



Institute for Jewish Spirituality

Cultivating Mindfulness. Deepening Connection. Enlivening Jewish Life.

Sefat Emet, Bereshit/Hanukkah (5661/1901)

ספר שפת אמת - בראשית - לחנוכה - שנת [תרס"א]

איתא ברוקח, כי הל"ו נרות דחנוכה מול הל"ו שעות שהאיר אור הגנוז בששת ימי בראשית ע"ש [בר"ר י"א ב']. א"כ (אם כן) נראה שנה חנוכה הוא מאור הגנוז, והוא מאיר בתוך החושך הגדול. זהו שרמזו שמאיר מסוף העולם ועד סופו, שאין העלם וסתר עומד נגד זה האור.

We find in the book *HaRoke'ach* [R. Eliezer of Worms, 1176-1238] that the 36 candles of Hanukkah [without the 8 extra of the *shammash*] are parallel to the thirty-six hours that the original light of Creation shined in the world before being hidden away [see Genesis Rabbah 11:2]. If this is so, then the light of Hanukkah is itself of that hidden light, which [now] shines in the great darkness [of exile]. The Sages taught that this light shined from one end of the world to the other [Genesis Rabbah 11:2], so no hiding or concealment can stand before this light.

כי העולם נקי הטבע, שהוא מעלים ומסתיר האור. אבל אור הראשון היי מאיר בכל אלה ההסתרות וגנוז לצדיקים. וע"ז (ועל זה) כתיב "זרח בחושך אור לישרים". וכי (וכתיב) "העם ההולכים בחושך ראו אור גדול".

The world (*ha'olam*; העולם) is also called "nature", as it hides (*ma'alim*; מעלים) and conceals this light. Still, that original light shined in all those concealed places, where it was hidden away for the righteous. It is in this sense that we read "**A light shines in the darkness for the upright**" (Ps. 112:4), and "**the people who walk in darkness saw a great light**" (Is. 9:1).

ואותו הדור, בימי יון הרשעה, הלכו בחושך כמ"ש (כמו שאמרו) חז"ל (חכמינו זכרונם לברכה): "וחושך" – זה יון שהחשיכו עיניהם של ישראל. ומ"מ (ומכל מקום) אותו הדור מסרו נפשם והלכו בעבודת השי"ת (השם יתברך) גם תוך החושך. לכן זכו שהאיר להם מאור הגנוז. ונשאר הארה מזה האור לימים השפלים בכל שנה ושנה. וכל עובד ה' צריך לשמוח בימים הללו שיש בהם הארה מאור הגנוז בעבודת השי"ת:

That generation, suffering under the "Greeks", walked in great darkness, as the Sages taught [Genesis Rabbah 2:4]: "[the earth was unformed and void] **and darkness** [over the deep]' (Gen. 1:2): 'darkness' refers to the exile of the 'Greeks', who darkened the eyes of Israel". Moreover, that generation gave of themselves, persevering in their divine service, even in the thick of that darkness. Therefore, they merited illumination from that hidden light – and that light remains for us, to illumine even the darkest days of every year [in our Hanukkah lights]. Therefore, we must rejoice during these days of Hanukkah, which are illumined [as well] by that hidden light through our dedication.

Source Notes

Sefat Emet – Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter (1847 – 1905) was also known as the “*Sefat Emet*,” after the title of his great Torah commentary. He was one of the last great Hasidic masters of Polish Hasidism.

R. Eliezer of Worms (1176 – 1238) A renowned Talmudist, liturgist and kabbalist who lived and suffered in a dark time of history for the Jewish people (during the Crusades). *Ha’Roekach* is one of his major works of ethics and law.

36 Candles of Hanukkah – During the eight days of Hanukkah, candles are lit at the onset of the Jewish day, which begins at sunset. On the first evening, one candle is lit; on the second, two; on the third, three, and so on. $1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5 + 6 + 7 + 8 = 36$. On each of the 8 nights, a helper candle (*Shamash* – see below), is also lit, bringing the total to 44.

The Light of Day 1 and the Light of Day 4 – In the creation story we read that God created light on the first day of creation; however, the sun and the moon were only created on the fourth day. What was the nature of that “light” created on the first day? It must be something other than the natural, physical light by which we see. The rabbis claimed that by it one could see from one end of the cosmos to the other, through all time and space, “illuminating” even the darkness of night.

36 Hours of Light – Each day is made up of 24 hours. The Sages assume that the light (day) and dark (night) each have 12 hours (even if the length of those hours changes with the seasons). The original light of creation shined, along with the sun, moon, and stars, through the sixth day of creation, on which Adam and Eve were created. When Adam ate of the Tree, and sin entered the world, God chose to hide that light away for the righteous in the “world-to-come”, but waited until after Shabbat. So, that original light shined during the 12 daylight hours of the sixth day, and it shined as well throughout the night of Shabbat (12 hours) and its day (12 hours). After Shabbat Adam was expelled from the Garden, and that light was hidden away. Or, was it?

Shammash – *Shammash* means one who serves. Every Hanukkah menorah has one extra candle, known as the *shammash*, the server or helper candle. In lighting the Hanukkah candles, one first lights the *shammash*, and then uses that candle to light the candles for each day.

The Hebrew Root מ-ע-ל – Many Hebrew words can be derived from three letter “roots.” When various words share these root letters, the field becomes ripe for the rabbis and for us to play with creative connections between them. The Hebrew word for “world” (העולם /*ha’olam*) shares the same root (מ-ע-ל) as the word for ‘hidden’ (נעלם /*ne’elam*), used here in our text in the third person present tense (מעלים /*ma’alim*) ‘hide’.

“Greeks”: The oppressor in the story of Hanukkah was the Seleucid Empire, based in modern Syria. That empire descended from, and embraced much of the culture of Greece, imported during the conquest of Alexander the Great. In the Jewish mind, they sought to uproot the

Jewish religion by prohibiting the study of and observance of Torah. In turn, they are depicted as “darkening the eyes of Israel”, blinding them to God’s light in Torah.

The Four Exiles – The rabbis conceived of four exiles from the land of Israel that the Jewish people suffered: the Egyptian, Babylonian, Maccabean and Roman. The midrash creatively reads the verse from Genesis 1:2 as referring to the four exiles: “the earth was **unformed** [Egyptian] and **void** [Babylonian] and **darkness** [Maccabean] over the **deep** [Roman]”. This is an example of the rabbis reading Torah to find their own experience – and all of history – reflected in it. It is the way the rabbis make new Torah.

Guidelines for Mindful Torah Study Discussion

SPEAKING & LISTENING:

Give your full attention to the person speaking. Use “I” statements when speaking yourself. Do not interrupt one another. When in doubt, take a breath. Be aware of how much space you are taking up.

CULTIVATING YOUR ATTITUDE:

Respect difference. We are a diverse group. Notice judgment and practice experiencing it with compassion rather than conviction. (Remind yourself that other people are not failed attempts at being you!) Cultivate curiosity. Be open to surprise. Enjoy!

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

1. What associations come up for you when you consider the phrase “hidden light”? Think of the natural world, the human world, your own heart. When and how is light hidden? When and how is it revealed? What kind of light do you hope might be revealed to illuminate the whole world?
2. Our text teaches that the Maccabees and their supporters merited the revelation of the hidden light (in the Hanukkah miracle) because they gave of themselves, persevering in the face of oppression. How do you understand connections between giving of ourselves, perseverance, and the revelation of light? Can you think of an example when sticking with and giving yourself to something really difficult and important unexpectedly revealed the light of something new?

Let Us Sing Together

<i>Or Zaru-a laTzaddik, u-le-yishrei lev simcha</i>	אור זָרַע לְצַדִּיק וּלְיִשְׁרֵי לֵב שִׂמְחָה :
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Light is sown for the righteous, and joy for the upright in heart.

<i>Ner Adonai nishmat adam</i>	נֵר ה' נִשְׁמַת אָדָם
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God’s light is the human soul.

Ner Adonai nishmat adam, breathing in my soul, breathing out God's light