our homes by having children who are Torah scholars.

Many questions seem to arise from this Talmudic passage:<sup>5</sup>

1. Rashi cites a source in the Book of Proverbs for the Talmud's assertion, but Rashi does not explain the assertion itself. Why indeed is it that we merit to receive the light of Torah by adhering to these two candle-centric mitzvot specifically?
2. How can we say that "the candle of a mitzvah" *brings* "the light of Torah"? If anything the candle of a mitzvah *comes from* the light of Torah?
3. Both the mitzvot of lighting candles on Shabbat and on Chanukah are Rabbinic. i.e. instituted by the Rabbis, not by the written Torah. Chanukah is a Rabbinic holiday in general, and though observing Shabbat is a Torah commandment, the lighting of candles on Friday night is a Rabbinic decree. Why then do these Rabbinic decrees represent all of Torah, with the candle of the mitzvah leading to the light of Torah?

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<sup>3</sup> Shabbat 23b.

<sup>4</sup> Proverbs 6:23.

<sup>5</sup> See Sefer Hasichot 5751, vol. 1, pp. 192ff.

## 7. Light's Natural and Supra-natural Properties

The reason these two candle lighting mitzvot merit Torah light is because they embody the very essence of the entire Torah and all the mitzvot: to bring light into the world.

The physical light of the Chanukah candles has three general natural characteristics that are metaphors for the three spiritual elements in every mitzvah:

- Light illuminates its surroundings. This is the purpose of every mitzvah – to infuse the physical, biological and empirical world with ethereal and divine light.
- The light multiplies, as we add another candle every single night. So too must we always grow and increase in the light of mitzvot (*maalin b'kodesh*).
- The candles are lit “at the door (or window) facing outward,”<sup>6</sup> to demonstrate that the light of a mitzvah is meant to illuminate not just our homes, but the “outside” – the spheres and environments around us, to shine outward all over the world, even in the darkest places.

Now let me illustrate this with a story (or a couple of stories).

## 8. The Power of One Candle: Three Stories

### Story #1 - Four Candles

In a room there were four candles burning. The ambiance was so soft that you could hear the candles talking.

The first one said, “I am PEACE, however nobody can keep me lit. I believe I will go out.” Its flame rapidly diminished and went out completely.

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<sup>6</sup>Shabbat 21b.



The second one said, "I am FAITH. I am no longer indispensable, so it does not make any sense that I stay lit any longer." When it finished talking, a breeze softly blew on it, putting it out.

Sadly, the third candle spoke in its turn. "I am LOVE. I have no strength to stay lit. People put me aside and don't understand my importance. They even forget to love those who are nearest to them." And waiting no longer, it went out.

Suddenly a child entered the room and saw that three candles were not burning. "Why are you not burning, you are supposed to stay lit till the end."

Saying this, the child began to cry. Then the fourth candle said, "Don't be afraid. I am still burning and, with my flame, we can re-light the other candles. I am HOPE."

With shining eyes, the child took the "candle of hope" and lit the other candles.

The flame of Hope should never go out from our life so that each of us can maintain HOPE, FAITH, PEACE and LOVE.

### *Story #2 - Do Your Part*

An old man carried a small candle as he climbed the stairs of a lighthouse.

On their way up to the top, the candle asked the man, "Where are we going?"

"We're going to the top of this lighthouse in order to give signals to the big ships out on the ocean," the man answered.

"What? How could my small light possibly give signals to those big ships? They will never be able to see my weak little flame."

The man replied, "If your light is small, so be it. All you have to do is keep burning and leave the rest to me."

A while later, they arrived at the top of the lighthouse where there was a big lamp with a mirror behind it. The man lit the lamp with the light of the little candle and, instantly, the place shone so brightly that all the ships on the ocean could see its light.

**Story #3 – The Candle Doesn’t Warm the Skin, It Warms the Soul**

Once long ago in the village of Ashkehir, the people grumbled and complained, for winter had set in and the weather was bitterly cold. Nasreddin Hodja and his friends gathered in a cafe, talking of the weather.

Hodja suddenly sat up and raised his hands. “My friends,” he announced, “you may think this is a cold winter, but this is nothing for a man like me. When I was a boy, I broke the ice in the river and took a swim. I walked across icy fields in bare feet. There’s nothing like a little cold to strengthen a man! Indeed, it has made me strong and bold.”

The others laughed and winked and nudged each other, for they were accustomed to Hodja’s tall tales. “Well, then, Hodja,” one of his friends said, “since you like the cold, why don’t you stay outside all night long tonight without a coat or a blanket or anything to warm yourself? In that way, you can prove to us how strong you are and how little the cold bothers you.”

“That would be nothing,” Hodja bragged.

“No fire to warm yourself,” another said.

“Of course not,” Hodja said.

“No hot tea or warm sweaters,” another wagged his finger.

“Not a problem,” Hodja smiled.

“We’ll make a bargain, then,” Hodja’s best friend remarked. “You stay outside tonight with nothing to warm you, and if you make it through the night, we’ll treat you to a feast. But if you use something to keep yourself warm, you will entertain all of us for supper.”

“Fine, fine,” Hodja agreed.

That evening his friends gathered inside a warm house and watched as Hodja stood outside, pacing up and down the village square.

Hodja looked up at the stars and contented himself for a while with the beauty of the clear winter sky. After a few hours, though, he began to shiver and shake so hard that he cursed his pride. "If only I had not been so hasty," he said to himself. He paced this way and that, wondering how he would survive the night.

Then Hodja saw a candle in a window across the way. He walked closer, and as he watched, he could feel the glow of the candle warming his blood. The sight of warmth helped to remind him of what warmth felt like, and so he stayed where he was. All night long he stared at that candle, imagining himself hot and unwavering, just like that flame. And that is how he survived the long cold night.

At dawn, Hodja's friends ran out into the frosty air and stared in wonder. Hodja stood there, smiling and calm.

"Hodja, you have survived!" they shouted in disbelief.

"Of course," Hodja said.

"And did you use nothing at all to warm yourself?" they asked.

"Nothing," he said, "unless you can call the glow of a candle a hundred yards away a means of keeping warm. I watched a candle burning in that window, and that helped me to endure the bite of the winter wind."

"Aha!" his friends cried. "Then you have lost the bet and must invite us to supper. You warmed yourself by that candle, and so you did not keep your part of the bargain!"

No matter how much Hodja argued, his friends insisted he had lost the bet and so must invite them to supper at his house. They came that very evening.

The group arrived early and sat around in Hodja's living room, waiting for their fine supper. They sniffed the air, hoping to guess what their friend was preparing for them. A half-hour passed, and then one hour, and another, and still the men smelled nothing at all.

Hodja rose several times, excusing himself to go into the kitchen to supervise the meal. But when the third hour passed, the men lost their patience.

“What, dear friend, is the delay?” they demanded.

“Come and see for yourselves,” Hodja replied, and he led them to the kitchen.

The men stared in amazement at the sight of a large pot suspended from the ceiling. One foot below the pot burned a single candle.

“Hodja!” the men exclaimed. “Surely you do not expect one tiny candle to cook such an enormous pot, do you?”

“Of course I do,” answered Hodja, “for if a candle a hundred yards from me, behind a window no less, could keep me warm all night long, a candle a foot away can heat a pot.”

Hodja’s friends all laughed, and they invited their dear friend to be their guest at the cafe.

## 9. Practically Speaking: How to be a Light

The Talmud teaches us that the single best way to generate the light of Torah in life is through lighting Chanukah candles.

The Rebbe, Reb Yosef Yitzchak, would say: *m’darf zich tzuheren tzu dem vos the lichtelech dertzaylen*. We need to listen to what the flames are telling us.

The Chanukah lights tell us a story, many stories, First and foremost they tell us:

We are charged with being agents of light in this world. Even when darkness falls, both in our personal lives or in the worlds around us, light has the power to dispel darkness.

And each night, we add a flame, teaching us to always grow in our illumination.

When you light the candles, speak to your children about the lessons of the Chanukah lights. Teach them how to listen to the flames, and hear their tale.

Light is our identity and our mandate. It's not just what we do; it's who we are.

Lighting candles, more than any other mitzvah, embodies the idea that you and every Jew is a light, a candle. As King Solomon says in the Book of Proverbs, "The soul of man is the flame of G-d."<sup>7</sup>

And when your children see you as that candle, that flame, you will be blessed to see them live lives full of light, and be candles in their own right, illuminating and warming everyone and everything they come in contact with.

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Chanukah!

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<sup>7</sup> Proverbs 20:27.