

Some Spiritual Teachings of Chanukkah
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By Rabbi Stuart Gershon
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Summary: Chanukkah always falls near the winter solstice, literally the darkest day of the year. And all of us, no matter what our age, are still afraid of the dark. Into the midst of all that darkness what do we do? We kindle light! Our wonderful Chanukkah ritual reminds us of what comes immediately after the darkest moment of the night...why, of course, it is the dawn! Chanukkah teaches us that even at our personal moments of deepest darkness there is still reason for hope. And we need hope, because hope is an essential component of wisdom."

The focus of my teaching tonight is "Let's put back Chanukkah into Chanukkah." By this I mean: How do we reclaim the true meaning of Chanukkah and the real spirit of this winter festival?

I think just about all of us are troubled by the excessive materialism that has all but obliterated the real spirit of all the December holidays, whether that be Christmas or Chanukkah or Kwanzaa.

Our festival of Chanukkah is much more than a Holiday for children. Chanukkah is so much more than dreidels and latkes, as delightful as they are. Chanukkah is a festival that offers a beautiful, substantive, and serious message.

So how do we put back the Chanukkah into Chanukkah? We do it by celebrating Chanukkah with perspective and restraint. After all, Chanukkah was not ordained by God. There is no mention of it in the Torah. Chanukkah was a holiday created by human beings, the famous Maccabees, and recorded in their historical books. And therefore Chanukkah is a relatively minor holiday in Judaism.

How else do we put back the Chanukkah into Chanukkah? We do it by shifting the focus of our Chanukkah celebration from the consumption of things to the consumption of moral values and religious virtues; from the giving of material gifts to the giving of gifts of the heart.

Every Jewish festival is a window into the mind of God and what God wants us to think about. On Chanukkah, God wants us to think about many important principles: that everyone has the right to religious freedom, that might does not make right, that the few can overcome the many, that miracles can and do occur.

Chanukkah always falls near the winter solstice, literally the darkest day of the year. And all of us, no matter what our age, are still afraid of the dark. Into the midst of all that darkness, what do we do? We kindle light. Our wonderful Chanukkah ritual reminds us of what comes immediately after the darkest moment of the night ... why, of course, it is the dawn!

Chanukkah teaches us that even at our personal moments of deepest darkness -- there is still reason for hope. And we need hope, because hope is an essential component of wisdom.

Furthermore, the ritual of kindling one more light each night of Chanukkah, of augmenting the light, symbolizes our responsibility to bring more light and more Godliness into our oftentimes cold, cruel, and lonely world.

Someone once said, "There are people who wait for the dawn to come. And there are people who bring the dawn with them."

Each of us has the power to bring the dawn for someone else. When your heart strengthens the heart of another. When your mind illuminates the mind of another. When your soul restores hope to the soul of another. Each of us has the power to banish the darkness.

Historically, Chanukkah celebrates our Jewish liberation from control by the Seleucid empire. What we do not often recognize is the human cost by which our people's freedom was won. Many, many Jews suffered and perished defending their faith from Antiochus' persecution and during the Jewish rebellion. Indeed, we know that Jewish concepts of the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the dead first came into prominence within Judaism precisely at this time, due to the terrible persecution Jews experienced.

When our people of that era gazed at the lights of the Chanukkah menorah, it was not dreidels and children's fantasies that they saw. No, it was a far more somber miracle they perceived. They saw reflected in the Chanukkah lights their Jewish belief in the immortality of the soul and bodily resurrection.

So when we celebrate Chanukkah and get into its spirit of fun and games, of latkes and jelly donuts, of dreidels and gifts, we should also pause for a moment to remember the more somber aspects of this festival.

Let us be sure to offer up words of praise for the heroism of our ancestors and their dedication to the Torah and to our Jewish way of life. For that was the greatest miracle of all! Above all, let us remember that the word Chanukkah means "dedication." Just as the Maccabees rededicated the great Temple in Jerusalem to Judaism, so too Chanukkah calls upon us not just to kindle candles, but to rededicate ourselves to our Jewish faith and people, to rededicate ourselves to Jewish learning and to Jewish living. "Let us pray for a world of greater lights and lessened darkness, greater soulfulness and lessened materialism, greater joy and lessened sorrow ... and above all, the light of peace and freedom which we pray will illuminate the world" (Rabbi S. Zimmerman).

May the remainder of your Chanukkah celebration be filled with illumination, with light, and above all, with love.