

THE WEXNER FOUNDATION

FROM SUKKOT TO HANUKKAH INFUSING OUR FALL WITH JOY AND LIGHT

Light or Fire? (Or vs. Ur)

Rabbi Morris Panitz | December 18, 2020

Rav Shlomo Yosef Zevin-- "L'Torah u'limoadim"

It's appropriate to pose this question concerning the Hanukkah lamp-- What is the commandment: to kindle a fire or create light?

...One might say that the founding fathers, *Beit Shammai* and *Beit Hillel*, already disputed this point: "Gradually decrease [the number of lights]" or "Gradually increase [the number of lights]" (Shabbat 21b)

The light functions as an expression for "the *mitzvah* is a lamp; the Torah is a light," "the soul of a person is the lamp of God" (Proverbs 6:23; 20:27). The light of the soul needs to penetrate into all the remote recesses of a person and to illuminate his whole being. And the light of the Torah needs to penetrate, and is destined to penetrate, into all of the remote corners of the world and to illuminate all of the darkened regions of the universe and the depths of the land. And the two are dependent on one another. A person creates the world. "Also, God placed the world in their hearts" (Eccl. 3:11). When people cause their souls to shine, the entire world will be uplifted to the level of the utmost light of Torah Light.

The fire symbolizes the destruction and annihilation of the evil. The fire burns and consumes the evil forces that are in a person's soul, as it is written, "You shall sweep out the evil from your midst" (Deut. 13:6). And, the fire even burns and annihilates the evil forces that are active in the entire world. And the two are dependent on one another, "For God placed the world in their hearts," until the arrival of the day of which it is said: "I will cause the spirit of impurity to pass from the land" (Zechariah 13:2) and "evil, in its entirety, will vanish like smoke" (Rosh Hashanah liturgy).

Certainly, we require both forces—fire and light, but Shammai and Hillel disagreed about where to place the emphasis, what is the essence and central focus of a person's efforts. Beit Shammai, as is their tendency, is strict. A person cannot elevate oneself to the utmost light without annihilating and "burning away" one's inner evil forces. "For evil cannot reside with you" (Ps. 5:5). After one destroys the evil, inevitably one will draw close to the light of holiness. Beit Hillel is lenient. On the contrary, by means of the light of Torah, one will drive away the darkness of evil. A little light pushes away much darkness from itself, and even more so, a lot of light... "When God departs from God's dwelling place, the mountains melt" (Micah 1:3-4). God is within every Jew ("And I will dwell within them"), but God is concealed

within the depths of the person. When God “departs from God’s dwelling place,” the concealed elements of the soul, and expands to illuminate one’s whole being, inevitably “the mountains melt.”

...In the days of Matityahu, there were these two phenomena: fire and light. At first, the Hasmoneans used the holy fire to destroy and annihilate the impurity of the Greek culture that had ruled over the land. By sword, they vanquished the Greeks and the Hellenizers, who defiled the holy land with alien altars, who compelled Jews to desecrate the Sabbath, made themselves loathsome with forbidden foods, and to annul the sign of the covenant. The enemies were not satisfied until they erected an abomination in the holy sanctuary. When the impure were delivered into the hands of the pure, the wicked into the hands of the righteous, the arrogant into the hands of those who were engaged in the study of Your Torah, and the forces of evil were destroyed from the land—then came the light. “And then, your sons came and purified Your sanctuary” (*Al Ha’nissim* prayer). The light of Torah was illuminated in the sanctuary and throughout the land, and “the Jews had light”—this is Torah.

The disagreement between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel was concerning which of these two phenomena we are commemorating in perpetuity. Beit Shammai, according to their viewpoint, say: the remembrance is of the fire, for the destruction of the evil and annihilation of the impurity. And Beit Hillel, as is their way, reason: the remembrance is of the light. Certainly, in its time, the war was necessary, and it being necessary, we engaged in it, but we don’t create from that a symbol and ritual act. The temporal means does not turn into an absolute end. This is not the ethical teaching for generations. The lesson for the future is the light.

And it is self-evident, for if the essence is the burning away of evil, its destruction, the more the flame consumes, the less evil remains until [it’s entirely destroyed]. Thus, “gradually decrease.” If the remembrance is of the light, as more is kindled, more is illuminated. To the extent that people are increasingly involved in the “lamp of *mitzvah* and light of Torah” (Proverbs 6:23), they add more and more light. “The path of the righteous is like a radiant light, ever brightening (*holech va’or*) until the full light of day” (Proverbs 4:18). “Ever brightening,” “Gradually increase.”

And the *halakhah* is according to Beit Hillel...

(Translation from original Hebrew by R’ Morris Panitz)