

# Chanukah and Fire



IN THE COLD depths of winter, when the nights are at their longest, we light our Chanukah candles and briefly try to dispel the surrounding darkness. Since *Chazal* (*Bereishis Rabbah* 2:4) teach us that the Greeks represent and embody the primeval darkness referred to in the second verse of the Torah, it fits perfectly that we commemorate and continue our battle against them by kindling lights. Let us try to better understand the nature of those lights and the darkness they seek to dispel.

Three events occurred in the same year: (1) Alexander, the man destined to conquer the world and impose Greek civilization on it, rose to power; (2) the last prophet died, and prophecy ceased; and (3) the *yetzer ha'ra* for *avodah zarah* was eliminated. These three events are, in fact, three facets of one cataclysmic shift.

It is impossible for us to visualize the world before that point in time. No less than the Vilna Gaon said that he could not envision what it was like when there were thousands upon thousands of prophets walking the earth who directly heard the word of G-d. Even the rest of the people who did not achieve that level of Divine revelation experienced the world much differently from the way we do. In Hebrew, the word for “thing” is דבר (*davar*) which comes from the same root as דיבור (*dibbur*), or “speech.” This is because the Creator of the universe speaks to us through every object in this world. In its depths, every item in the world comes to say something. Until that year, everyone could perceive some degree

of the depth and meaning behind all that surrounded them. When the last prophet died, it was not just that there were no longer any individuals who heard G-d's word directly; we were cut off from perceiving the depths of everything that surrounds us, confined to surfaces that seem to contain no meaning.

Because we no longer see past the surface of anything around us, we cannot really understand the urge for *avodah zarah*. When we consider the sun, for example, we have no sense of its true power, of how it serves as the major tool for Hashem's control of the world, as the main conduit for Divine influences. *Avodah zarah* rested on the same basis as prophecy; they were two sides of the same coin — the ability to see deeper, to perceive the meaning and power of all that surrounds us. The major question was: would that perception go far enough? Would they grasp the huge power of the sun or moon as independent powers and bow down and worship them, or would they see even further that these, and all the heavenly hosts, are only tools of Hashem, that all their cosmic powers are not their own?

In order that men have an equal choice between good and evil, there must be a balance in the world. When the Men of the Great Assembly chose to destroy the *yetzer ha'ra* for *avodah zarah* in order for the balance of good and evil to be maintained it was necessary that prophecy cease as well.

This is when Greece rose to power. That nation's special power was their ability to construct a world where G-d had appeared to fall silent, a world where events seem to stem not from *hashpa'os*, from higher aspects of reality, but from the laws of a seemingly self-contained nature in which nothing seems to stem from deeper origins. Once the genuine source of reality was largely hidden, Greece was able to conquer the world. This is the deeper meaning behind Alexander's dreams that Shimon ha'Tzaddik, the leader of the Men of the Great Assembly, led him to victory in all his battles (*Yoma* 69a). In choosing to terminate the *yetzer ha'ra* for *avodah zarah*, the Men of the Great Assembly brought Greece to power.

We are now in a position to understand *Chazal's* equation between the Greeks and darkness. That equation is somewhat jarring for many of us. Western civilization begins with the Greeks and they are considered the very source of light. Is it not the Greeks who freed the human intellect from the shackles of primitive superstition? Did they not found philosophy and science? Does not every form of enlightenment harken back to their example?

A metaphor: Imagine a person confined to a completely dark basement. He walks two steps in one direction and bumps his head. He learns to bend over when he gets to that part of the basement. He moves a bit in another direction and jabs his toe. He has learned that there is an object of some size at that point. Slowly he pieces together a picture of the dark room where he can find food, where he can stand straight, etc. Now compare all the knowledge that he could attain in this fashion to what he could get if a small hole in the wall allowed one ray of light into that basement. In an instant he would have a sense of clarity far beyond anything he could have ever achieved through all of his efforts groping in the darkness.

Greece was the epitome of clarity, but only within the darkness. The force of human intellect represented by the Greeks is what allows us to function down here in our darkened world. But this does not diminish the fact that our situation is one of complete darkness. The Greek ability to comprehend the world gives us a clarity we presently need, but to the degree that their understanding of the world helps block out a light from above, it is the very epitome of darkness.

We cannot overestimate the difference between our world, where Hashem is hidden and silent, where we are cut off from the depths of reality and see only the mere surfaces, compared to the world that came before this level of darkness. *Chazal* record an agreement with Alexander that we would date our documents from the year when he ascended to power (*Avodah Zarah* 10a). This commitment was kept. One can find references to the year

as counted from Alexander throughout the works of the *Rishonim* (see Rambam, *Hilchos Gitin* 1:27), and such was the practice in certain communities down to recent times. Why should we continue to count from that year when, now, Alexander is long gone? The answer is clear from Rav Nissim Gaon's *Hakdamah* to *Shas* where he twice dates events from the year when Alexander became king and adds, "which is the year when prophecy ceased." We counted from that year because that year marked nothing less than a new beginning to the world — a world of spiritual darkness.

Let us look at one aspect of this overwhelming darkness. How do we see ourselves? Do we really feel like we have any real importance? Probably the most devastating aspect of the darkness that started with Greece was that the Jews could no longer see their own special depths. Under Babylonian or Persian rule we do not find the Jews rushing to join the conquerors. They remained all too aware of the profound differences between Jew and gentile. Under the Greeks, however, our main problem was with the Hellenizers, the *Misyavnim*, Jews whose desire was to join the dominant culture. This is not surprising when, on the surface, there appeared to be no clear difference between Jew and gentile.

We suffer immensely from this darkness. It is not just our secular brethren intermarrying in droves who are blind to the truth. Do we ourselves really see a difference between us and the gentile next door? Do we really have a sense that our mitzvos have any significance?

The Greek's attacked precisely those mitzvos which show Jewish greatness, like *Bris Milah* and *Shabbos*. The Midrash says that Greece represents darkness precisely for forcing the Jews to publicly declare that "we have no portion in the G-d of Israel" (*Bereishis Rabbah* 2:4). The Greek war was, above all, with *Elokei Yisrael*, and the concept that the infinite Creator had a special relationship with one specific people. The Greeks denounced any notion that G-d would grant the Jewish people a uniquely privileged revelation that both depends on men and yet, at the same

time, remains an inseparable covenant. In other words, the Greeks were at war with the concept that men could have a *chelek* in the Divine.<sup>1</sup> Life subjugated to the darkness of Greece resulted in many Jews losing their sense of their unique greatness.

Against this darkness, we light our candles. Think about a fire, about its awesome energy. Think about how so much light and heat is unleashed from a small amount of wood. It is a sight that awes us, that catches our attention.

Fire symbolizes a deep spiritual truth.<sup>2</sup> It shows us that just as so much energy can be hidden in a piece of wood, everything in this physical world contains inconceivable meaning and spiritual depths waiting to be revealed. Whenever we see fire, that is the idea.

The bonfires that are customarily lit on Lag ba'Omer honor Rebbi Shimon bar Yochai, whom the Zohar refers to as the *botzina kadisha*, the holy candle, and his revelation from within the huge flame of the *Zohar ha'Kodesh*, which reveals something of the awesome depths in every object we see and every action we do.

The Rambam says that the candles of the Menorah in the *Beis ha'Mikdash* were intended to give *kavod*, honor. There can be no *kavod* in darkness. Only when one sees something of the greatness of a person or an idea, how it comes from a higher level, does one feel *kavod* for it.

This is also one of the reasons given for the fact that we usher in the Shabbos with candles. The candles give honor to the Shabbos.

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1. This is a very difficult concept and is a main topic addressed by kabbalistic teachings. One will recognize from the beginning of the *Shomer Emunim* how it takes Kabbalah to explain how there can be something that connects the infinite, unknowable G-d and this lowly and limited world which seems to be completely *chol*. This was the topic of Rav Gershenfeld's pre-Chanukah *shiur* to advanced students. You can call me to hear more about this. You can call me even if you don't want to hear about this.

2. See the essay that follows (p. 317), "*Parshas Vayeshev: The Kavod of Torah, Yosef, and Teves.*"

Shabbos is *mé'in Olam ha'Ba*, a taste of the World to Come. We will not just go forward in the next world. Rather, our lives in this world will be repeated, with one difference: the full meaning and depth of each moment will be revealed. In short, in this world we set up the candles and in the next world the fire will be lit. The starting point of Shabbos is the lighting of candles because candles reflect the essence of the day, the experience of the energy and the spiritual depths of all that will ensue which results from our efforts and deeds.

There is no time of year when we need to light a candle more than in the depths of the winter. At this time, when darkness is at its strongest, we are most in need of light, of *Kavod*. The significant events that occurred during this time of year all reflect this idea.