

**THE DARKNESS OF WINTER**  
**ENVIRONMENTAL REFLECTIONS ON HANUKAH**

**By Ebn Leader**

It has often been noted that the Jewish holidays function within a dual cycle of history and nature. This is perhaps most clearly expressed in the *Kiddush* of Friday evening, where within one sentence we speak of the sanctity of *Shabbat* as a memory to the act of creation and as a memory to the exodus from Egypt. Most of the holidays are strongly rooted in the agricultural cycles of the land of Israel, connecting the people to the flow and change of the seasons, while at the same time commemorating formative experiences from our national history.

Ever responsive to the needs of their communities, the Rabbinic authorities in the period following the destruction of the second temple de-emphasized the agricultural aspect of the Holidays. Torn away from their connection with the land, the Jewish people created an identity based on a shared sense of history and destiny rather than an identity based on the experience of shared living off the land, an experience they no longer had. Although some memory of the seasonal cycle was retained in the liturgy and ritual, the main body of the holiday experience was formed so as to recall and enhance the continuity of the Jewish people and their relationship with God through history.

Yet the Rabbis have taught us that the rejected opinion of the minority is always cited alongside the majority ruling to allow for a future generation of Jews struggling with Halacha in their lives, to revisit ancient decisions. It would seem that our awareness of the ecological crisis we are bringing on the planet we live on in the 21<sup>st</sup> century merits a reevaluation of the nature aspect within the Jewish year cycle.

Obviously, with the majority of Jewish communities in urban settings, we do not readily experience the cycle of the year through farmer's eyes. Yet it is possible that we could still benefit from delving into the sensitivity to natural cycles and processes inherent in the holiday cycle. With our cultural proficiency at creating palaces in time, some of the holiness we create on earth could flow also into space, generating change in our attitude towards the planet we live upon.

This shift in the focal center of our holiday experience necessitates going back to the sources of our religious experience. It is only through engagement with the texts and rituals that are at the core of our religious forms that such levels of meaning and sensitivity can be uncovered.

This is the sort of process I intend to engage in, in the following investigation. I would like to address one of the less obviously “natural” holidays – Hanukah. The most commonly known Rabbinic source relating to the meaning of Hanukah appears in the Babylonian Talmud in the context of a discussion about *Shabbat* candles. In response to the question – what is Hanukah? The Talmud tells the famous story of the Hasmonian revolt against the Selucid Empire and the miracle of the small vessel of oil that lasted for eight days. Hoping to shed light on another aspect of this holiday I will begin this study from a less known Rabbinic text which appears in the context of a discussion on the Jewish response to idolaters and their celebrations.

***MISHNAH.*** *THESE ARE THE FESTIVITIES OF THE IDOLATERS: KALENDA, SATURNALIA, KRATESIS, THE ANNIVERSARY OF ACCESSION TO THE THRONE AS WELL AS [ROYAL] BIRTHDAYS AND ANNIVERSARIES OF DEATHS, ETC.*

***GEMARA.*** *Said R. Hanan b. Raba: KALENDA is kept on the eight days following the [winter] equinox. SATURNALIA on the eight days preceding the equinox. As a mnemonic take the verse, “Thou hast beset me behind and before”.*

*Our Rabbis taught: When the first Adam saw the day getting gradually shorter, he said, ‘Woe is me, perhaps because I have sinned, the world around me is being darkened and returning to its state of chaos and confusion. This then is the kind of death to which I have been sentenced from Heaven!’ So he began keeping an eight days’ fast. But as he observed the winter equinox and noted the day getting increasingly longer, he said, ‘This is the world’s course’, and he set forth to keep an eight days’ festivity. In the following year he appointed both as festivals. Now, he fixed them for the sake of Heaven, but the [heathens] appointed them for the sake of idolatry.*

*This is quite right according to the one who holds that the world was created in Tishri, so that he saw the short days before seeing the longer days. But according to the one holding that the world was created in Nissan, Adam must have seen the long days as well as the short ones! — Still, he had not yet seen the very short days.*

*Our Rabbis taught: When Adam, on the day of his creation, saw the setting of the sun he said! 'Alas, it is because I have sinned that the world around me is becoming dark; the universe will now become again void and without form — this then is the death to which I have been sentenced from Heaven!' So he sat up all night fasting and weeping and Eve was weeping opposite him. When however dawn broke, he said: 'This is the usual course of the world!'*

(BT, *Avoda Zara*, 8:a)

The main human experience around which the stories in *Avoda Zara* are focused is a fear of darkness and of the unknown that is common to all humankind. The fact that all people share this fear is emphasized by the fact that the stories are told about the common parents of all humanity, and by the fact that this story was seen as an explanation for a pagan holiday.

Yet it seems obvious that this story is not only about a pagan holiday. It would be very hard not to connect this Talmudic story of an eight-day holiday dedicated to the appreciation of light on winter solstice to Hanukah. While it is obvious that winter solstice is not the main focus of Hanukah as it is celebrated in most Jewish homes today, still the text in *Avoda Zara* offers an interesting challenge. Since it criticizes the nations of the world for subverting a celebration in honor of God to idolatry, what would be the proper way to celebrate winter solstice? Or to rephrase the question in the existing Jewish context - how is the celebration of winter solstice best expressed within Hanukah?

In order to answer that question I would like to return to the initial human experience that the *G'mara* discusses. Fear of darkness and of night is a very basic human experience that goes back both to childhood and to ancient cultures. Often, as in the case of our text, this fear is associated with the fear of death. If darkness arouses fear because it holds within it the unknown and challenges human control, death is the ultimate unknown. Death is the experience that none can escape, and no one knows what lies beyond it. The story highlights this by the choice of words with which Adam expresses his fear – “the universe will now become again void and without form”. That is to say - the understanding and the rules by which I live my life will no longer be relevant. The form will be lost. The story told by the *G'mara* is the story of responding to that fear, and

as life and death are inseparable, the response to death is ultimately what you have to say about life.

I would like to propose that Hanukah, seen in the context of winter solstice, is the celebration of a Jewish response to the challenge of the unknown. In order to make this idea clear I would like to compare the story we read of the first night of Adam and Eve, to a slightly different version of that same night that appears in the *Midrash Rabah*.

*As soon as the sun set on the night of the Sabbath [i.e. Friday evening], the Holy One, blessed be He, wished to hide the light, but He showed honor to the Sabbath; hence it is written, AND GOD BLESSED THE SEVENTH DAY: wherewith did He bless it? With light. When the sun set on the night of the Sabbath, the light continued to function, whereupon all began praising, as it is written, "Under the whole heaven they sing praises to Him" (Job XXXVII, 3); wherefore? "Because His light [reaches] unto the ends of the earth "(ib.). R. Levi said in the name of the son of Nezirah: That light functioned thirty-six hours, twelve on the eve of the Sabbath [i.e. Friday], twelve during the night of the Sabbath, and twelve on the Sabbath [day]. When the sun sank at the termination of the Sabbath, darkness began to set in. Adam was terrified [thinking] "surely the darkness shall envelop me" (Psalms 89:11) Shall he of whom it was written – "he shall strike at your head" (Gen. 3:15) now come to attack me! What did the Lord do for him? He made him find two flints, which he struck against each other. Light came forth and he said a blessing over it. Hence it is written – "but the night was light about me – Ba'adani" (Psalms ib.) i.e. the night was light in my Eden.*

*(Midrash Rabah, Bereshit, 3:6)*

I would like to begin with the last part of the *Midrash*. While in the version of *Avoda Zara* Adam and Eve are in terror till sunrise, in the *Midrash* God gives man fire to help him overcome the fear of night. This is an important distinction. In the Midrashic version Man (With God's help. It is interesting to compare this to the Greek myth of Prometheus who steals fire from the Gods and is punished for the deed.) Defeats darkness with his new technology by bringing light into it. In this version Man overcomes darkness, though not necessarily his fear of darkness. This is very different from the version of *Avoda Zara* where the humans learn to accept darkness as "the usual course of the World". Darkness will no longer scare these people as they have learned to accept it as part of life, and even to celebrate it. It is for this reason that the *G'mara* tells us that in the following year

sixteen days were celebrated. Adam is not celebrating the return of the light but rather the cycle of nature. It is for this reason that the days when the process of darkening is culminating are also celebrated. This is a lesson that Adam from the *Midrash* never had a chance to learn. He will continue to fear darkness, and will continue to battle against it with more and more advanced technology, turning night into light around him, as in the verse quoted from *Tehilim*.

Ultimately that battle cannot be won. Death will always loom ahead as the great unknown that cannot be conquered. Not that this stops people from spending their lives trying. Prof. George Annas (of the Boston University School of medicine and law) spoke at the New Jewish High School, of medicine as the new religion that judges, lawyers and parents ultimately submit to. And as for the creed of this religion, forever enlisting more and more modern technology, western medicine battles against death. Reducing human health to a question of chemical/biological functioning, western medicine seeks for the answer in more sophisticated technology, and many times the person is dropped by the roadside. An alternative model of healing would deal with the fear of death and sickness, with the meaning and goals of life, with breaking the addiction to drugs and “procedures”, rather than limiting itself to chemistry. The fact that many western physicians would not see many of the above issues as relevant to their profession is yet another symptom of the alienation we have developed from our bodies, and the physical reality we live in. The way we, as a culture, relate to our bodies is strongly related and similar to the way we relate to our environment. Employing more and more technology to try to satisfy our fantasies of growth, ever trying to assert our imaginary control over the world and leaving destruction in our wake.

So the two stories of humanity’s encounter with darkness tell different stories of relating to life. One tells of a struggle for control and the other of the ability to relinquish the same. Yet I think that the version of *Avoda Zara* offers something more complex than passive acceptance, that still has to be clarified. Strangely enough, the element that I want to add to the *Avoda Zara* version is the mysterious light that appears in the beginning of the *Midrash*. This light created on the first day of creation, independent of the sun and the moon was the light that according to the *Midrash* shone through the first thirty-six hours of humanity’s existence, and was hidden away upon the departure of *Shabbat*.

*For R. Eleazar said: The light which the Holy One, blessed be He, created on the first day, one could see thereby from one end of the world to the other. But as soon as the Holy One, blessed be He, beheld the generation of the Flood and the generation of the Dispersion, and saw that their actions were corrupt, He arose and hid it from them, for it is said: "But from the wicked their light is withheld"(Job 38). And for whom did he reserve it? For the righteous in the time to come, for it is said: "And God saw the light, that it was good"(Gen. 1). And 'good' means only the righteous, for it is said: "Say ye of the righteous that he is good"(Proverbs, 13). (BT, Hagigah, 12a)*

A full discussion of this "light of the seven days" is beyond the scope of this paper, so I will limit myself to a few short comments. What is the experience of a light with which you can see from one end of the world to the other? As this story is told, for the first hours of their existence humans experienced light that has no darkness, life that has no death. Nothing limits their vision, nothing shades the bright light. How great then, must be the shock of experiencing limitation for the first time, of losing the vision wherein all is good and all are righteous. Yet this is what happens when Adam sins, when mankind sins. Once evil is introduced into the world we cannot exist without the option of closing the eyes. The story is told of R' Ya'akov Yitzchak the seer of Lublin who was given the gift of vision from one end of the world to the other. Overwhelmed by the enormity of evil in the world he begged for mercy and it was limited to the four hundred miles around him. He asked that that be taken from him as well, but this request was not granted. Yet we also know that our greatest sins come from turning our eyes away... this is the complexity of our vision. We cannot turn away lest we be guilty of sin, as the Torah says – "you must not remain indifferent" (Deuteronomy 22:3). Yet we cannot let ourselves see everything lest we be overwhelmed and lose all capacity to bring about change in the world. The fact that as humans we are imperfect and limited necessitates our acceptance of our limitations as a prerequisite for our growth. Is this not what the sages meant when they said – "the wages of sin is sin" (*Avot*, 4:2)?

It is accepting this limitation that allows man/woman to grow. To work for fixing that which is broken, for *Tikkun Olam*. Yet it is easy to lose hope. If our ability to see depends on our ability to accept not seeing are we not stuck in an endless cycle? Is not

the pure vision of creation lost forever? Perhaps This is the topic of the discussion of R' Jose and R' Yehuda in the Zohar...

*It is written: "And God said, Let there be light, and there was light" (Gen. 1, 3). Said R. Jose: 'That light was hidden and kept in store for the righteous in the world to come, as already stated; for it is written, "A light is sown for the righteous" (Ps. XCVII, 11). Thus that light functioned in the world only on the first day of Creation; after that it was hidden away and no longer seen.' Said R. Judah: 'had it been hidden away altogether, the world would not have been able to exist for one moment. But it was only hidden like a seed that generates others, seeds and fruits, and the world is sustained by it. There is not a day that something does not emanate from that light to sustain all things, for it is with this that the Holy One nourishes the world. Moreover, whenever the Torah is studied by night, a little thread of this hidden light steals down and plays upon them that are absorbed in their study, wherefore it is written: "The Lord commandeth His lovingkindness in the daytime, and in the night his song is with me" (Ps. XLII, 9); this has already been expounded. (Zohar, Shemot, 148:b)*

R' Yehuda teaches us that had the original vision been totally taken away we would have truly been lost. Somehow, in some moment, we are able to reconnect to that original vision. Not as it was, for that is lost forever like a seed buried in the ground, but rather as it can be, like the new plant that will grow from that seed. It is up to us, those who learn Torah in the darkness to create those flickering moments when "*Or Ein Sof*" the light of no limitations illuminates our struggle through boundaries, and the flash of the moment when we intuit that by piling limitation on limitation we will eventually be free. For without this the world would cease to exist.

So Adam and Eve having gotten through the first night of terror no longer sit and weep in the darkness. Rather they accept the darkness and work in it to bring about *Tikkun Olam*. They celebrate the memory of the thirty-six hours of limitless light that hidden in the darkness gives their work hope. And this is the meaning of our Hanukah candles. Night after night in the darkest moments of the year we light small flickering flames till by the end of eight days we have kindled a total of thirty-six lights to remind us of the initial experience of unlimited light. And we are not allowed to use these candles for they are not there to help us overcome the darkness. Rather they are there to

help us accept the darkness, to celebrate that work which we can do by accepting our limitations and the great freedom that will grow from them. These are the candles with which we relinquish the attempt to conquer the world through technology and to harness it to our perceived needs and aspirations. These are the candles with which we humbly celebrate the cycles of nature through darkness and light, through winter and summer through life and death. These are the candles of embracing our own fear and growing through it. If I may offer my own translation for a prayer commonly said when lighting the candles – “For these candles that we light are holy and we do not use them to assert authority over the world, but rather to observe them, for that enables us to be grateful and to praise your holy name.”

May we all be privileged as we watch the Hanukkah flames to let go of our need to use the world, to relinquish our imagined authority over life and death, and to be strengthened by the beauty of the course of the world with its light and darkness.

May we be privileged to see the flickering of those thirty-six hours of light in our lives, and may we create more and more options for those flames to be seen and remembered.