

**The Power of Light**  
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*By lighting the menorah, we ignite the flame in our souls, the spark that cannot be extinguished, that will burn not for eight days but for eternity. We place the menorah in our windows to be visible to those passing by, just as our inner light must shine against evil and indifference and must kindle the spirits of our fellow humans.*

*--Michael Strassfeld*

**Meditation**

In this season of growing darkness,  
we pause before the beauty of light...  
light within, light without...

Light of freedom...  
Light of truth...  
Light of faith... and hope...  
Light of love... and compassion...

We pause before the beauty of light shining forth  
from within the beauty an mystery of the dark.

We pause...  
may we be renewed within this quiet time together...

**Reading** – by Rev. Lynn Ungar

Come down from the hills.  
Declare the fighting done.  
Be bold – declare victory,  
even when the temple is wrecked  
and the tyrants have not retreated,  
only coiled back like a snake  
prepared to strike again.

Come down. Try to remember  
a life gentled by daily acts  
of domestic faith – the pot  
set to boil, the bed made up,  
the table set in calm expectation  
that when the sun sets  
we will still be here.

Come down and settle.  
Unlearn the hears of hiding.  
Light fires that can be seen for miles,  
that dance and spark and warm  
the frozen marrow. Set lamps  
in the window. Declare your presence,  
your loyalties, the truths  
for which you do not expect to have to die.

It would take a miracle you say,  
to carve such a solid life  
out of the shell of fear.  
I say you are the stuff  
from which such miracles are made.

## Sermon

The most visible symbol of Hanukkah, which begins late this year, December 21 – a beautiful and appropriate pairing this year with solstice – is of course the lighting of the candles, one for each night of the eight day festival. As you know, these eight nights of light represent the miracle of a small amount of oil lasting eight days when the lamp was lit to rededicate the Temple following the victory of the Maccabean Jews over King Antiochus, the king who had been forcing Jews to worship the Greek gods and forsake their own tradition.

What you may also know, since I mention it from time to time, is that in the early years of the celebration of Hanukkah there was a debate as to the order in which the lights ought to be kindled. Should there be one candle on the first night, two on the second, until all eight are lit on the final night? Or should the festival begin with eight candles, seven on the second, six on the third, until just one remains on the final night. It was Rabbi Hillel who argued many centuries ago for the custom with which we are now familiar. It was Rabbi Shammai who argued for the alternative practice.

Beginning with eight and reducing the number each night does make some sense. After all, the oil in the story would have diminished during the eight days. Not only that, though not this year, most years Hanukkah begins before the winter solstice, sometimes by as much as two or three weeks; this of course means that more often than not the light all around us, at least here in the northern hemisphere, is still diminishing with the passing days of Hanukkah. So to light one less candle each night would most years be an accurate reflection of the natural world around us as well as a way of remembering the diminishing number of days in the festival and oil in the lamps.

Yet clearly the question is not just about historical or astronomical accuracy. It is a spiritual question. Do we feel that the light in our lives is increasing or decreasing? Do we think that the light (of course metaphor for love and wisdom, compassion and kindness) in the world is increasing or decreasing? And in either case, should the lights of the menorah reflect how our lives and the world *are* or how we would like them to be, what we would aspire for them to be?

In short, are we with Shammai or with Hillel?

One contemporary writer suggests that “during normal history – the realm of Hillel – the normal fear of darkness would be best soothed by increasing light; but that after Messiah comes... human beings will be able to honor and celebrate the Divine mystery that resides in

darkness” and so follow the practice of Shammai. Once the Messiah comes, in other words, there would be nothing to fear from the dark.

So – when are *we* living now? Well, let’s think about it. Yesterday, for example, was International Human Rights Day, the anniversary of the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. And yet we look at our world and can catalog terrible human rights abuses. For hundreds of millions, living on the edge, living in danger, ours may well feel like an era of decreasing light, an era of darkness which is not the darkness of divine mystery but the rather darkness of human misery.

At the same time, though, we do live during the first era of human history in which global declarations of human rights are taken seriously. War criminals are prosecuted and convicted in the World Court for crimes against humanity. Democracy and freedom *may* be rising in the Middle East. And how wonderful that three women from Liberia and Yemen yesterday were given their Nobel Peace Prize awards for their human rights and women’s rights work.

Perhaps light is increasing.

Increasing light or decreasing? Hard to know.

How about in the natural world? The extinction of species continues at a rate unequaled for millennia. Extinction is about as dark as you can get, the loss forever of a unique expression of life. And climate change is upon us with increasingly devastating weather catastrophes... all as the world’s governments debate and dither at the current climate change talks in South Africa and one of our two national parties denies that there is a problem at all... and the other doesn’t seem to do much about it anyway.

Yet in spite of all this, we also see creative responses to these challenges technologically and politically and personally. Will it be enough? In time? Who knows? But *perhaps* the light is increasing over the natural world.

Increasing light or decreasing? Hard to know.

In our individual lives, too, we experience both light and darkness. If we look around there may be some in our community who are struggling with hard and ever darker times right now. For some the light may indeed seem to be decreasing.

At the same time others in our community are enjoying health and well-being. For some the light surely would seem to be increasing.

And for most of us, over the years of our lives, we know times of increasing light and other times of increasing darkness. This is how lives are.

Increasing light or decreasing? Hard to know.

Increasing light or decreasing? Maybe it’s beside the point.

For whether the light is increasing or decreasing in the world or in our lives, we can choose to be light bearers, candle lighters. Though there is much in our lives over which we have little control, at the same time we are not only passive recipients of darkness or light.

The Maccabees during the time of Antiochus most certainly were not passive recipients of what was happening around them. They could have been. Other Jews tried to get along in the growing darkness, tried not to rock the boat, tried even to become more like the oppressors in order to avoid the oppression. But the Maccabees refused.

Yes, they prayed and hoped for God’s assistance, and they believed that they received that assistance, but they didn’t just wait around for that help – they also engaged in the struggle themselves. We may or may not agree with the military means the Maccabees used to engage in

that struggle, but engage they did. That passion, that engagement can be an inspiration to us to courageously bring the light of our beliefs, our love, our values where there may seem to be growing darkness.

So the heart of what I want to say today actually has to do not with an assessment of the light and darkness in our world or in our lives, but with whether and in what ways we will choose, whatever may come, to be ourselves bearers of light, lighters of candles – in the words of the reading, to “light fires that can be seen for miles... set lamps in the window.” It is no small thing, to bring light one to another – and to be willing to accept the help of light from another when ours is dim.

Emily Dickinson:

We grow accustomed to the Dark –  
When light is put away –  
As when the Neighbor hold the Lamp  
To witness her Goodbye.

We all know people who “hold the Lamp” for us, who bring light into our lives, people we would welcome at our door in the midst of some terrible crisis or illness, people who seem almost to *be* light. It has nothing to do with whether a person is outgoing or quiet; it is a quality that people of all kinds have, a quality that for some has grown as they have walked through their times of darkness or suffering or grief and then come out the other side. It is as if their journey through the darkness has revealed the light of wisdom and compassion that was within them all the time, revealed the light in a way that might be impossible when we strive only for light and deny the dark.

Bring to mind the light bearers in your life – whether personal friends or family, or public figures who have brought wisdom and inspiration to you... many of whom have themselves been through the dark and become more transparent to the light.

One example of a public figure: Elie Wiesel, whose first novel about the holocaust was titled simply, *Night*. How many of you have ever heard Wiesel speak, been in his presence? Here is a man who has clearly been in the midst of the darkest night, yet, in his quiet way, the light now shines through him so brightly, gently, wisely, lovingly.

No one would choose the kind of night Elie Wiesel and millions of others were forced to endure, yet some grew even through that night; just as many can and do grow – like seeds – in less extreme manifestations of the night. Poet Susan Griffin offers this invitation:

If we allow the night,  
if we allow what she is in the darkness to be,  
this knowledge, this that we have not yet named:  
what we are. Oh, this knowledge of what we are is becoming clear.

Much emerges and grows in the night, in the dark, whether the dark of suffering or the dark of sacred mystery, of gestation. Much emerges that we can use in our journeys to the light.

And, too, as the poet Theodore Roethke wrote, “In a dark time, the eye begins to see.”

I do suspect, then, that this is the kind of journey that many of the light bearers in our lives have taken, these people (*perhaps you; perhaps the one sitting next to you...*) who don't have to try to bring something or to be something that they are not, since through their journey –

sometimes a very difficult journey – they have become more transparent to the light that we all need, the light that we all are.

Does all this mean, then, that I would choose Hillel’s way or Shammai’s way of lighting the Hanukkah candles?

I wonder – can I choose both? Shammai’s way affirming that the journey into darkness sometimes simply happens, and is a journey through which we can sometimes grow – at the very least can emerge to the other side. Hillel’s way affirming that we must choose to light one more candle each day if we can. More if we’re able, but at least one; one candle has enormous power, one candle can light many more, each of which can light many more... many more. For each day there are some who *are* in darkness of the worst kind, there are some who will need *our* light. When we *can* bring light, we *must* bring light.

And it may come around to us when we need the light.

In the end, in any case, it is well worth remembering which way the Jewish people have chosen to light the Hanukkah candles, the Jewish people of all peoples, who have known so much suffering, so much darkness – Jews have chosen to honor the increase of light, to aspire to *bring* an increase of light. The Talmud tells us that Hillel argued that we should be about the work of increasing the holiness represented by the light rather than diminishing the holiness.

So, though the world is too complex for us to be able really to know whether light is increasing or decreasing... though it may be that as often as not we stand as if at one of those moments of dusk or dawn when it feels as though it could be either... we can even so light candles with a faith in the power of light *and* in the power and holiness of a certain kind of darkness.

This season, then, echoing in another way some of what I shared last week... may we allow ourselves that universal journey, may we open ourselves to what gifts there may be in the darkness, even as we are led by and to the light. And may we share what light we have with others along the way. There is more, far more light than it might sometimes appear. Isn’t that the message and the miracle of Hanukkah candles and Christmas lights and solstice fires? And isn’t that the message and perhaps the miracle too in the light of the chalice we kindle each week and that burns always in our hearts?

There is a song by Gordon Bok title “Turning Toward the Morning” and after years of listening to and singing the song, it finally occurred to me that even as it is growing darker – in the season or in our lives – and though we don’t know for how long it will be growing darker... we are also still “turning toward the morning” whether soon or late, still “turning toward the morning.”

So may it be.

### **Benediction**

Willing to face the mystery of the dark,  
May we so live as to become ever more transparent to the light;  
May we bring light to the world;  
May we spark the light within each other.

So may it be.