



Shadows and Light

Chanukka, 2022 / 5783

There's an elephant in the room, though I think most readers are unaware of its shadowed presence. It's the portion of the Chanukka story that occurs after the victorious restoration of the Temple that we celebrate with our *chanukiyot*. The Maccabean uprising had begun three years earlier when the Greeks (spurred on by their Hellenized accomplices) outlawed Jewish religious practices—shabbat, circumcision, dietary laws and marking the new month. A statue of Zeus was placed in the Holy of Holies, and outlying communities were required to worship the Greek pantheon. Whoever refused was killed or enslaved.

Most galling of all was that the architects of these oppressive decrees were, for the most part, Hellenized Jews. The Maccabees were outraged. This crossed all red lines. It was a *causus belli*, an act of war. There was no choice but to gather the Torah-faithful and fight against the powers that be. True, the odds were against them; they were ridiculously outnumbered, but compliance was not an option. They would fight for the Torah's sake, trusting that their success was in God's hands. This was 167 BCE.

After three years (against all odds) they secured their religious freedom. The decrees were canceled and the Temple was reclaimed. (This was 164 BCE). That is the Chanukka we celebrate as our festival of lights. Many of the rebels were satisfied with that. Yet the Maccabees would not relent until the Jewish nation secured its full independence. It's understandable but, in retrospect, the seeds of their undoing began with that choice, for the fight now shifted from religious freedom to political autonomy. On one hand the aspiration for national sovereignty is perfectly legitimate, but on the other hand, it opens the gate to the test of power. And that is a Pandora's box.

The rebellion continued for another twenty-two years until in 142 BCE, after a series of fortunate events and military victories, Judea achieved its independence. Simon, the last surviving son of Matisyahu, was the rebel leader at the time and, as a kohen by birth, was anointed High Priest.

Sovereignty had its challenges, but things were relatively stable until Simon and two sons were murdered by a son-in-law. Simon's third son (called, Hyrcanus) now assumed the dual role of rebel leader and High Priest. It is at this point that things begin to unravel. Hyrcanus expressed a compromising attitude toward the Hellenists with whom his ancestors had risked their lives to oppose. In the next generation the Maccabean inheritors of the High Priesthood claimed the position of king as well. Thus begins an era of palace intrigue with matricides, fratricides, power plays and corruptions of every sort, that persisted, generation after generation, until Herod's reign and, eventually, the Roman conquest of Israel. HaShem was so dismayed by this state of affairs, reports the Talmud, that he purged the Maccabean bloodline from the Jewish people. "Anyone who claims Maccabean ancestry is actually a slave and an imposter," asserts the Talmud.¹ [R. Tsadok HaKohen qualifies that assertion. HaShem does not pay bad for good, says he. HaShem would not punish the first- and second-generation Maccabees so harshly when their love of Torah and faith in G-d inspired such self-sacrifice and

¹ TB Kidushin 70b

demonstrated such devotion to their Sinaic covenant. R. Tsadok asserts that the Maccabean blood line persists, but that it has gone underground, meaning that its carriers have no idea who they are anymore². Presumably, when Elyahu comes and tells everyone which of the twelve tribes they hail from, the descendants of the Maccabees will rediscover their roots.

It must be that our Chanukha lights do (or can) bring some kind of healing to the corruptions of power that surround our light and lively Chanukka observance, even if we are not consciously intending to do so, and even if the rabbis did not consciously design things with that in mind. Still, anything that affects the Jewish people as a whole, HaShem is directly involved and the providence is precise.

I

One clue is that although candles mark every Jewish holiday (except Purim) there is something different about the candles of Chanukka, that's reflected in the blessing recited while kindling them, at least according to Chassidic custom.

On every other occasion the holiday exists independent of the lights that only mark the specialness of the day in a generic kind of way. On Chanukka, the lights ARE the holiday, they ARE the central distinction of the day...that the menorah was restored and burned miraculously for eight days.

Consequently, on the other holidays, besides Chanukka, the blessing is:

Blessed are you, God...who has commanded us to kindle the lights of Shabbat (נר... שבת של - *ner shel shabbat*) [or נר של יום טוב...*ner shel yom tov*].

On Chanukka there's a slight change: Instead of stating: "...the lights of Chanukka," we say, instead, "the Chanukka lights." Meaning, instead of saying (נר של חנוכה...*ner shel Chanukka*) we say (נר חנוכה...*ner Chanukka*).

The Chanukka lights are about *ner*, which is a specific form of illumination, that is different from the generic light (*ohr*) which associates with daylight.³ Light equates with consciousness in kabbala, but their different terms—*ner* and *ohr*—imply that they are two types of consciousness.

Both *ohr* and *ner* have their specialties. A hint to their respective distinctions is found in the verse:

The mitzvah is a candle (*ner*), and the Torah is a light (*ohr*)...[Mishley 6:23]
כִּי נֵר מִצְוָה וְתוֹרָה אֹר

The *light* of Torah reveals the basic principles of spiritual law and ethical monotheism. It's a guidebook for living. Its radiant truths enable us to make sense of the world and to discover our purpose therein which is the most powerful ingredient to quality of life.

But, unfortunately, it is also possible to take the Torah's teachings into one's head and not be transformed by them. Just as sunlight, has seemingly infinite expanse, and yet it can't go around corners or illuminate nooks and crannies or reach under the bed or behind closet doors. As powerful as sunlight is, a *ner* (a little candle or battery-powered flashlight) can sometimes outdo it.

That brings us to: "*Ner mitzvah*..." The mitzvot are called 613 advices⁴ because, when practiced consistently, they bring a person's life into line with spiritual law. Each mitzvah imprints a habit into the nerve-net. In this sense the mitzvot work on the unconscious layers of a person—their nervous system and its reflexes—greasing neural pathways through the

² R. Tsadok HaKohen, Resisei Layla 57.

³ And God called the light, *day*. And the darkness He called, *night*. — וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לְאֹר יוֹם וְלַחֹשֶׁךְ קָרָא לַיְלָה:

⁴ הזוהר הקדוש (ב פב ע"ב) מצוות אינון תרי"ג עיטין

repetition of spiritually productive behaviors. The mitzvot, *because* they engage the musculature, actually engrave consciousness into the nerve-net.

Kabbalistically, symbolically, the farther something is from the head, the more unconscious it is. And so when King David says,

Your command is a candle for my feet...[Psalms 119:105]

נר-לרגלי דְבָרְךָ ... :

It is saying that the mitzvot possess the awesome power of enlightening the “feet,” ie the body, ie one’s unconscious reflexes and habits of behavior.

It is a custom on Chanukka to sit and meditate with the candles (*nerot*) for half an hour after lighting and to invite the lights to transmit their secrets and *tikunim* to the soul. The Chanukka lights are working on us, even unawares.

II

There are seven Chanukkas : 1) The initiation of creation altogether...2) The initiation of the portable Tabernacle by Moshe in the desert...3) The initiation of the first Temple...4) The initiation of [Nechemia’s] wall surrounding Jerusalem...5) The initiation of the second Temple... 6) The re-initiation by the Maccabees of the Second Temple amidst the Greek exile [ie what we celebrate as our festival of Chanukka]...7) **The future initiation of the world to come [which is also a festival of lights] when the light of the moon will be like the light of the sun which itself will be seven- fold greater than it is at present.**

שבע חנוכות הם [1] חנוכת ברייתו של עולם... [2] חנוכת משה [ומשכן]... [3] וחנוכת הבית [המקדש]... [4] וחנוכת החומה... [5] וחנוכת בית שני... [6] וזו של עכשיו של בית חשמונאי... [7] וחנוכת העולם הבא שאף היא יש בה נרות כדכתיב והיה אור הלבנה כאור החמה ואור החמה יהיה שבעתים וגו' (ישעיה ל' כ"ו) : [פסיקתא רבתי - פרשה ב]

A second hint is that our unspoken prayer (which is actually articulated in the last verse of *Maoz Tsur*), is for the final, messianic redemption that is yet to come—our 7th Chanukka. And how does the midrash characterize that golden age? As an era of equality, without disparities of power, where the ancient inequality of masculine and feminine (symbolized by sun and moon) and, by extension, all subordinations, will disappear. The circle world of Yirmiyahu’s prophetic vision,⁵ will supplant our present, hierarchical, linear world. We will pass the test of power, and replace coercion with unconditional positive-regard as the glue of relationships.

נר יי נשמת אדם :

G-d’s candle is a person’ soul.

I want to bless us, individually and collectively, that we, who inherit both the light and the shadow of Chanukka...that, along with our festive lights and exchange of gifts, latkes and *sufganiyot*, dreideling and family time, that we should take some moments for mindful reflection on how we wield power in our life and how we respond to the power of others and what might be a small correction we could make in that area. And to offer the merit of that inner work as a prayer for the restoration of the Maccabean lineage and the rekindling of their family’s “menorah of soul-lights” that will hopefully usher in our 7th Chanukka and Final Redemption.

⁵ Jeremiah 31:32-33. “And they shall teach no more every man his neighbor and every man his brother saying, ‘Know the Lord.’ For they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord.”