



Hanukkah 5784 | December 2023

Night One: Look Towards the Light **Amanda Goldstein, Class of 2027**

Lighting the Hanukkah menorah is one of the most widely practiced mitzvot for Jewish people across the world. What is less well known is the origin story of that one bottle of pure oil that was used to create the light that lasted for eight days. In order to find the source of this miraculous flame, one must turn first to another place where light was created in a most unexpected way.

According to the rabbinic tradition, the story of Hanukkah starts at the beginning of the Torah. The Midrash Tanchuma states:

The Holy One, blessed be He, said: Just as the dove brought light to the world [by bringing Noach an olive leaf], so you, who are compared to a dove, must bring olive oil and kindle lamps before Me... ([Midrash Tanchuma Teztaveh 5:5](#))

How does this journey unfold? In Parshat Noach, we read:

Make an opening (*tzohar*) for daylight in the ark, and terminate it within a cubit of the top. Put the entrance to the ark in its side; make it with bottom, second, and third decks. ([Bereishit 6:16](#))

The word “*tzohar*” here is usually translated as a window, though some understand it to be a jewel. Chizkuni, a 13th century French commentator, however, [suggests](#) that the *tzohar* should be understood as a lamp; not just any lamp, but one lit with pure oil. He explains that the letters in *tzohar* are a *remez*, a hint, about the word *yitzhar*, which means pure oil.

The use of this hint is expanded further from a verse later in Parshat Noach. According to the Torah, Noach sends a dove to see whether the waters of the flood had receded.

The dove came back to him toward evening, and there in its bill was a plucked-off olive leaf. Then Noach knew that the waters had decreased on the earth. ([Bereishit 8:11](#))

The Kli Yakar, a 17th century Torah commentator, asks why the Torah reports that the dove returned at night. He suggests that nighttime is when light is needed. Using Chizkuni's hint of the *yitzhar*, he shows that the need for light was both immediate and far reaching.

Rabbi Horowitz of Dzikov, in his book *Imrei Noam*, explains that when the dove brought back the olive branch, it contained whole olives, which Noach used to produce pure olive oil. According to Rabbi Horowitz, "The oil was given to Noach's firstborn, Shem. Shem, otherwise known as Malchizedek, the priest to the Most High Hashem—sealed this little jar of oil and gave it to Avraham as a gift. Avraham, in turn, handed it over to Yitzchak who passed it down to Yaakov."¹

What became of this oil? In Parshat Vayishlach, we read:

Yaakov was left alone. And a figure wrestled with him until the break of dawn.
([Bereishit 32:25](#))

The Gemara on [Chullin 91a](#) explains that Yaakov was left alone because he had forgotten some small jars and returned for them. According to the gemara, Yaakov did not bring the small jars across the river the first time because they did not belong to him, but rather, were "of *Shamayim* (heaven)."

Crossing a river at this time was no simple task, and it must have felt even more precarious to Yaakov, who was preparing for an unfriendly reunion with his brother Esav and his army of several hundred men. Rabbi Horowitz writes, "Thus the Ishbitzer Rebbe heard from his rebbe of Przysucha who said in the name of the Yehudi Hakadosh...: a righteous person is obligated to enjoy an object which is fitting for them even if it means risking their life. That is why Yaakov—who knew that the small vessels were his, appropriate to his soul, and created for him—risked his life to save them."²

¹ Translation: Jonathan Neril

² Translation J. Neril



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Given that these jars were both his physical inheritance and the spiritual inheritance of the Jewish people, he realized that in order to ensure the future of the nation, he had to risk leaving his family alone, and cross this river again.

In *Yeriot Shlomo*, a commentary on Rashi, the Maharshal connects the formidable efforts of Yaakov on behalf of the small vessels of oil to the Hanukkah story. He suggests that, perhaps, the miracle that will occur for Yaakov's descendants, the Hasmoneans, will be fulfilled through another small vessel.

This narrative of the inherited nature of the Hanukkah oil gives a deeper richness to the story and to the practices on Hanukkah and also creates an appreciation for the obligation upon each of us to continue to bequeath this light to future generations as our national, spiritual heritage. If we are able to define ourselves by the light we have received from our ancestors, we can imbue ourselves with the strength and determination of Yaakov, the fortitude of Noach, and the tenacity of the Maccabees to ensure not only our survival in dark times, but our resilience and perseverance during precarious moments. Using this Divine light as the vehicle for connection gives us the opportunity to see each other and the world with the most clarity. It allows us to view our lives as Yaakov understood the small vessels, as being “of *Shamayim*” rather than as our own possessions, and thus under a Divine mandate to figuratively “bring olive oil and kindle lamps before Me.”

Amanda Goldstein is a mother of four fantastic children, doula, and graduate of the Borns Jewish Studies Program at Indiana University. Amanda has worked in Jewish communal service—in program development, marketing, and teaching. Amanda is an active member of the Skokie Jewish community, both at Skokie Valley Agudath Jacob synagogue, as well as the Skokie Women's Tefillah Group. In her “free time,” Amanda can be found creating pottery in the ceramics studio, cooking delicious, vegan meals, or exploring nature.