

Illuminating the Darkness

The world seems filled with darkness.

There are terrible natural disasters including devastating fires in Southern California. Meeting with a family whose siblings lost the home they were living in and seeing those pictures drove that home for me. We seem to be going backwards on protecting the environment, violating a large swath of *mitzvot* – commandments – in our Torah.



We have seen the House of Representatives pass legislation that will allow people who have permits to carry concealed weapons, [granted by states with lax gun laws](#), to carry them in other states, like our own with strong gun laws. If that becomes the law of the land, we will all be less safe.

You can make a difference on this issue, by clicking here and supporting groups that oppose this like [Everytown](#) and [contacting your political officials](#).

And we have seen [tax bills pass the House and Senate](#) that, under the guise of supporting the middle class, will end up cutting taxes mostly for corporations and the wealthiest, while cutting benefits to help the poor.

This violates the basic teachings of our Torah, which thousands of years ago, taught us that the mark of a moral society is not letting the rich get too rich, nor the poor too poor. It enshrined this in the laws of the Jubilee year, where every 50 years, land was supposed to return to its original owners, protecting a basic distribution of wealth, not exaggerated riches in the hands of a few.

On the most dangerous side, there are the tensions with North Korea. Watching a [NY Times documentary with Nicholas Kristof](#), I was struck by an entire country that seems brainwashed and controlled in a manner right



out of [George Orwell's 1984](#).

They are being taught to hate us, while aiming their 60 nuclear warheads right at us. Combined with their unstable leader and our leader who

plays right into their hate, that is not a good combination.

Finally, Jerusalem. A moment that many of us have awaited for decades – to finally recognize Jerusalem, the capital of Israel, as its capital. A wrong that most of us have wanted corrected for years (if you are an American citizen born in Jerusalem, it just says “Jerusalem” on your passport, not Israel!) has been rectified.

This picks up on the law passed over two decades ago to recognize Jerusalem and move the embassy there, but every president – Democrat and Republican – has delayed this due to the complexities of the move and the region. Moving the embassy was supposed to be the incentive to solidify a peace deal.

Some on [the left are extremely disappointed](#); some on [the right are overjoyed](#).

And some, like me, are in the middle; of course, Jerusalem is the capital of the State of Israel, but what is the point of doing this now?

As we ask our children, “Is what you are doing right now helpful or not so helpful?” At this moment, I would have to say, this announcement without any other action to help move us towards peace, was not so helpful.

So, fires, guns, wealth disparity, nuclear war, and strife in the Middle East, it's a lot!

All of this can make us feel overwhelmed by a pervading sense of gloom and darkness.

The days are literally darker; the world feels the same way.

But our tradition offers us a way forward. A ray of light shining through these dark days.

Hanukkah comes each year when the days are shortest.

The fact that *Rosh Hodesh Tevet*, the New



Moon, falls on the 6th and 7th days of Hanukkah means that there is little light, not just during the day, but also no moon at night.

To me, Hanukkah is less about the Maccabees, and more about the spiritual message of light and hope.

While there is a military narrative to Hanukkah, it is clear that our rabbis wanted to move the festival away from that and toward the story of

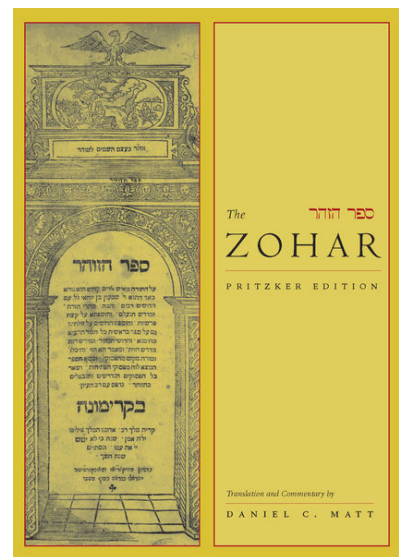
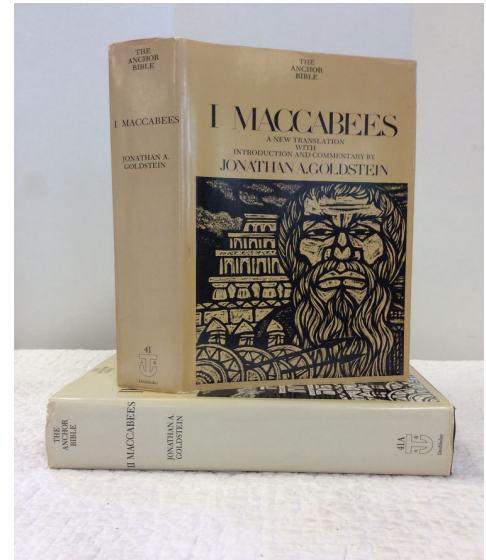
the miracle of the oil. That move – from the bloodshed to brilliance, from struggle to shining – was the key shift of this festival.

Our rabbis did not dwell on the aspects of warfare – in part because later military revolts did not go nearly as well for the Jewish people; in part because the Maccabees devolved into a fairly problematic group.

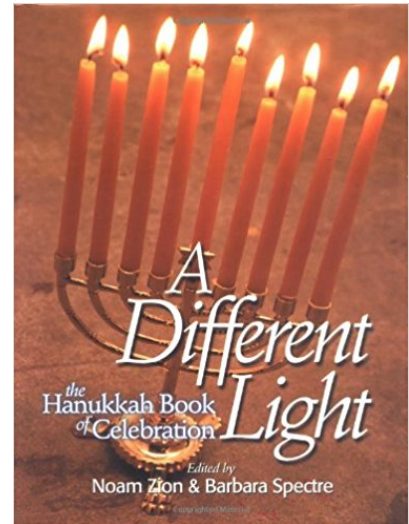
Most of all, they wanted to infuse the events with a spiritual teaching. Thus, they re-oriented the holiday to impart a much more timeless message.

The Zohar, the foundational text of Jewish mysticism, written by Moses de Leon in 13th century Spain, explains that the source of the light of *Hanukkah* is the *Or Ganuz* – a hidden light.

According to tradition, the light that preceded the creation of the sun, moon, and stars was hidden after Creation.



Over the centuries, the *Hasidic* tradition transformed this idea, indicating that there is an inner light in every human being, a divine spark within every person. It is the essence of our soul – it is neither our public persona nor our more private, internal psychological profile. “It is the DNA of our soul.” (A Different Light, p. 213)



As [Rabbi Yitz Greenberg](#) teaches, every human being is created *b'tzelem elohim* – in the image of God. And thus, every human being is of infinite value and is totally unique.

Just as no two fingerprints are the same, neither are any two souls.

The *Hasidic* tradition invites us to gaze into the *Hanukkah* candles this week as they burn and through that meditative act, we can open a window into the hidden light within our own souls.

And that is the beginning of the healing the world so desperately needs, the first step is to heal ourselves.

As we connect with that *Or Ganuz*, that hidden light, that deepest part of our own soul, we begin to illuminate not only ourselves, but also the larger world, as the light intensifies.

[Rabbi Eliezer Diamond](#), one of my Talmud professors at the [Jewish Theological Seminary](#), taught me this insight into the different blessings we recite as we light the *Hanukkah* candles:



The first blessing is the one we recite before we light the candles.

Brakhot ovrot le'asiyatan – we recite the blessing before we perform the *mitzvah*, so say the first blessing before lighting the candles.

But what about the second blessing – do we say that before or after lighting the candles?

And what is the text for that blessing?

Most versions of the blessings state that we praise God for the miracles that God wrought for our ancestors *ba'yamim hahem bazman ha-zeh* – in those days, in those ancient days, at this time of year.

However, some manuscripts contain a different version of this text: *ba'yamim hahem u'va'zman ha-zeh* – in those days AND in these days. To me, this version resonates much more powerfully; that is the version we have in our *siddur*, in our prayerbook. It says that there were miracles in those days AND in these days. This softens the focus on supernatural

miracles; supernatural miracles have never been compelling to me – I am much more interested in the miraculous aspects that fall within nature and human beings.

Rabbi Diamond points out another element in this: what is the function of this second blessing?

Is it to commemorate something as in the manner of the *Kiddush* over the wine on Shabbat, which sanctifies and elevates the day?

Another possibility is that the blessings reminds us of why we are lighting the candles; that is, it is not just to commemorate a past event, but to publicize something. That is why the *Hanukkah* lights are traditionally lit



in the window or outside the home: so passersby can see them from outside.

Or, the Talmud offers another twist on this approach: that we recite this blessing in response to seeing the lit candles. That is what is called *pirsumei nisa* – to publicize the miracle. So, is it someone else who did

not light the candles who says this or the person who lit them?

Seeing something concrete, the Hanukkah candles, allows us to acknowledge this wonder. There is a source that states that first we recite the blessing about lighting, then we light, and then when we see the first candle burning, that first flame, we recite the second blessing.

What does this teach us?

It teaches us that while we are lighting the candles to publicize this story of Hanukkah to others, the first person I need to share this with is myself!

So after I see the first candle lit, I can say the next blessing – deepening the sense of wonder.

Before I can inspire others, I must make sure that I, myself, am inspired.

We must begin with ourselves.

Hanukkah, with its focus on light is an extended reminder to delve into our *Or Ganuz* – our hidden light, getting in touch with the deepest parts of ourselves, our souls.

The brilliance of this idea is that even though the idea of Hanukkah lights is to share with others: *pirsumei nisa* – publicize the wonder of Hanukkah to others, we must start with ourselves.

We must model this, connecting to that divine spark hidden deep within us, sometimes buried under layers and layers of *schmutz*, of clutter.

But it is there.

And just like the oil of Hanukkah – once found and lit, it can burn and burn, illuminating not merely ourselves, but also providing light for others.

That is the essence of Hanukkah: a time to connect to the hidden light that lies buried within ourselves so we can bring that light into the world.

In a world that is dark, both literally and metaphorically, that is the light we so desperately need.

Hag Urim Sameah – happy festival of lights!