

Parashah Mikeitz falls on the Shabbat during Chanukah, the darkest time of year here in the north. Chanukah is a celebration of many different things: The unlikely victory of a small band of guerilla warriors against the powerful Greeks, the inner-Jewish fight between the assimilationists and those who remained loyal Jews, the rededication of the desecrated Temple and reinstatement of Jewish practice, and last but not least, the victory of darkness over light. Yes, it is also a winter solstice festival. Except for cultures close to the equator, solstice festivals are celebrated all over the world. Of course, they differ widely in form, but in substance they are remarkably alike; and in addition to all else it stands for, Chanukah is among them. The overarching theme of Chanukah is light, both literally and figuratively.

It is noteworthy that the Babylonian Talmud's discussion of Chanukah is primarily about how, when, and where to position and light the Chanukah lights. Tractate Shabbat goes to great lengths to explain the laws concerning the Chanukah lights, emphasizing that they must be positioned so they are easily seen. To drive home the point, one of the rabbis cites Joseph in the pit – a seemingly strange analogy, but on closer examination a powerful teaching. The Hebrew word *bor* means grave or hole, with related words meaning ignorance – i.e., implicit darkness, as in *dimwit*. The pit has no water, but the rabbis say that despite the description in the Torah, which simply states that it has no water, it is not empty; instead, it is filled with snakes and scorpions. In other words, because by nature, nothing is totally empty, the belief in nothingness is a destructive force. Hence, if the lights are not visible, they are useless. Shining a light to dispel darkness is a powerful symbol of optimism. The Talmud was created during the brutal Roman occupation, when Jerusalem had been razed and rebuilt as a Roman city, and Jews were not permitted to live there. It was a dark time indeed, reminiscent of the dark times during the Greek occupation 600 years earlier. When we light our Chanukah candles in this darkest of seasons, we remember the unsuccessful attempt to extinguish Judaism during the time of the Maccabees, along with many other unsuccessful attempts that followed and are still a threat today. Light signifies hope!

The Joseph analogy presents a different aspect of light – light as insight dispelling darkness of mind and soul. As we read last week, Joseph has developed from spoiled, naive youth to overseer in his master's house, only to wind up back in prison after being falsely accused of attempted rape by the master's wife. There too, his ability to interpret dreams distinguishes him, but he is forgotten until Pharaoh has some disturbing dreams himself. Once again, his talents propel him to great prominence. Having experienced very dark times, he has emerged into a light brighter than he ever could have imagined, with all his senses opened, his callowness transformed into wisdom and discernment. As he understands and reclaims his true identity, he is able to devise ways to help his brothers to do some necessary soul-searching of their own. The darkness of sibling rivalry gives way to the light of family unity, charting a new path into the future.

The Talmud is full of disputes, some of them quite bitter. But in their wisdom, our sages recognized the higher goal of respecting each other in spite of their often widely diverging opinions. All views were recorded, and no one was made to look inferior. A prime example is the dispute between the old sparring partners Hillel and Shammai concerning how to light the Chanukah lights. Hillel, viewing the number of lights as marking the days that have already been celebrated, ruled that we should begin with one light and add a light each evening. Shammai, referring to the decreasing number of bulls sacrificed on each succeeding day of Sukkot, ruled that we should begin with 8 lights and decrease the number each evening. As usual, Hillel won, but both opinions have their own logic and validity. Here too, is a powerful light shining in the figurative darkness that so often results when differing views cause people to enter into prolonged and bitter fights. After Constantine established Christianity as the official religion of Rome, the anti-Jewish language of the church fathers increased, and Jews were progressively marginalized. The rabbis of the Talmud, who lived under this tension and sought constructive ways to resolve disputes, were instrumental in ensuring our survival through the ages.

Unfortunately, surging fear and ignorance is again driving people to not only believe outlandish conspiracies, but to even resort to violence in defense of their beliefs. Joseph, who through adversity developed wisdom and discernment, and the rabbis of the Talmud, who experienced Greek, Roman, and Christian oppression, show us a better way. We must never stop trying to pierce the darkness of ignorance and oppression with the light of reason and hope, not only during this dark time of the year, but always. I wish us all the strength and perseverance to carry this powerful light forward!

Shabbat shalom!