

Holding The Dark With The Light

A Hanukkah Companion

R. Avi Strausberg

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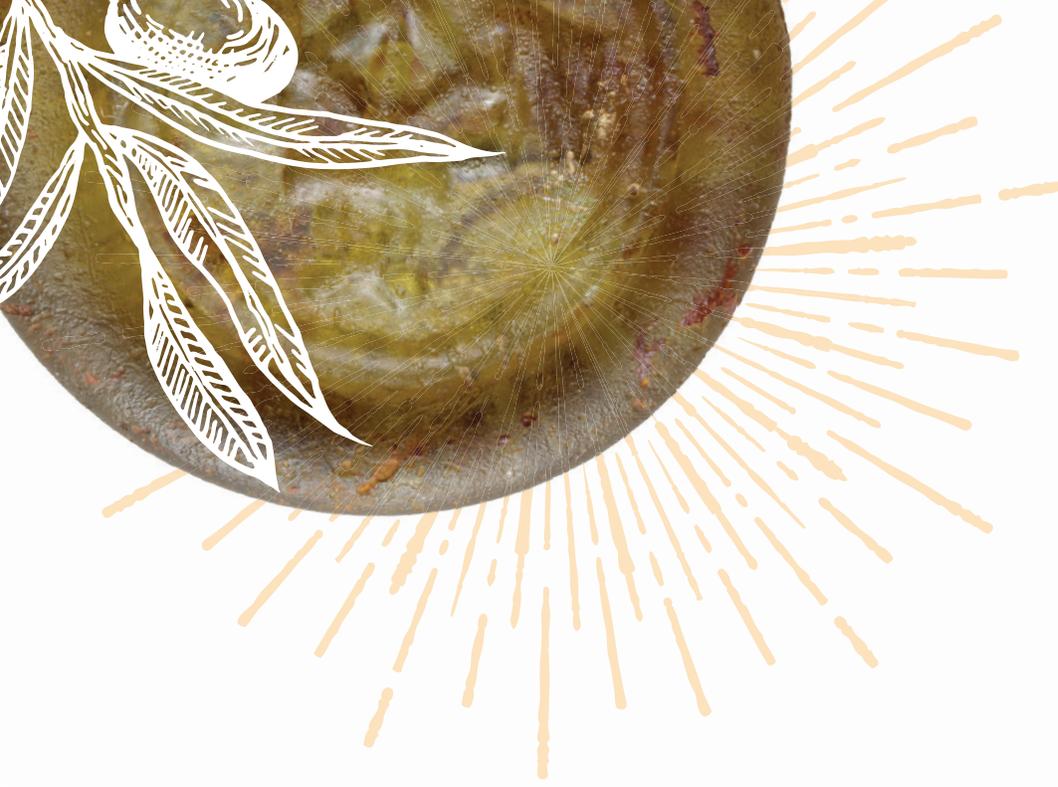
Hanukkah

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Introduction

As children, we learn to be afraid of the dark—and for good reason. We learn to associate darkness with the unknown, with monsters under our bed, with shadows that loom eerily out of proportion. But, what if we could hold the darkness as we hold the light? What if this year, when we light the candles of our *hanukkiyah*, we admire not only the light of the fire but acknowledge the place of the darkness?

We learn in the Talmud that Adam and Eve were also afraid of the dark. Their very first night they spent facing each other fasting and crying the whole night long. What if this was the end? What if the whole world had returned to the *tohu va-vohu* that preceded creation—chaos and darkness, the new forever state? What would a life of continual darkness be? Hour after hour, they mourned the loss of light and feared the dark. And then, dawn broke. Just like that, a night of tears and terror ended with the first light breaking on the horizon. Seeing the light meet the darkness, Adam understood and he said, *minhago shel ha-olam*—this is the way of the world.¹ Light and darkness are both a fact of life. There is no light that is not followed by darkness and no darkness that does not give way to light.

For many of us, the last two years brought much darkness, from the literal darkness of the underground tunnel cells where hostages were imprisoned to the psychological and spiritual darkness of the endless mourning, loss, horror, and sadness of this long war. Like Adam and Eve, we have been afraid that the world had returned to *tohu va-vohu*, chaos and darkness. With the release of the surviving hostages, though, and the cessation of outright war and maybe even the prospect of a long-term shift away from violence, some semblance of a dawn has broken. Like Adam and Eve, we are no longer afraid of an interminable darkness; there is reason to rejoice.

And yet, it is a complicated joy, not without sadness; it is a light that is interwoven with darkness. Even as some are able to celebrate the light, we are very aware of the people who will never come home, the cost of getting to this moment, and the many people whose lives have been irrevocably harmed.

¹ Talmud Bavli Avodah Zara 8a.

Each night this Hanukkah, as you light your candles, take a moment to make space for both darkness and light. Take a moment to name, to grieve, and to hold a point of darkness from the past year. Rather than push the darkness away, hold it close and bring it into the light. Then, take a moment to hold the light. Name and give gratitude for a point of light this year.

In the texts that follow, we go on a journey that parallels the position of Beit Shammai. When it comes to lighting the Hanukkah lights, Beit Shammai argue that we move from light to darkness, beginning with eight candles and decreasing in light, while Beit Hillel argue that we move from darkness to light, beginning with one candle and increasing in light. While we follow the position of Beit Hillel when it comes to kindling Hanukkah lights, this year we attempt to honor the position of Beit Shammai as we study texts that move from light to darkness. We begin our learning with texts that recognize the power and necessity of light, and then move to texts that acknowledge not only our fear of darkness but the place of darkness in the natural order.

In this guide, you'll find texts to accompany you each night. As your candles burn and you hold both light and darkness, gather yourself and your loved ones and make space in your home for a little learning.

May this be a year in which we grow in light and make space for our sorrow.



Wide and Narrow

מדרש תנחומא, תצוה ו

אמר רבי אבין הלוי ברבי [אבין]: את מוצא כל מי שמבקש לעשות לו חלונות, עושה אותן רחבות מבפנים וצרות מבחוץ, למה? שיהו שואבות האור. אבל חלונות שבמקדש לא היו כך, אלא רחבות מבחוץ וצרות מבפנים. למה? שיהא האור יוצא מן בית המקדש ומאיר לעולם. והאור יוצא מתוך ביתו ומאיר לעולם. והוא צריך לנרות? אלא לזכותנו בנרות. אמר דוד: "אור ירע לצדיק ולישרי לב שמחה" (תהלים צ:יא).

Midrash Tanhuma, Tetzaveh 6

R. Abin ha-Levi bar R. [Abin]: You find that when one constructs windows, he builds them wide on the inside and narrow on the outside. Why? He does this so that the light may spread throughout the house. The windows in the Temple, however, were constructed wide on the outside and narrow within, so that the light of the Temple might spread forth to illuminate the world. After all, does God require lamps? Rather, it is for our merit. David said: "Light is sown for the righteous, and gladness for the upright in heart" (Psalm 97:11).

- The windows in the Temple are designed to let God's light shine out into the world. On Hanukkah, we too turn our light outward. The lights in our windows tonight are meant to shine out and be seen by the world, sharing the miracle publically. What light would you like to send out into the world tonight?
- God offers us the opportunity to light the Temple *menorah* (and the *hanukiyah* in our time) in order to gain merit for doing so, even though God has no need for it—God is full of light. In what ways do you feel God's light?



NIGHT

2

Lamp and Torch

This passage from the Talmud describes the process of looking for hameitz before Pesah, which must be done at night, in darkness:

תלמוד בבלי פסחים ח.

למה צדיקים דומין בפני שכינה?

כנר בפני האבוקה...

אמר רב נחמן בר יצחק: זה יכול להכניסו לחורין ולסדקין וזה אינו יכול להכניסו לחורין ולסדקין

רב זביד אמר: זה אורו לפניו וזה אורו לאחוריו

רב פפא אמר: האי בעית והאי לא בעית

רבינא אמר: האי משך נהורא והאי מיקטף איקטופי:

Talmud Bavli Pesahim 8a

To what are the righteous comparable in the presence of the Shekhinah (presence of God)?

To a lamp in the presence of a torch...

Said Rav Nahman bar Yitzhak: The one can be brought into holes and chinks [in the wall], whereas the other cannot be brought into holes and chinks.

Rav Zevid said: One [throws] its light forward, whereas the other [throws] its light behind.

Rav Papa said: Here [with a torch] one is afraid, whereas there [with a lamp] one is not afraid.

Ravina said: The light of the one is steady, whereas that of the other is fitful.

- Why do you think we do the search for hameitz at night? What role does the darkness play in focusing our attention?
- What makes the lamp, the smaller light, preferable over the brighter light of a torch? How can this metaphor help us understand the light that we can bring to the world and how it relates to the divine light?

Torah and Mitzvah



תלמוד בבלי סוטה כא.

והתניא את זו דרש רבי מנחם בר יוסי: "כי נר מצוה ותורה אור" (משלי ו:כג) תלה הכתוב את המצוה בנר ואת התורה באור, את המצוה בנר - לומר לך מה נר אינה מגינה אלא לפי שעה אף מצוה אינה מגינה אלא לפי שעה, ואת התורה באור - לומר לך מה אור מגין לעולם אף תורה מגינה לעולם...

משל לאדם שהיה מהלך באישון לילה ואפילה ומתיירא מן הקוצים ומן הפחתים ומן הברקנים ומחיה רעה ומן הליסטין ואינו יודע באיזה דרך מהלך,

נודמנה לו אבוקה של אור - ניצל מן הקוצים ומן הפחתים ומן הברקנים ועדיין מתיירא מחיה רעה ומן הליסטין ואינו יודע באיזה דרך מהלך, כיון שעלה עמוד השחר - ניצל מחיה רעה ומן הליסטין ועדיין אינו יודע באיזה דרך מהלך

הגיע לפרשת דרכים - ניצל מכולם.

Talmud Bavli Sota 21a

But isn't it taught in a baraita: R. Menahem bar Yose explained: "For the mitzvah is a lamp and the Torah is light" (Proverbs 6:23). Scripture hangs the mitzvah on a lamp and the Torah on [sun] light. Scripture hangs the mitzvah on a lamp—to say to you: Just as the lamp only protects for a moment, so too the mitzvah only protects for a moment. The Torah on light—to say to you: Just as light protects forever, so too Torah protects forever. ...

Parable: A person walking in the dark of night and thick darkness is afraid of the thorns, the pits, the thistles, wild beasts, and bandits, and doesn't know on which road they are walking.

If a torch of light comes their way, they are safe from the thorns, the bits, and the thistles, but are still afraid of the wild animals and of the bandits, and still don't know on which road they are walking. When the sun rises at dawn, they are safe from the wild animals and the bandits, but still don't know on which road they are walking.

When they come to the crossroads, they are safe from all of them.

- Based on the verse from Proverbs 6:23, "כי נר מצוה ותורה אור" - For the *mitzvah* is a lamp and the Torah is light," this Gemara teaches that *mitzvot* and Torah learning each bring different kinds of light into our lives, indicating that the light of Torah itself is more powerful in dispelling the darkness. How do you understand this difference between Torah and *mitzvot*? What in your life functions like *mitzvot* (offering some immediate guidance), and what functions like Torah (offering more expansive guidance)?
- This text highlights several things to be afraid of at night: thorns, thistles, pits, wild animals, bandits, and a loss of direction. Light helps ward off some of these dangers, but even full sunlight doesn't necessarily mean we will find our way. Only recognizing the crossroads can fully orient us. At what crossroads do you find yourself? How do you center yourself and find direction?





NIGHT

4

Dark and Light

מדרש תנחומא, תצוה ח
"שִׁמּוֹן זֵית זָךְ כְּתִית לְמֵאֹר" (שמות
כז:כ). אֵת מוֹצֵא מִי שֶׁנִּתּוֹן בַּחֹשֶׁךְ,
רוֹאֶה מֵה שֶׁבְּאֹר, וּמִי שֶׁהוּא נִתּוֹן בְּאֹר
אֵינוֹ רוֹאֶה מֵה שֶׁבַּחֹשֶׁךְ. וְהַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ
הוּא רוֹאֶה מֵה שֶׁבַּחֹשֶׁךְ וּמֵה שֶׁבְּאֹר,
שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "יָדַע מֵה בַּחֹשֶׁךְ" וְגו' (דניאל ב:כב).

Midrash Tanhuma, Tetzaveh 8

"Pure olive oil beaten for the light" (Exodus 27:20). You find that a person standing in the dark can observe what is transpiring in a lighted place. However, anyone standing in a lighted place is unable to observe what is happening in the dark. The Holy Blessed One, however, can see in the dark or in the light, as it is said: "God knows what is in the darkness" (Daniel 2:22).

- This *midrash* challenges our assumption that light always helps us see. In what ways can light obscure vision?
- How do you relate to being in the dark? Are there things you can "see better" when there is darkness?



Bandits and Charcoal

This *mishnah* describes situations where one who extinguishes Shabbat candles—normally a violation of Shabbat—is exempt from punishment.

משנה שבת ב:ה

המכבה את הנר מפני שהוא מתירא מפני גוים,
מפני לסטים, מפני רוח רעה, ואם בשביל החולה
שיישן, פטור.

כחם על הנר, כחם על השמן, כחם על הפתילה,
חייב.

ורבי יוסי פוטר בכלן חוץ מן הפתילה, מפני שהוא
עושה פחם:

Mishnah Shabbat 2:5

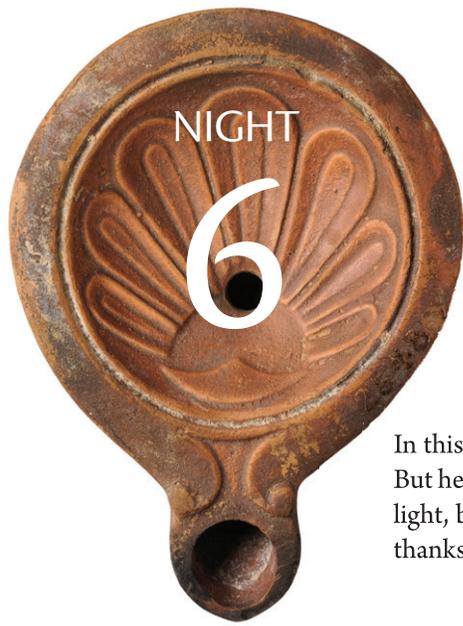
One who extinguishes the lamp [on Shabbat] because they are afraid because of [threatening] non-Jews, because of bandits, because of an evil spirit, or for the sake of a sick person so that they should sleep— [in all of these cases] they are exempt.

[One who extinguishes the lamp because they wanted to] spare the lamp, spare the oil, or spare the wick—they are liable.

But R. Yose exempts them in all of [these cases] except for the wick because this makes it into charcoal.

- One is exempt from punishment for extinguishing lights on Shabbat during moments when darkness is needed—when someone is in hiding, depressed, or sick. Why do these moments call for darkness? Have there been times in your life when permission for darkness was more important than light?
- The end of the *mishnah* demands that we never extinguish the Shabbat candles from a place of scarcity, to save fuel. What lights might we be denying the world because we are afraid of using our resources? What might we gain from this image of letting the Shabbat lights burn themselves out?





Good and Sweet

In this *midrash*, King David attributes his acquisition of light to the time he sat in the dark. But he takes this even one step further: not only is darkness presented as the prerequisite for light, but the subsequent manifestation of light seems to recast the darkness. Therefore, he thanks God for all things, light and dark, as being “good and sweet.”

מדרש תהלים מזמור ה
אמר דוד להקב"ה כל מה שנתת לנו טובים ונעימים
הם, שנאמר "חבלים נפלו לי בנעימים אף נחלת
שפרה עלי" (תהלים טז:ו), וכן הוא אומר "אל
תשמחי אויבתי לי כי נפלת קמתי כי אשב בחשך
ה' אור לי" (מיכה ז:ח), אילולי שישבתי בחשך לא
היה אור לי.

Midrash Tehillim Mizmor 5

David said to the Holy Blessed One: All that You have given to us— good and sweet are they, as it says, “Delightful country has fallen to my lot; lovely indeed is my estate” (Psalm 16:6). It says likewise, “Do not rejoice over me, O my enemy! Though I have fallen, I rise again; though I sit in darkness, God is my light” (Micah 7:8). [That is to say:] Had I not sat in the darkness, I would not have had light.

- In what way can it be said that dark is generative of light? In what ways do we owe our lights to our darknesses?
- In what ways do light and darkness reshape each other? Do the lights in our lives shed new perspectives on the darkness?





Cloud and Mist

ליקוטי מוהר"ן
קטו

Rebbe Nahman of Breslov,
Likkutei Moharan 115

"ויעמד העם מרחוק, ומשה נגש אל הערפל אשר שם האלקים" (שמות כ:יח) ...

"The people kept their distance and Moses entered the mist where God was." (Exodus 20:18). ...

והשם יתברך חפץ חסד הוא, ומסתיר את עצמו כביכול בהמניעה הזאת (עין למטה). ומי שהוא בר דעת, הוא מסתכל בהמניעה, ומוציא שם הבורא ברוך הוא... ומי שאינו בר דעת, כשרואה המניעה חוזר תכף לאחוריו.

Yet, God "is One Who desires kindness" (Micah 7:18) and God hides Godself, as it were, in this obstacle. Thus, someone who is wise will look at the obstacle and discover the Creator there... But someone who is not wise, when they see the obstacle, they immediately retreat.

ומניעה הוא בחינת ענו וערפל, כי ענו וערפל הינו חשך, חשך הוא לשון מניעה, כמו שכתוב: "ולא חשכת" (בראשית כב:טז).

Now, an obstacle corresponds to cloud and mist. This is because a cloud and a mist are darkness, [and] HoSHeKH (darkness) connotes an obstacle. As it is written (Genesis 22:16), "and you did not HaSaKH (hold back)."

וזה פרוש הפסוק: ויעמד העם מרחק – כי כשרואין הערפל, הינו המניעה כנ"ל, עומדין מרחק ומשה, שהוא בחינות דעת כל ישראל, נגש אל הערפל אשר שם האלקים – הינו אל המניעה, שבה בעצמה נסתר השם יתברך....

This is the explanation of the verse: The people kept their distance—for when they see the mist, the obstacle, they keep their distance. And Moses—He corresponds to the da'at (holy knowledge) of all Israel—entered the mist where God was. In other words, into the obstacle, which is precisely where God is hidden....

ומי שהוא בר דעת, יכול למצא את השם יתברך בתוך המניעות בעצמן, כי באמת אין שום מניעה בעולם קלל, כי בתקף המניעות בעצמן נסתר השם יתברך, ועל ידי המניעות בעצמן דיקא יכולין להתקרב להשם יתברך, כי שם נסתר הוא יתברך כנ"ל.

And one who is wise will be able to find God within the obstacles themselves. For the truth is that there are no obstacles whatsoever in the world. In the very force of the obstacles themselves, God is hidden. Thus, specifically through the obstacles themselves one is able to draw closer to the Holy One, for God is hidden there, as mentioned above. Thus, this is the meaning of: "and Moses entered the mist"—the obstacle, where God was.

- What might Rebbe Nahman mean by saying that, sometimes, the only way past an obstacle is not around, but through? Have you ever had a time in life when you were forced to confront the darkness in front of you?
- Rebbe Nahman is saying that we must sometimes search for God in the most unexpected places, even in the heart of the darkness. What do you think that means? How does the holiday of Hanukkah ask us to search for God where we might not have seen God before?

NIGHT

8

Chaos and Darkness

Here are two different versions of the legend mentioned in the introduction about Adam and Eve's first night.

תלמוד בבלי עבודה זרה ח.

ת"ר: יום שנברא בו אדם הראשון כיון ששקעה עליו חמה, אמר אוי לי שבשביל שסרחתי עולם חשוך בעדי ויחזור עולם לתוהו ובוהו וזו היא מיתה שנקנסה עלי מן השמים, היה יושב בתענית ובוכה כל הלילה וחה בוכה כנגדו, כיון שעלה עמוד השחר אמר מנהגו של עולם הוא, עמד והקריב שור שקרניו קודמין לפרסותיו שנאמר "ותיטב לה משור פר מקרין מפריס" (תהלים סט:לב).

בראשית רבה יא:ב

כיון ששקעה החמה במ"ש התחיל החושך ממשמש ובא ונתירא אדם הראשון, שנאמר "ואומר אך חשך ישופני ולילה אור בעדני", אותו שכתוב בו "הוא ישופך ראש ואתה תשופנו עקב" (בראשית ג:טו) בא להזדווג לי, מה עשה הקב"ה זימן לו שני רעפים, והקישן זה לזה ויצא מהן אור ובירך עליה, ה"ד ולילה אור בעדני", מה בירך עליה בורא מאורי האש.

Talmud Bavli Avodah Zarah 8a

Our Rabbis taught: On the day that the First Man was created, when the sun set upon him he said, "Woe is me, as because I sinned, the world is becoming dark around me, and the world will return to the primordial state of chaos and darkness. And this is the death that was sentenced upon me from Heaven." He spent all night fasting and crying, and Eve was crying opposite him. Once dawn broke, he said, "This is the order of the world." He arose and sacrificed a bull whose horns preceded its hoofs, as it is stated: "And it shall please the Lord better than a bullock that has horns and hoofs" (Psalm 69:32).

Bereishit Rabbah 11:2

When the sun sank at the termination of the Sabbath, darkness began to set in. The First Man was terrified, as it is said, "Surely indeed the darkness shall bruise me but the night was light about me" (Psalm 139:11). [He said,] "Shall he of whom it was written, 'He shall bruise your head and you will bruise him with your heel' (Genesis 3:15) [i.e., the snake], now come to attack me!?" What did the Holy Blessed One do for him? God arranged for him two flints which he struck against each other; light came forth and he uttered a blessing over it; hence it is written, "But the night was light about me (ba'adani)" (Psalm 139:11) [i.e., repointing "about me" as "my Eden" (be'edni)]. What did he bless over it? [Blessed are You...] Who creates the illuminations of the fire.

- In the Talmud's version, when the darkness first sets, Adam immediately assumes it's a punishment or a direct result for the sin of eating from the forbidden tree. Why does he immediately attribute this to sin? What does this teach us about how we sometimes relate to the darkness in our lives? What does Adam discover by the end of the text?
- When Adam sees the dawn breaking, he says, this is the order of the world. What do you think are the emotions behind that statement? What are the different ways we might understand that statement? When in life have you had such a realization?
- The version from Bereishit Rabbah offers a picture of Adam learning to create his own light, and then blessing it. What role do we each have in responding to darkness? What role does God play?

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