



dedicated learning. dynamic leadership.

## Chanukah: Light in Dark Times Rabbi Dr. Erin Leib Smokler

Director of Spiritual Development, Maharat  
Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Track Class of 2018

In 1968, German-born political theorist Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) published a book called *Men in Dark Times*. It was a series of biographical essays, portraits of individuals who, in the midst of darkness, offered illumination. Borrowing the phrase from Bertolt Brecht, she described "dark times" as characterized by a particular kind of malaise:

If it is the function of the public realm to throw light on the affairs of men by providing a space of appearances in which they can show in deed and word, for better and worse, who they are and what they can do, then darkness has come when this light is extinguished by "credibility gaps" and "invisible government," by speech that does not disclose what is but sweeps it under the carpet, by exhortations, moral and otherwise, that, under the pretext of upholding old truths, degrade all truth to meaningless triviality. (*Men in Dark Times*, p. viii)

In contrast to the explicit "monstrosities" of the 20th century, darkness is a more subtle form of despair, a violation of the public sphere and a breakdown in communal discourse. "Truth" obscures truths and language, thought to be shared, actually renders words incomprehensible. Dark times destabilize us. They rattle us to our cores.

We are living, alas, in dark times. Whether your measure of darkness emanates from the United States, Israel, Syria, Germany, or anywhere else where chaos lurks, we must contend with a feeling, at least, that light is ebbing; that the fabric of the world as we know it is coming undone.

What could it mean to take Chanukah, *chag urim*, the holiday of light, seriously in the midst of times that feel so very dark? Is there something to say, some healing to be had, some liveable message, that might meet the reality we find ourselves in?

The *Sefat Emet*, R. Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter (1847-1905), offers a poignant start, highlighting the ways that Chanukah itself contends with the darkness in its own midst.

The miracle of Chanukah was in the light, that one could find the illumination hidden in the darkness and the exile. And on this matter, [let us turn to] what my master, my father, my elder, my teacher of blessed memory said on the Talmudic statement [in tractate Megillah] regarding Purim, that we do not recite the Hallel then, "for we are still slaves to Achashverosh" [BT Megillah 14a]. So too regarding this miracle [of Chanukah], there was no full release or nullification of Greek sovereignty. It seems to me that on account of the miracle [the Jews] felt that they were servants of God even though they were still in exile [or, unredeemed]. *And this itself was the miracle: that they could be servants of God in exile in the midst of darkness.* This remained for generations, the

הנס דחנוכה היה באור והוא למצוא  
ההארה הגנוזה גם בחשך ובגלות.  
ובזה י"ל מ"ש א"ז מוז"ל על הגמ'  
דבפורים לא קבעו הלל דאכתי עבדי  
דאחשורוש כו'. וגם בנס זה לא היה  
יציאה וביטול לכל מלכות יון. ולהנ"ל  
ע"י הנס הרגישו שהם עבדי ה' אף  
שהיו בגלות וזה עצמו הנס שהם  
עבדי ה' בהתגלות אף בתוך  
החושך כנ"ל. ונשאר גם לדורות  
הרגשה ממה שלמעלה מן הטבע  
אף בעוה"ז. וז"ש בני בינה ימי

ability to experience something other-worldly even in this world. Regarding the phrase [in *Maoz Tzur*], "Men of insight, days eight [*yimei shemona*] established [for song and jubilation]," it seems, in my humble opinion, that it should have said "eight days" [*shemonah yamim*]. It must mean that those days were established in the aspect of "eightness" [or other-worldliness]. Every day of the eights contains this aspect of "eightness." (*Sefat Emet* on Chanukah, 1871)

שמונה קבעו כו'. ויל"ד דהול"ל  
שמונה ימים. מהו ימי שמונה.  
ונראה שהם ימים בבחי' שמיני  
שלמעלה מהטבע ובכל יום יש בחי'  
שמונה כנ"ל. (שפת אמת לחנוכה  
תרל"ב)

Though the Chanukah story that we liturgically tell is a clean one—celebrating the triumph of the few over the many, the sacred over the profane, and good over evil—the historic record is anything but clean. To name but a few checkered facts: The revolt itself was arguably led by religious zealots, set off by Mattisyahu's stabbing of a fellow (Hellenized) Jew in the vein of Pinchas. The priesthood in the aftermath of the Maccabean victory was corrupt and a puppet of the non-Jewish king. Within two years, Judah the Maccabee was dead and many of his men executed. The Seleucids were left in charge, giving grounding to the *Sefat Emet's* recognition that though the Jews indeed lived in the land of Israel, they were very much in exile during this era, and would continue to be. The return of the Temple to Jewish hands and its rededication was but one chapter of an evolving story, one compromised both before and after by internecine Jewish fighting and rampant corruption.

Yet, says the *Sefat Emet*, precisely in the midst of this chaotic darkness, "*af betoch ha'choshech*," in full awareness of the *lack of* full redemption, Jews declared "*nes gadol haya po*," "a great miracle happened here." One small cruse of oil. One battle won. That was *gadol*. That was a big event worth noticing. And that pause was and is itself the miracle. That willingness to see a half-measure, a step in the right direction, a moment of reprieve, and to *feel* oneself in the presence of God there—not as an objective unmistakable reality but as a subjective, elected experience. That's miraculous. The Jews of Chanukah gifted us with this capacity: to choose miracle in the midst of the morass; to discern a whiff of otherworldliness (or "eightness") in the grit of our everyday lives.

Chanukah, on this read, is thus not a rebuffing of darkness or a refusal to see it. It is instead a deep acknowledgment of it. The holiday actually marks the lack of an irrefutable miracle and the willingness to say anyway *nes gadol haya po*.

The essential mundaneness of this miraculous domain, the way in which it holds tenaciously to the world-as-it-is, is manifest in the way the holiday is marked. The Sochatchover Rebbe, R. Shmuel Bornsztain (1855 – 1926), writes in *Shem MeShmuel*:

The days of Chanukah are different from all the other sanctified times, for during all other times, all the forces of darkness disappear. "All judgment passes from them" [Zohar, part II]. But the days of Chanukah are regular days (*chol*), where work is permitted, and external forces do not disappear. [Rather] rays of heavenly light break through and penetrate by way of the screens [or coverings of everyday life]. For this reason, the *mitzvah* of lighting

ימי חנוכה שונים מכל הזמנים המקודשים,  
שבכל הזמנים מסתלקים כל כוחות החושך,  
"כל דינין מתעברין מיניה", אבל ימי חנוכה  
הם ימי חול ומותרים בעשיית מלאכה וכוחות  
החיצוניים אינם מסתלקים, וקווי האור  
האלוקי בוקעים וחודרים דרך כל המסכים.  
ומטעם זה נתקיימה מצות נרות לדורות אף  
בגלות, מה שלא מצינו בשום מצוה מן

candles endured for generations even in exile, something we have not found with any other Temple-based *mitzvah*. It has lasted for generations outside of the Temple because the darkness of the exile cannot hide it or darken it. (*Shem MeShmuel* on Chanukah)

המקדש שתישאר לדורות בגבולין, כי גם ששכת הגלות לא תסתיר ולא תחשיך אותו. (שם משמואל על חנוכה)

Chanukah is not a *yom tov*, a holiday that demands that one step outside of one's daily life, because it must, of necessity, take place in the context of daily life. It is a "*zman mekudash*," a sanctified time, *ba'chol*, in real time. So we go about our business by day and light candles at night in order to recognize that the plane of our miraculous existence is the humdrum *din* of our everyday lives. The darkness is not banished in this way, as it is on holidays that step outside of time. Instead, we step into time—into the mundane, into *galut*, out of the Temple, and into day-to-day living—and we welcome the rays of light that manage to shine through the cracks.

The power to discern that kind of obscured light is the lasting legacy of Chanukah, says the rebbe.

The days of Chanukah, during which work is not prohibited, and still the lights fall downward, [those lights] do not go out after Chanukah. (*Shem MeShmuel* on Chanukah)

...ימי החנוכה שאין בהם איסור מלאכה, ובכל זאת האורות יורדים למטה, אין הם מסתלקים גם אחר חנוכה. (שם משמואל על חנוכה)

Holidays that remove one from the world can only work their magic so long as one is not in the world. Chanukah, though, is a holiday of "*l'matah*," of this world, of lights falling down into a place that knows darkness. And as such, its effects last far beyond the holiday itself. The power to perceive the miraculous in the mundane endures.

On the capacity to find light not in spite of darkness but in the darkness, Arendt wrote:

That even in the darkest of times we have the right to expect some illumination, and that such illumination may well come less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain, flickering, and often weak light that some men and women, *in their lives and their works*, will kindle under almost all circumstances and shed over the time span that was given them on earth—this conviction is the inarticulate background against which these profiles were drawn. (*Men in Dark Times*, p. ix, emphasis added)

It is also the background against which this holiday was formulated. The assertion that light can be chosen in an unredeemed world and enacted, humbly, specifically in contexts of chaos, that indeed is a miracle for our times. May we ignite such flickering flames.



Rabbi Dr. Erin Leib Smokler is the Director of Spiritual Development at Yeshivat Maharat, where she teaches Chassidut and Pastoral Torah. She is also a faculty fellow of the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America. She earned her PhD and MA from the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought and her BA from Harvard University. In 2018 she received semikha from Maharat's Advanced Kollel: Executive Ordination Track.