

## Hanukkah

### Hidden Light

Even the darkness is not too dark for Thee,  
But the night shines as the day;  
The darkness is even as the light.

Ps. 139:11–12

It is held that underneath the desert lie great reservoirs of water; this is why a spring may appear from nowhere and vanish just as suddenly back into the ground. Perhaps darkness is like that also, concealing an immensity of light that shines forth briefly and disappears. That may in part be what provoked the question of the Midrash: What did God do with the light of the six days of creation by which it was possible to see from one end of the world to the other? God concealed it.<sup>1</sup> God hid it beneath the material substance of this world, but it shines out in the Torah and will illumine the world to come. For, “A mitzvah is a candle, and Torah is light” (Prov. 6:23); that is why Jewish life can be measured out in lights.

The Shabbat begins with the lighting of candles for the sake of *shalom bayit*, a peaceful atmosphere in the home. It ends with the putting out of the *havdalah* candle, a sign of differentiation between sacred and ordinary, rush and repose. I like to extinguish the flame in whisky and watch the blue light dance above the spirit as if it were the soul of the Sabbath, till it ascends and disappears. There are all the lights of the festivals too, the candle by which we search every room before Pesah, the “. . . light and joy, and happiness and honor” of the Jews on Purim (Esth. 8:16), the flames of hope and courage on Hanukkah.

As candles measure out the year, so they mark the passage of every life. Light, it is said, precedes our entrance into the world. “Who shall set me as in the months of old, as in the days when God watched over me, when his light burned radiant over my head?” pleaded Job in the midst of his misery (29:2–3). To what days and months can he be referring, asks the Talmud, if not to those spent by the unborn child inside the womb, when God’s candle burns above her head and she learns the entire Torah by its light?<sup>2</sup>

## *The Eternal Journey*

When life is again transformed and someone dies, a second candle is lit by the person's head. On several occasions I have watched such a light burn, on a little table at the top of a bed cleared quickly of medicines and syringes, or on a shelf dangerously near to treasured books. This time it is an ordinary, material, visible light. Or is it? I have sometimes stood with the mourners for a while and watched as if it were the person's very spirit ascending and departing, hovering between attachment to the body that was its home and the power that summons it onward. Then the presence of the flame transforms the place from the scene of death into the focus of a mystery we are not entitled to understand.

Most of all, however, light is indicative of the presence of God. Once, to save a long walk home, I spent the night of Rosh Hashanah sleeping at the synagogue. Wanting something, I went upstairs at a late hour and found myself arrested by the *ner tamid*, the eternal light. I had known of course what that lamp symbolized, hung above the reader's desk before the ark, but had thought little of it by day. By night, however, it was different. The synagogue was radiant with its tranquil illumination, and a penetrating presence filled the empty room. I stood absolutely still, in awe. I had never felt such power here before. It was as if God were alone in solitary being and I had intruded on a consciousness which usually withdraws at the coming of the worshippers and the onset of ordinary light.

Since that time, the teaching that beyond the darkness lies light inestimable has made increasingly more sense. For God's presence, the first source and ultimate goal of consciousness, is recognized as light, and the small and separated consciousness of every individual being is a fragmented portion of that same light, burning upward in concealment in the direction of its source. The mystics teach that in the beginning the whole world was illumined by this light and that in it one could see from one end of the earth to the other, but when people began to sin, God hid it away. Sometimes this light shines through even now, rendering itself perceptible to the soul. Often it is clothed in darkness and we see nothing, but it is present in the dark none the less. It is the vital, animating principle of all life and shall one day be recognized and set free.

Perhaps, therefore, all the different lights with which Judaism marks the passage of the year should be seen as signs and indications of that reality. Like the variously colored lamps on an airfield, they are beacons from one

## *Ḥanukkah*

world to another. In each of them, a different quality shines through. The Shabbat candles bring the peace of the spiritual world into the rush and confusion of material existence. The Ḥanukkah candles burn with the steadfast faith that overpowers armies, their wicks emerging not so much from a miraculous supply of oil as from a world in which might and power are as nothing before the supreme reality of the spirit.



Copyright © 2004 by Jonathan Wittenberg. All rights reserved.

Footnotes:

1. Shemot Rabbah 35:1.
2. B. Niddah 30b.