

Divine Light In the Midst of Darkness:
A Hanukkah Message
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“And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.” (Genesis 1:3) The presence of divine light was a good place to start the universe and it is a good place to begin our current search for this divine light in a world flooded with artificial lights. In fact, there are so many artificial lights during the season of Hanukkah that they blind our eyes to how dark it really is.

At the time that this sermon was written the United States was experiencing the worst economy since the Great Depression. This is a very timely message to a materialistic world that has turned this holiday season into an economic religion that worships consumerism, corporate profits, and personal debt. From the midst of this darkness this sermon comes to say “Let there be light!”

On the first day of the world Hashem² separated the new divine light that He created from the nothingness called “darkness.” This light was not the visible light that emanates from the sun, moon, or stars—for those heavenly bodies were called into existence until the fourth day of creation.³ Hence, the divine light of the first day is distinguished from the natural lights created on the fourth day. This is an important point for a clear understanding of this message because we so often confuse divine light with

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² “Hashem” is a Hebrew word meaning “The Name.” It refers to the most holy name of God, which we do not know and dare not try to pronounce.

³ Gen 1:14-15 “And God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years: And let them be for lights in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth: and it was so.”

natural light and we live in a world that cleverly substitutes a dazzling spectacle of artificial lights in place of the one true light.

The Bible teaches us that the intensity of divine light and the intensity of darkness fluctuates across time and with different people. For example, in the book of Exodus it says, “And the Lord said unto Moses, stretch out thine hand toward heaven, that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, even darkness which may be felt. And Moses stretched forth his hand toward heaven; and there was a thick darkness in all the land of Egypt three days: They saw not one another, neither rose any from his place for three days: *but all the children of Israel had light in their dwellings.*”⁴ Please notice that two groups of people living in the same geographic location within a society can be divided by whether they have this light or not. Egyptian society at this time was the most technological culture in the world. They were also the most powerful military on earth. Yet, spiritually they were in a darkness so thick that they could not see each other. On the other hand the Israelites—who were slaves occupying the lowest social, economic, and political station in Egypt—had light in their dwellings. The Egyptians could not see our light nor could they fathom why God would favor us with it. Indeed, the Israelites were losing faith in the belief that they had this divine light. We were being drawn to the false sparkle of Egypt’s gold to such an extent that God sent Moses to deliver us from this illusion.

Many centuries later we found ourselves in the land of Babylon. Our ancestors were brought there as slaves following the destruction of the holy temple in 586 BCE. We gazed upon their shimmering cities reflected in the Tigris and Euphrates rivers just as we had marveled at the pyramids along the shores of the Nile. Their language was different and they exhibited a different style of dress and architecture, but the cloak of spiritual darkness hung over that society like sack cloth. Once again the people who were immersed in this gaudy materialism found that the false light cast from their expensive alabaster lanterns did not allow them to read the writing on the wall.⁵ The book of Esther

⁴ Exodus 10:21-23.

⁵ Here I am referring the prophecy of Daniel. מֵנֵה, מֵנֵה, לֵקֵת, וַיִּסְרְפוּ (*Mene, Mene, Tekel u-Pharsin*). Daniel describes a society that was wealthy in material things but when its spirit was weighed came up short. Daniel 5:1-31.

tells us that even in Babylon “*The Jews had light, and gladness, and joy, and honor.*”⁶ This lesson repeats itself throughout our history. We keep forgetting. Hashem keeps reminding.

At the end of every Sabbath we conduct a service called Havdallah, which means “separation” because it separates the holiness of the Sabbath from all other days of the week. As part of this ceremony we light a decorative candle that is usually braded in the shape of a torch. After we repeat the verse ליהודים היתה אורה (The Jews had light), we stretch our hands out toward the flame that we may feel its warmth. An amazing thing happens when we turn off the artificial electric lights; the glow of our Havdallah candles fills the room! Even in our synagogue, which has bright florescent bulbs, our single candle can be seen from every corner of the room. I once said to the congregation as they gazed upon our candle that “Just as this candle can be seen in the dark, the light of Torah is a beacon to the world in darkness. We do not need to be as big or as numerous as false lights; we need only to be true Israelites. There is a warmth, a beauty, a quiet power, and a living spirit in every flame that causes it to dance upon the wick. This light of ours is infinitely more attractive than all the neon on Broadway.”

“I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles” Isaiah 42:6

How can we tell the difference between divine light and false light? It would be easy if there were not so many things blinding us with idolatry and confusing our minds with false doctrine. The prophet Isaiah warned of this danger when he wrote, “Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!”⁷ The Torah is our light. God descended upon Mt. Sinai and gave it to us. Only a person who is stone blind would allow someone to take this Torah from him. King Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived wrote in the

⁶ Esther 8:16. The Hebrew in this text is “Yehudeem” (יהודים) meaning Jews rather than “Yisrael” (ישראל) meaning Israelite. This proves that the term “Jew” was commonly used by Israelites to describe themselves by this point in Biblical history.

⁷ Isaiah 5:20

book of Proverbs, “For the commandment is a lamp; and the law is light.”⁸ Therefore, anyone who does not live by these commandment and does not obey God’s laws does not see His light. Those who speak against God’s laws or claim that God’s commandments are void are saying that God’s light is out. The best advice is this: Do Not Trust New Lights. Follow the divine light that was given on the first day. It is the oldest and truest of lights. As the Negro spiritual says, “It was good for the Hebrew children, its good enough for me.” When people tell you to accept a new light quote Psalm 27 “The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? the LORD is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?”

How can we who seem so dark be the true light?

*The Light of Israel will become a fire, their Holy One a flame; in a single day it will burn and consume his thorns and his briars....In that day the remnant of Israel, the survivors of the house of Jacob, will no longer rely on him who struck them down but will truly rely on the LORD, the Holy One of Israel. A remnant will return, a remnant of Jacob will return to the Mighty God.*⁹

We are that bright remnant, the survivors of centuries of exile and oppression who are returning to the Mighty God. Just as the slaves of Egypt and Babylon held the true light in those disbelieving days of old, so do we—the former slaves of western nations—hold the light and the hope of this world. Jeremiah said do not be fooled by the sick and impoverished condition from which we are elevating. “For I will restore health unto thee, and I will heal thee of thy wounds, saith the LORD; because they called thee an Outcast, saying, This is Zion, whom no man seeketh after.”¹⁰ We do not assert these facts out of a misguided sense of nationalism and we reject all forms of racism. The light of which we speak is not in our skin; it radiates from the God who dwells within us. Hashem chose us to be the holders of His flame; He established an everlasting convenient with us to bring

⁸ Proverbs 6:23

⁹ Isaiah 10:17-21

¹⁰ Jeremiah 30:17

this light to the rest of human kind. Our mission cannot be accomplished by one person. If it were so God would have chosen a man instead of creating a nation of people.

*“This is what God the LORD says-- he who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and all that comes out of it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: "I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles”.*¹¹

During Hanukkah we celebrate the victory of our people over the Hellenistic Greeks who were trying to extinguish our spiritual flame. The Greeks at that time were the latest but not the last great civilization to delude themselves into believing that their philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, and marble statues were superior to divine light. Many Jews of that period were envious of Greek culture and believed that Europeans were the most beautiful people on earth. I came across this startling admission in a contemporary Jewish publication called *Chanukah—Its History, Observance, and Significance: A Presentation Based Upon Talmudic and Traditional Sources*. In it Rabbi Nosson Scherman, one of the three Orthodox rabbis who wrote this book, evoked the old rabbinic notion that all the nations of the earth trace their origin back to one of Noah’s three sons: Shem, Ham, and Yapheth. What was most astonishing about his analysis is that Jews normally consider themselves to be the descendants of Shem, hence the term Semitic. People of African descent were often called “Hamitic,” because they were thought to have come from the cursed son of Noah. Rabbi Scherman wrote the following as it relates to the Greeks:

The Talmud (Megillah 9b) derives both Yapheth’s name and the word with which he was blessed, יָפֵֿתֿ , from הֵפֵֿתֿ , *beautiful*. He was blessed not only with territory but with beauty, and that blessing endures to this day wherever Greek philosophy is studied, Greek plays are performed, and Greek athletic events are emulated. These and other manifestations of

¹¹ Isaiah 42:5-6

Greek culture all flowed from Noah's blessing. Shem was blessed with none of these.¹²

My first reaction upon reading this was to ask myself, "If the Greeks were blessed with physical beauty, artistic talent, and athletic prowess, then what did Jews and non-Europeans get?" Rabbi Scherman explained that Shem "produced the nation that accepted the Torah, built the Temples, and remained loyal to their teachings and concepts even in the darkest moments of many exiles." He went on to say, "What is the essential difference between the two blessings? Yahpeth's was an *external* gift. Mental, no less than physical, gymnastic are essentially superficial in comparison with the Godliness of the Divine Presence. The architect of physical beauty, the composer of scores that meld the talents of a hundred musicians—even the playwright and philosopher—do not approach the inner depth of one whose mind is engaged with the wisdom of God..."¹³

The Israelite Board of Rabbis has always challenged this pervasive belief—common among Jews and African Americans alike—that assumes European standards of beauty to be superior. It is astounding to us that Orthodox rabbis in the twentieth century so explicitly concede esthetic, intellectual and musical superiority to Europeans. It is the teaching of the Israelite Board of Rabbis that having a divine inner light does not imply that our external beauty or ability to excel in all human endeavors is diminished one iota. In fact, one's divine light should illuminate all earthly activities—physical, social, political, economic, academic, and artistic; in other words, this divine light should be visible in all that you are and in everything you do.

We are a people of light. Within every synagogue hangs a symbol of the *nir tamid* (eternal light). Our culture is filled with light from the special candles used to inaugurate each Sabbath to the Havdallah candles used to mark its conclusion. We use the eight-branch candelabrum called a Menorah to celebrate our dedication to the temple and the

¹² Hersh Goldwurm, et al., *Chanukah—Its History, Observance, and Significance: A Presentation Based Upon Talmudic and Traditional Sources*, (Brooklyn: Artscroll Mesorah Publication, Ltd., 1981), 23. Italics in original

¹³ Ibid, 24-25. Incidentally, in this formulation the descendants of Ham received no blessings. They were cursed.

miracle of lights that Hashem performed for us when people believed that we did not have enough oil to keep our lamps burning. And, we solemnize the death of those we love by lighting candles on the anniversary of their transitions. From beginning to end we are bathed in light. We close our services with the blessing that God commanded the Levities to place on the Children of Israel: *“The LORD bless you, and keep you: The LORD make his face shine upon you, and be gracious unto you: The LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. And they shall put my name upon the children of Israel; and I will bless them.”*¹⁴

¹⁴ Numbers 6:24-27