

Sparks

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Chanukah: The Light of Love

Most people who have read a little about Kabbalah probably know that this mystical tradition of Judaism talks a great deal about light – what it calls the Endless Light. The Kabbalah teaches that through our actions we draw and increase this Divine Light into the world or diminish its presence.

For a long time, I had difficulty in understanding this Kabbalistic metaphor until one day it all came together. As a way of explaining this difficult concept, let me ask you to imagine for a moment that you have walked into a magic store. And there, they are selling special flashlights equipped with magic lights of different kinds. For example, you can buy the light of science, and when you point that flashlight at your hand, you see not a hand, but cells and blood vessels and tendons and ligaments. Or you can buy the light of art, and you point that flashlight at your hand, you see your hand as if it were a painting by Leonardo Da Vinci – you see form, and color, and texture. And you're having a lot of fun trying out the different flashlights with the different lights. And then you see one labeled "the light of Chanukah." What will you see in that light?

It is interesting that according to Jewish law, when we light the Chanukah Menorah we are prohibited from using its light –from reading by it, or doing some other task by it. Instead, we are commanded to simply look at the light. All year long we are looking at what we see in the light, but on Chanukah we are to focus on seeing the light itself. We are to fill our eyes with the light of Chanukah so that when Chanukah is over, we will continue to see our lives in this special light. What is special about the light of Chanukah?

When King Solomon wrote in his famous work, Ecclesiastes, "everything is vanity ... nothing is new under the sun" he was talking about what it is like to see the world in the light of the sun, in the light of nature.

But the Zohar, the chief work of Kabbalah, teaches us everything is new when seen in the light beyond the sun.

The light of Chanukah is the light beyond the sun, it's the light beyond nature, it's the light of miracles. And what does the world look like in the light of miracles? The world looks like a miracle. In the light of nature nothing is new but in the light of miracles everything is new and novel.

When I point the light of science at my hand I see cells, I see veins. When I point the light of art at my hand I see form, I see shape, and I see color. But when I point the light of Chanukah, I see a miracle. We fill our eyes with the light of Chanukah for eight days, so that when the holiday is over, we see that everything is a miracle, we see that even nature is actually a miracle.

Albert Einstein once said: "There are two ways of looking at the world – either you see nothing as a miracle or you see everything as a miracle."

The Jews see everything as a miracle. The Greeks saw nothing as a miracle. To the Greeks, a miracle was an absurdity. To them only what is reasonable, logical, and rational can be real. Miracles are illogical and therefore not possible.

The Greeks could never access the light of Chanukah, the light of miracles, because they only believed in the light of reason. To them the world always existed, it never was created. History was an inevitable process – the present linked to the past and the necessary outcome of the past. Nothing unusual can happen, history will march on, a consequence on top of the last consequence. Similarly, their view of G-d, or rather of G-ds, was of super-beings detached from the world, contemplating themselves. Their G-ds didn't care about man. For the Greeks nothing is new under the sun—what “was” always “will be”. Therefore miracles are impossible.

This is why Judaism irritated the Greeks so much that they decided to wipe it out. Judaism said G-d created the world, cares about man, and invites man to be His partner in making history and perfecting the world. The Greeks assumed that the world was perfect already. Everything was as it should be. The world was eternal, history was inevitable, G-d was impersonal. No expectations of miracles, no hope. Life is a Greek tragedy.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik explained that the difference between the Jewish perspective of history and the world's perspective of history is that the world generally sees history as an unfolding out of the past, as if the past is pushing history forward. But Judaism believes that it's actually the future that is activating history -- history is actually being pulled, not pushed, towards the future.

If sometimes -- because man has free will as G-d's partner in making history -- history goes off the road, then G-d might interfere for the sake of the future with the natural transition from past into present. Then the present may not be determined by the past, but the present may be determined by the future. That's when miracles happen.

One key example of that is the survival of the Jewish people which historians have puzzled over for centuries. The Jews should not be here. We broke all the historical rules. No other nation has survived under these kinds of conditions. We are a people of miracles who believe in a G-d of miracles. We believe in a G-d who cares, a G-d who relates to us. And if G-d so wills it, something radical and new can happen at any moment. We have reason to be hopeful.

This is why we light candles on Chanukah and bring the light of Chanukah – the light of miracles – into our lives every year. On Chanukah we are celebrating the light beyond the sun, the light of hope and miracles. We fill our eyes with that light so that we can use that light all year long, once we've internalized it within ourselves.

In fact, it is only in the light of Chanukah that we can understand Chanukah at all. It's only because the Maccabees had the light of miracles already in their souls that they went ahead to accomplish something very unreasonable and very irrational. A small group of weaklings stood up against the warriors of Greece and won. But they knew it was possible because G-d created the world and is free to do as He pleases.

Their victory was a miracle in itself, so why top it off by keeping the Menorah miraculously lit for eight days? It seems most unnecessary. When you think of it, this was a very strange miracle. There are lots of miracles that have happened in the history of the Jewish people, but this seems to be an unnecessary miracle. Okay, the Maccabees reclaimed the Temple in Jerusalem from the Greeks and when they went to light the Menorah there was only enough oil for one day. And yes, unbelievably that oil lasted for eight days until more oil could be pressed and brought in. But this doesn't seem like a very important miracle. If they hadn't been able to light that Menorah the world would not have fallen apart. So, they would have had to wait another eight days – would that have been so terrible?

But that is the definition of miracle – its unnecessary. Natural phenomena are necessary. If I put a drop of ink into water, it necessarily will dissolve. That's nature. But a miracle is just the opposite. It

doesn't have to be, indeed in the light of nature it shouldn't be. But it is because G-d wants it to be. G-d needs no reason to make a miracle. G-d wants to, and G-d does it. That's why Chanukah is such an incredible holiday of miracle, because it's the holiday which really celebrates the essence of miracle, the essence of the unnecessary.

When you look at the world in the light of Chanukah, you realize that the world is completely unnecessary. That you're unnecessary. That everything is unnecessary. And yet the world is here and you are here. Celebrating the unnecessary is really the celebration of love. Because the ultimate expression of love and kindness is not in doing what I have to do, but in doing what I don't have to do. If I dent your car and then offer to pay for it, that is not an act of love. That is the law which says what I have to do. But if one day I decide to wash your car or buy you a new one, that is an act of love.

Judaism believes that we are here by the grace of G-d because G-d – out of His infinite love – created us. It is a miracle that we are here and at Chanukah, more than at any time of the year, we see that and we marvel. We see ourselves in the light of miracle, in the light of miracle and hope.

Without the light of Chanukah we would be totally blind to the true Chanukah victory--- the triumph of G-d's love. It is only in the light of Chanukah that we are able to see the infinite possibilities of love. In the light of science and in the light of art we see aspects – and only some aspects – of what is there. But in the light of Chanukah – in the light of miracles – we see all that is and all that can be.

In the light of Chanukah we see that everything is a miracle and only love is real. Anything is possible-- so never lose hope.

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