

This year the last day of Chanukah ends on Friday when we light our Shabbat candles. As we know, Chanukah is a celebration of many different things: The unlikely victory of a small band of guerilla warriors over the powerful Greek war machine, the inner-Jewish fight between assimilationists and loyal Jews, the rededication of the desecrated Temple and restoration of Jewish practice, and last but not least, the victory of darkness over light. Finally, Chanukah is also a winter solstice festival. Except for cultures close to the equator, solstice festivals are celebrated all over the world, and although they differ widely in form, in substance they are remarkably alike. The discussion of Chanukah in the Babylonian Talmud is primarily about how, when, and where to position and kindle 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 illustrate, one of the rabbis cites Joseph in the pit (בּוֹר). In addition to pit or dungeon, Hebrew word *bor* means ignoramus, dimwit – i.e., implicit darkness. The pit has no water, but the rabbis say that it is not empty, but instead, 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 has always symbolized optimism. The Mishna, the earliest part of the Talmud, was compiled during the brutal Roman occupation, when Jerusalem had been razed and rebuilt as a Roman city, and Jews were barred from entering its domain. 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 – something we once again sorely need! The story of Joseph is also infused with light. Each time he is hurled into darkness, Joseph emerges with new insight, and as the far-reaching consequences of his first two dreams begin to dawn on him, he is ultimately able to reclaim his true identity and devise ways to help his brothers do their own necessary soul-searching. His first encounter with Pharaoh is the beginning of Joseph's enlightenment, and it is ignited by the guilty admission of Pharaoh's chief cupbearer, who finally remembers Joseph's ability to interpret dreams. True to his culture, he calls Joseph "a Hebrew lad, a slave .." (41:12), belittling him even as he acknowledges his talent. Actually, Joseph is just beginning to shed his callow arrogance and understand the origin and purpose of his prodigious gifts. The word נֶעַר (*na'ar*) not only means adolescent and sometimes also servant, it also means to bray like a donkey. And Joseph certainly did his share of youthful, and often destructive, braying. The cupbearer also points out that he is a foreigner, which according to prevailing custom, precludes his being fully accepted into Egyptian society. Finally, he is also a mere slave, hardly worthy of mention. Nonetheless, the cupbearer concludes that this lowly being has correctly interpreted both his and the hapless baker's dreams. When Joseph not only interprets Pharaoh's dreams, but also offers a sound plan to save Egypt from famine, he begins by fully acknowledging, and then reiterating HaShem's role. The pit into which his brothers throw him, and later, his imprisonment, give him time to reflect. Those snakes and scorpions the rabbis of the Talmud mention could very well be the demons with which Joseph has to grapple. Like his father, he has much to regret. But it is not until he is in prison that HaShem enters his mind. Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi z'l taught us that "The mind is like tofu. By itself, it has no taste. Everything depends on the marinade it steeps in." When Joseph finally becomes aware of HaShem, he begins to mature and grow into his true calling. The names he gives his two sons provide insight into the workings of his mind. "And Joseph named the firstborn Manasseh, for 'God has caused me to forget all my toil and all my father's house.' And the second one he named Ephraim, for 'God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction.'" (41:51-52) Indeed, in spite of, or perhaps because of the exalted position to which he has risen from his darkest depths, Joseph becomes increasingly aware of his origins as well as his mission. It is noteworthy that both he and much later, Mordechai, both Hebrews in a foreign land and subject to existential danger, are given rings of power by the rulers of these lands, and both use them for ultimate good. When the mind is steeped in the light of Torah, much good can be accomplished. We have always fought against the darkness of willful ignorance, which throughout our history has resulted in immense tragedy. The legendary dispute between Hillel and Shammai over how to kindle the Chanukah lights is in itself a powerful light shining in the figurative darkness that so often results when differing views, not always based on fact, provoke bitter strife. (Hillel: mark the days by increasing the light. Shammai: Decrease the light to commemorate the decreasing number of bulls sacrificed each day of Sukkot. Hillel's view prevailed, but both are given due respect.) Unfortunately, fear and ignorance is again driving people to believe outlandish conspiracies, and to all too often engage in 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 and this extremely dark time in our own history, but always. Let us be inspired by the light of Chanukah and the increasing light following the winter solstice to find the strength and perseverance to carry this powerful light forward!

Shabbat shalom!