

Hanukkah: Becoming a Light

A Study Guide, The Nesiya Institute 5766/2005

על הנסים ועל הפורקן ועל הגבורות ועל התשועות ועל המלחמות שעשית לאבותינו בימים ההם בזמן הזה.
(מתוך תפילת חנוכה בעמידה)

We thank You for the miracles, for the redemption, for the mighty deeds and for the saving acts which You performed, as well as for the wars which You waged, for our ancestors in ancient days and in our time.

From Al Hanisim, in the Hanukkah Amidah

היה לפנינו נר ביתו ונר חנוכה... נר ביתו קודם, משום שלום ביתו: שהרי השם נמחק, לעשות שלום בין איש לאשתו. גדול השלום, שכל התורה ניתנה לעשות שלום בעולם, שנאמר "דרכיה דרכי נועם, וכל נתיבותיה שלום" (משלי ג, יז).
(רמב"ם, משנה תורה ד: יד)

If a person has the opportunity to fulfill only one of two mitzvot – lighting a lamp for one's home (i.e. Sabbath candles) or lighting a Chanukkah lamp... The lamp for one's home receives priority, since it generates peace within the home. For even God's name may be blotted out in order to create peace between a husband and his wife. Peace is great, for the entire Torah was given to bring about peace within the world, as it is written: "Its ways are pleasant ways, and all its paths are peace." (Prov. 3:17)

Maimonides, Mishneh Torah Halacha 4:14

אמר רבי אלעזר: אור שברא הקדוש ברוך הוא ביום ראשון – אדם צופה בו מסוף העולם ועד סופו. כיוון שנסתכל הקדוש ברוך הוא בדור המבול ובדור הפלגה, וראה שמעשיהם מקולקלים - עמד וגנזו מהם. ולמי גנזו? לצדיקים לעתיד לבוא.
(חגיגה ב.; בראשית רבה ג.; שמות רבה לה)

שאלו חסידים: היכן גנזו?

השיבו: בתורה

שאלו: אם כן, כלום לא ימצאו צדיקים משהו מן האור הגנוז כשהם לומדים תורה?

השיבו: ימצאו וימצאו.

שאלו: אם כן, מה יעשו צדיקים כשימצאו משהו מן האור הגנוז כשהם לומדים תורה?

השיבו: יגלוהו באורח חייהם.

(מתוך: 'אור הגנוז' – מעשיות חסידים שאסף מרטין בובר)

Rabbi Elazar told that the light which God created on the first day was visible from one end of the earth to the other. But when God observed the generation of the flood and the generation of the tower of Babel, and saw their evil deeds – he rose and hid the light from them. Who did He hide it for? For the *tzadikim* (the righteous people) of the future.

in Hagiga 2a, Genesis Rabba 3, Exodus Rabba 35

The Hasidim asked: Where did he hide it?

They answered: In the Torah.

They asked: If so, won't the *tzadikim* find some of the hidden light when they study Torah?

They answered: They will find it! They will find it!

They asked: If so, what will they do with the hidden light they find while learning Torah?

They answered: They will reveal it through their daily deeds and way of life.

From "The Hidden Light", in Tales of The Hasidim, by Martin Buber

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Introduction and Commentary

On Hanukkah, we tell two parallel stories. One story focuses on the miracle of the little jar of oil for the eternal light in the Holy Temple, which miraculously lasted for eight days, though it was only enough to last for one. The other tale extols the heroic Maccabees, who fought to defend their culture, religion, and right to independence from the Greeks who sought to assimilate the Jews into their Hellenistic culture. While we may associate these stories primarily with children's tales and charming theatrical productions, the core values they reflect are not so simple – and the ideals that they encourage often conflict.

The Al Hanisim prayer, which is traditionally recited every day of Hanukkah in the daily prayers and in the Grace after Meals, clearly places God at the center of our celebration of Hanukkah. It is God's miracles which we praise and publicize as we light the candles and place them outside for everyone to see. As we remember the miracles and great deeds which God has performed for the Jewish people throughout history, we are reminded both to express our gratitude, and to remember to turn to God when we ourselves are in need.

Maimonides, however, raises what seems to be a more fundamental, and conflicting, value, one which trumps the priority of God's greatness. According to Jewish law, he tells us, one who does not have money for both Hanukkah candles and Shabbat candles must light only the Shabbat candles, since they represent *shalom bayit* – peace within the home. If we have to choose between praising God and cultivating loving relationships, what we create with others takes precedence over the *mitzvah* of remembering God's miracles. The same logic would suggest that our remembrance of the Maccabees' initiative and courage on behalf of other Jews should take priority over celebrating the miracle of the oil.

The legend from Tales of the Hasidim helps us to integrate these two competing priorities. It is true, the text tells us, that God's teachings should be central in our lives. Studying Torah – not only the Five Books of Moses, but many different texts and teachings which contain wisdom about the world – is essential to finding "hidden light." But finding the hidden light is not enough. The power and beauty of the light are only actualized when we share it with others, when it is reflected in our daily actions and our way of life. We create light by integrating our commitments to searching for what is beyond this world, and building stronger relationships and communities in this world.

*May your Hanukkah be full of light,
and may you use the lights you find hidden within yourself to become a light to others.*

Questions for Further Thought

1. What might be some of the different reasons that Maimonides chose to end his Laws of Hanukkah with the text about making peace?
2. In the third text, why do you think that God chooses to hide the light? Are there places other than Torah that you think light is hidden?
3. What is Hanukkah for you? Are the miracles that God performed what we should focus on commemorating, or is it the human victory that is more important to celebrate?
4. To whom do you look for courage, hope, and support? Are you more likely to look to God, or to other people, to help you through difficult times?
5. Have you had an experience of finding "hidden light"? In what concrete ways does Jewish learning, ritual practice, or your relationship with God, help you to be a light to other people?