

Night Vision



Dear Friend,

Click on a flashlight, click on a light, kindle a flame: physical darkness is relatively easy to dispel. Human ingenuity and determination can bring color and light to even the darkest night.

But what of spiritual darkness? How do we vanquish evil and wrongdoing? More, what tools do we need to encounter the darkness that we find inside ourselves - anxiety, feelings of weariness of abandonment, the apathy, that sense that this world is a difficult struggle instead of a daily adventure?

The Chanukah story features not only the darkness of Yavan, but another, entirely different kind of darkness. Let's discover a darkness that will surprise us with its power.



Anatomy of Light

"Said R' Chanina, 'Said Hakadosh Baruch Hu: Eyes feature both black and white [the pupil which is black and the white sclera] but we see through the black.'" (Tanchuma Behaalosecha 5).

An anatomy lesson from Chazal? Or a deep secret that opens up an entirely different definition of darkness?

Our pupils—the dark centers of our eyes—are constantly dilating and contracting

according to how much light surrounds us. This physical phenomenon hints to an inner spiritual movement. We might think that we need light to see, but it's darkness that gives us true vision: "we see through the black". It's the darkness that enables us to see the light.

Let's stop and explore this.

On the very first day of Creation, Hashem created heaven and earth and He filled the world with light. This light, though, contained darkness. Rashi (Bereishis 1:4) comments that Hashem saw the light and



darkness were mingled together and He separated them. Light and darkness, then, at the beginning of time, **were intrinsically mixed.**

The Torah continues: “And it was morning and it was evening, Day One.” Here we see something fascinating: the very definition of a day contains this mixture—there is dark and there is light. A day doesn’t only include 12 hours of sunlight. **A day contains darkness, too.** Right at the start of Creation, before the waters had been separated, before the yetzer hara had been created—there was darkness.

This wasn’t the darkness of evil, explains the Vilna Gaon. It also wasn’t simply an absence of light. It was an intentional creation, placed in the world by Hashem for a specific reason. The darkness was created to enable us to live in a world that was iridescent with the presence of Hakadosh Baruch Hu. **It was a darkness that was needed to veil the incredible spiritual light.** The darkness stopped us from being blinded by this light.

This type of darkness **can be compared to a pair of sunglasses; the tinted lenses protect our eyes from the glare of the sun’s rays.** These glasses have different strengths, depending on the sun’s brightness. If one wants to stare directly at the sun—say, during an eclipse, then an even more intense form of protection is required.

The Paradox

Light enables us to see and understand. It warms us and cheers us and is a metaphor for clarity and uplift. But although we long for a world that is only light, and we grapple with the existence of darkness, **for us to find meaning and growth, light is not enough.** *“We don’t see through the white parts of the eye, but through the black center.”* How is darkness the tool by which we see—gain spiritual insight?

Hashem’s light is so all-pervasive that we need darkness to be able to live and grow and move around within that light. This darkness is a form of covering, a veil put in place to protect us from the glare. It follows that **the greater the darkness, the more light which is being concealed.**

The darkness is testimony to the brightness of the light—which is just out of reach.

Of course, when we’re in the darkness, we don’t feel that light. Whether we’re lonely or anxious. Whether we’re weary of fighting with our particular demons. Whether we have children who are struggling or finding a *zivug* feels far away. Whether we feel fragile due to health concerns or are beset by financial loss—we don’t see the light. **All we feel is the darkness.** It’s overwhelming. It can feel like it’s choking us. The experience is all-too real and carries its own anguish.

That’s true not only on a personal level. There’s our present and our past. The

collective trauma of 2000 years of *galus*. And the present reality of anti-Semitism, of tragedies in Eretz Yisrael, of being a part of a nation that aches with sorrow.

There is so much darkness.

The veil is thick and all-encompassing and seems to be impenetrable.

But then along comes Chanukah.

Dispelling Darkness

Chanukah is the battle of light against darkness, reminder that whatever our particular struggle, it takes only a small, *pure jug of hope to change everything*.

The Greek exile was the epitome of darkness. *Choshech—zu yavan*. They are called this way “because they darkened the eyes of Klal Yisrael through their gezeiros.”

This was not just a few shadows: this was a great darkness that threatened to fracture their relationship with Hashem and which encompassed everything that was most precious. Thousands of Jews were killed for the crime of learning Torah; thousands more for refusing to offer sacrifices to pagan gods. Rebbi Eliezer, one of the elders, was put to death for refusing to eat pork. Parents risked their lives and performed *bris milah* in secrecy. Young *kallahs* on the eve of their *chuppah* were taken by Greek officers and defiled. Chanah saw her seven sons murdered, one after the other. Meanwhile, Klal Yisroel was bleeding from the inside: many turned their backs on Torah and joined the

Hellenist culture, worshipping the body and even the mind, but betraying their eternal souls.

And yet, the Chashmonaim fought back—and vanquished.

They won the battles over the Greek darkness and rededicated the Beis Hamikdash, kindling the lights that give us succor two thousand years later.

How did they do this? *What kind of powerful light dispelled the choshecha of Yavan?*

Holy Darkness

The Chashmonaim knew that there were two types of darkness. There is the darkness of personal and communal hardship, our suffering as a nation tossed back and forth through the millenia. This is the darkness that was found on the Second Day of Creation, when Hashem divided the waters and *machlokes* entered the world. This is the darkness of schism and fragmentation, of loss of self and meaning.

One way of battling this darkness is to find light, to actively bring goodness into the world. But there’s another way—and it was this path that the Chashmonaim adopted. *They did not fight darkness with light. They fought darkness with darkness*. Faced with the darkness of oppression, *they utilized the choshech of Day One: the darkness which is a veil for light*. Rather than be swallowed by the darkness of evil, they

brought back a *choshech d'kedushah*, a sanctified darkness which, like the soil, cushions a seed of faith and enables it to grow.

Let's explore.

When the Yevanim promulgated decrees against Klal Yisroel, they carefully targeted the locus of our relationship with Hakadosh Baruch Hu. Shabbos—the testimony that Hashem is a Creator. *Bris milah* and Rosh Chodesh—Hashem's invitation to sanctify the body and time itself. All of these things, the center points of our lives as a Jew—were forbidden.

But what happened? [The Jews retreated to caves, to underground places, to the cover of night](#)—and in those places they affirmed their loyalty to the Creator.

From one viewpoint, this concealment was a tragedy. They lived under subjugation and oppression. But there's another narrative, that parallels the first but also changes it fundamentally. By retreating into the darkness, the Chashmonaim declared—[it is here that the greatest light will be revealed](#). For it is here that we affirm our emunah, our loyalty, our dedication to Hashem's will even when we don't understand it. Even when the very *chesed* of Hashem is shrouded in mystery, even when His will is incomprehensible—[even then we embrace it](#).

The Chashmonaim revealed that [darkness does not have to be feared. It can be a source of strength](#). For it can be the key to finding something deeper and more

powerful than we ever thought possible: a relationship with Hashem that burns inside—a flame that can never be extinguished.

Conceal-Reveal

What happens when something is concealed? What happens when something is out of reach, out of sight?

The answer depends upon who you ask.

For the Greeks, the universe was something to be weighed, measured, clearly defined—and then beautified. Materialists, they believed that the world had always been in existence. The Greeks were the ultimate rationalists; in their eyes, nothing was higher than human reason.

The Chashmonaim fought this. Their message was: all of the things that you don't see, measure, or understand—[those are the most potent aspects of our life](#). Who can measure the love of a mother to her child? Who can find a strict definition to our soul's search for meaning? How can we quantify our connection to Hakadosh Baruch Hu? All of these are the hidden, pulsing center of who we are. [And all of these are the secret strength that weaves beauty and purpose from our darkest challenges](#).

Something that can be weighed, defined, measured is limited. It exists in the dimension of the physical; it is present in the light of the sun, but when the sun sets,

it is useless. What happens when darkness descends? Something comes forth—a special kind of insight and growth. Darkness is the veil that brings us to greater light. It tells us—reach for more. Reach deeper. Find that which transcends time and space and understanding. Because it is there that is buried a light that is dazzling in its glow.

The Hidden Aron

In Ner Mitzvah, the Maharal explains the significance of the number eight on Chanukah. The actual menorah in the Beis Hamikdash had seven flames, he explains, but there was an additional source of light: the *aron*. The eighth light and the eighth day corresponds to the *aron*, which symbolized the Torah (and in fact, contained the *luchos*) and which represented a spiritual light. In fact, the very word *aron* is related to the word *ohr*, light.

A beautiful answer—with a glaring question. In the time of Chanukah—the period of the Greek dominion—there was no *aron* in the Beis Hamikdash! The *aron*, Chazal tell us, had been hidden away years earlier, to protect it from falling into enemy hands (*Yoma* 21b). If there was no *aron*, where exactly did this eighth light come from?

The Pachad Yitzchok explains that when something is “*nignaz*” or hidden away, it doesn’t mean that it never existed. Rather, it shifts into a different dimension, from

which it can become even more powerful. In Bayis Rishon, the presence of the *aron* was obvious and significant and evident to all. But the second Beis Hamikdash was not like an empty shell. In fact, the *aron*’s influence only grew stronger. Deep under the ground, the light shone.

Covered in earth, concealed by mystery and history, its illumination only grew, in a paradox that is the essence of the Chanukah miracle.

When the *aron* does not reside in the *kodesh hakedoshim*, we find it in the sanctity of our hearts.

When the eighth light seems to have disappeared, we discover it burning deep in our souls.

Darkness in our lives

We have been placed in a *galus* that feels like it will never end. The shadows lengthen and the darkness grows thicker. We can react by embracing light and use the light to push away the darkness. It is a time-honored approach, which brings hope and goodness and comfort. But at times, the battle can leave us weary. And at these times, we can turn to a different conception of night. The idea that darkness is a veil for light, that by entering that place of darkness we can find gleaming treasures.

What does this look like? It means facing our pain or anguish and saying, this is beyond my understanding. This looks like

the ultimate abandonment. This is filling me with dread. We acknowledge the darkness and know Hashem's light and love are present, behind the veil. To reach it requires us to dig deep inside, find the light that burns there, the Emunah that the darkness of this world is taking us to a place that is deeper and more expansive and more beautiful than could ever be measured—or even dreamed of.

It's not easy. But the energy of this time makes an imprint on our souls. The Chanukah flames dance with the unspoken message—it is winter. Spring is far away. It is night—and there are long hours until the sun rises. But within that darkness, light swirls. Concealed. Covered over. But the veil only attests to its potency—that light is so bright that it is blinding. That darkness leads us to finding Hashem in every situation. It pushes us to find the *aron*, hidden two thousand years ago, but still present in our hearts. It brings us to the comfort of *emunah*, the hope that can never be extinguished for it lies inside us, its potency protected.

Chanukah has a special significance for women. They, too, have an obligation to light the *menorah*—"because they, too, were included in the miracle." There are historical reasons for the inclusion of women in this mitzvah, but there is also a

deeper reason. The Chashmonaim reached deep inside and there, found an *emunah* that was so potent that it could defeat the entire Greek army and rededicate the Beis Hamikdash. The strength that they found was the realm of the feminine—the ability to hold on in the darkness, knowing that even now, in this very moment, the struggle is building something precious and beautiful.

It is the Jewish woman who has a spiritual affinity to the inside, to all that is concealed from sight, to the tiny flame that can never be extinguished, but that can serve as a guiding light to ourselves, our families, and an entire generation. Every woman, as she gazes at the dancing flames can reaffirm that place inside. We all know darkness. We all long for dawn. But even as the darkness presses into us and the cold winter wind blows, we have the capacity to look at the night and know that it is a veil, pushing us to unexpected growth, to deeper relationships, to a renewed connection with Hakadosh Baruch Hu.

This Chanukah, may we not only find the light that pushes away the darkness, but the light within the darkness, so that no matter our situation, we can bask in the warmth of Hashem's infinite love.

Sincerely,

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