

*CHANUKAH*

# Switching on the Lights

Flourescents, incandescents, strobes, neon, infra-red, ultraviolet, laser beams. From all sides, we are bombarded by seemingly endless forms of light. Our homes are dim-lit, back-lit, flood-lit from every angle imaginable. We look down from a jetliner flying through the night five miles over the earth, and we see cities and towns like shimmering islands of light in a vast archipelago stretching from coast to coast. In one of the most radical changes in the history of civilization, this century has brought an explosion of light to a world previously illuminated by torches, lamps and candles.

Yet paradoxically, this very century has also brought a darkness to the world such as history has never seen. Many tens of millions of people have perished in a global orgy of incendiary hatred and savage slaughter. Where is humanity? Where is the light in this century of such phenomenal illumination?

It seems that the more we illuminate the external world the greater the pall of darkness that fall over the internal world. As people become more and more distracted by the glitter of the outside world, they lose sight of the inner glow, the spiritual light, the inexhaustible fount of mystical energy that can truly illuminate the world in every sense of the word.

This was at the root of the struggle between the Greeks and the Jews. The Greeks were the ultimate materialists, fascinated by the beauty of form as captured in sculpture, art and architecture. The Greek purpose of life was to extract as much pleasure as possible from the world - by beholding its beauty and tasting its delights. As the Greek conquerors spread across the civilized world, many peoples became enchanted by their siren song - including a large proportion of the Jewish people.

But the Torah represented the antithesis of the Greek way of life, and a stalwart nucleus of Jews led by the Hasmoneans rose up to defend it. Form, according to the Torah, is only the handmaiden of substance; the glorious physical beauty of the world is there to facilitate inner growth. Without the inner spiritual beauty, however, outward beauty is but a hollow shell - and worse. It is a seductive light that lures the wayfarer to his doom.

With the help of Heaven, the Hasmoneans were victorious after a long and bitter war. The triumphant Hasmoneans entered the

desecrated Temple and set up a new *menorah*, fashioned not of gold or silver but of plain iron rods. There would be time to fashion a new golden *menorah*, but first the concept of the *menorah* had to be reestablished.

Our Sages tell us that the *menorah* was certainly not needed to illuminate the Temple. The lights of the *menorah* represent inner substance, not outward form. They represent the light that shines from the pages of the Torah, not the light of fashionable boulevards. They represent the Presence of our Creator who infused each of us with a spark of divine light that glows at the center of our being. An iron *menorah* makes this statement very loudly, although a golden one makes it with more elegance and dignity.

*A brilliant young man set out to find . . . something he could not quite describe. He sailed the seven seas, climbed the highest mountains and visited the great cities on every continent. Still, he was not satisfied. The unexplained yearning continued to gnaw at him.*

*One day, as he gazed upon yet another statue in miserable disappointment, he saw an old man looking at him quizzically.*

*“What is your problem, my son?” the old man said.*

*To his own dismay, the young man suddenly found himself pouring out his heart to the stranger.*

*“You can travel the world for many years,” said the old man, “and you will not find what you seek. But I know where it is.”*

*“Then tell me!” cried the young man. “I will go there tomorrow.”*

*“But you are there already,” said the old man. “You have always been there, but you did not know where to look.”*

*The young man looked at him blankly, and the old man laughed.*

*“You are seeking yourself,” he said. “You have been looking all around you, but you have not looked inside!”*

The radiant Chanukah lights carry this message down through the generations and centuries right into each and every one of our homes. Jewish law forbids the use of Chanukah lights as reading lamps and the like, because they are not meant for physical illumination. They are symbols of a light that guides our hearts and souls rather than our eyes. In this age of blinding light, the little Chanukah flames encourage each of us to turn inward, to switch on our inner light and let it show us the way to eternal life.