



A Chanukka Meditation from the Zohar¹

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The candles of Chanukka are different from those of other special days. On Chanukah the candles are the essence of the day, its central (and only) mitzvah. On Shabbat and festivals the candles are auxiliary to the main rituals specified for that holiday. And so, on Chanukka we engage with the candles at a different level, by gazing upon them for some period after lighting them.²

Those who seize this occasion to meditate on the Chanukka lamps will be changed by it, says the Zohar, for: “One who seeks to fathom the mystery of holy *yichud* (unity) should contemplate a flame rising from a coal or candle.”

מאן דבעי למנדע חכמתא דיחודא קדישא. יסתכל בשלהובא
דסלקא מגו גחלתא או מגו בוצינא דדליק.

This mystery of “holy *yichud*” is twofold: 1) it is the secret of *devekut*, of mystical attachment to the Holy *One*. And 2) it is the measure of our heart-mind’s ability to grasp the truth of Divine oneness. There are Fifty Gates of Understanding which are fifty levels of integrating what it means...what it really means...what it really, really, really means that G-d is *one* (with fifty *really*’s on the list).

The Zohar then shares a guided meditation that explores this mystery of *yichud* as embodied in the candle’s flame. The entire text is available as an accompanying download but we’ll explore two of its implications (chosen arbitrarily since the possibilities are infinite).

But first to say that the soul is fluent in the language of symbols. The candle’s flame—its colors, shapes and patterns—conveys a message straight to the soul, bypassing the brain’s conceptual frame. The teachings that follow translate this directly acquired soul-knowledge into words and concepts

that are exactly what the Zohar sought to avoid by speaking in symbols in the first place. Our job is to REdiscover these ideas within the flames—as a direct transmission—by meditating upon them.

In the kabbalistic lexicon, lights equate with consciousness. There are lights that descend from above to below; they are cool, watery, and dispassionate. There are lights that ascend from below to above; they are warm, fiery, and fervent.³ Obviously, our Chanukka meditations center around the latter.

I

In the flame there are two lights: one white and luminous, and the other black, blue [and sometimes red]. The white light is the higher of the two and rises steadily. The black, blue or red light sits beneath the white light and serves as its throne of glory. These two parts of the flame are inseparably connected...Its blue, black or red throne is itself attached to something that sits beneath it and which keeps it ablaze and impels it to cleave to the white light above....The dark flame cannot rise except when there is a coarse/concrete body to support and impel it....The dark light consumes everything that it touches beneath itself...the white light does not consume.

The Zohar starts by introducing the three most visible elements of a flame: 1) the physical candle (i.e. wax and wick) that supports 2) the dark light, that supports 3) the white light. From science we know that each lower level vaporizes into the level above it. The Zohar emphasizes that the lower element not only serves as a kind of throne to its higher partner, but also stimulates its upward striving. *As below so above* with our own fiery lights (called sparks) that circulate through consciousness and push us toward *teshuvah*. There as well, says the Leshem, when it comes to inner awakening our involvement with those below must match our enchantment with the glories ahead. We cannot take a forward step until someone can fill the spot that we are vacating. Otherwise, try as we might, we’ll keep falling back down until we’ve groomed a

This Chanukka teaching is dedicated to **Yaku, daughter of Heltcha** by her devoted student Karin Susskind. “Thank you for sharing your light with this world. May blessings of love and healing always be with you on your journeys.” ...Karin

replacement.⁴ Just as it's a mitzvah to give alms to the poor, so do we have spiritual dependents that count upon our aid. Yet it's not altruism, for we gain much from that alliance, as R. Chanina reports:

From my teachers I learned much; from my study partner, more; yet from my students I learned the most. (TB *Taanit* 7a)

The flame's message is clear: We need to maintain contact with our subordinates *below* and raise them toward the light. Yet it's not all service with a smile. Our assistance is twofold: 1) With our welcoming "right hand" we grab ahold of what's good and give it a boost. 2) With our fiery "left hand" we facilitate the teshuva which burns off the next increment of ego densities that have no place in the rarified environs of their next rung up. This is a delicate operation that only works because we have been raked over those same coals and can share our experience as a compassionate fellow traveler.

The Zohar asserts that had Avraham not gone *down* to Egypt (and forged a connection there) he could not have risen to the distinction of fathering the Jewish nation. Avraham redeemed their *good* through the wealth he brought out from there (which retains a spiritual link to its Egyptian source enabling Avraham to exert influence upon them from afar) and he catalyzed their teshuva (through Paro's apology for taking Sarah and then escorting them through his land).⁵

II⁶

A flame has five elements: The physical candle (wax and wick); the dark, consuming flame (which is sometimes black, sometimes blue and sometimes red); the white, stable flame that does not consume; the surrounding *visible* glow; and, finally, an additional surrounding glow that is *invisible* to the fleshy eyes (but sensible to the soul). [Zohar Chai on our section of the Zohar 1:51a]

The fiery lights (called sparks) ascend upward and drive the *teshuva* process, a word that means literally *return* and describes our life-journey, which is to recover our authenticity and return, improved, to our Creator. The flame, with its individual elements fused as one, depicts this holy pilgrimage and the stepping stones along its way.

Step 1 – Preparing the Lamps and Striking the Match

The *teshuva* process begins in the "head" as a shift of interest and intention. A decision arises—motivated by any number of things, but ultimately instigated by the Divine soul (*Nefesh Elokit*) which is always looking for opportunities to awaken the ego's thirst for truth, authenticity, service, and meaning. This initial turning toward spirit expresses *ahavat olam* (Eternal Love). This is a generic level of love—innate and unintegrated—but, when awakened, it produces a calling.

Step 2 – Igniting the Wick

Now begins the active search—the study and practices that revolve around this newly-aroused interest in the spiritual side of things. One's priorities shift toward more noble pursuits. This investment of time and energy ignites the soul for it engages the *sefira* of *daat* (integrated *knowing*). The awakening, which began from a detached place now pierces the heart.

Step 3 – The Dark Consuming Flame (and in particular its weaker, cooler, black expression⁷)

As the ego adjusts to this new direction, and absorbs the effects of study and practice, the heart quickens with emotion. Feelings of love and awe and wonder arise as the psyche opens to its newfound spiritual sensibilities.

Step 4 – The Dark Consuming Flame (and, in particular, its most intense, red expression⁷)

This newly awakened devotion builds into a passion called *ahava aza* (אהבה עזה), a fiery love that overwhelms other desires. Yet there is an element of coercion here. It is similar to the power (and blindness) of romantic love which suppresses contrary information instead of processing it. Consequently, when reality sets in, people fall out of love as quickly as they fell in. There's a similar danger here, where a person's life is suddenly subsumed by their spiritual aspirations. It's a kind of romantic love of the Divine.

Step 5 – The Dark Consuming Flame (and in particular its moderated, blue, expression⁷)

With the passage of time, commitment is tested and stability ensues. The heart evolves, as it absorbs the *lights* of the previous stages. Its taste buds refine and it becomes a connoisseur of pleasure as its genuine preferences shift toward more spiritual delights instead of worldly ones. Not because that's what's expected, but because its eyes are opened and it sees that these wholesome pleasures are more stable, long-lasting, free of noxious side effects and don't produce a crash in their wake. In short, they are more pleasurable pleasures.

Step 6 – The White Flame That Does Not Consume

Passionate love gives way to a more quiet affection, called *ahava raba* (אהבה רבה), Mighty Love whose greatness lies in its unwavering stability. Whereas fiery love needs to be stoked and billowed to keep it aflame, *ahava raba* is like charcoal that burns steady and needs no intervention to keep it aglow.

Step 7 – The Visible Surrounding Glow

This love continues to mature as it integrates into the heart, bones, cells and spaces of its practitioner. Now, at this advanced stage, it assumes a cool, watery quality called *ahava b'taanugim* (אהבה בתענוגים), Love of Delights, for one's pleasure-buds have finally awakened to the soul-penetrating savor called *oneg*. These

enjoyments are holy, simple and G-d-centered, such as Shabbat (which, for an initiate, is a taste of heavenly bliss) or the simple pleasure of doing good (called *simcha shel mitzvah*).

Ahava b'taanugim (אהבה בתענוגים), with its advanced integration of head and heart, is rightly translated as equanimity—the quietly joyful state of well-being called, *nachas*.

Step 8 – The Surrounding Invisible Glow

This highest rung of mystical encounter (*yichud*) is a complex state often translated as reverence. This pinnacle of *devekut* has two distinguishing features: a) It encompasses both *ahava* and *yirah* (love and awe, masculine and feminine) in “face to face and completely equal union.”⁸ b) It is unselfconscious, in the sense that there is no thought of how it makes *me* feel. Rather, one is seized by an overwhelming sense of admiration bordering on rapture. In this most exalted *yichud*, ego-awareness all but ceases and one enjoys a direct transmission of what it means that G-d is one.

Our *chanukiyot* face out to the street, for the mitzvah is to spread the light. May their flames impress the truth of oneness on the souls of all who behold their glow. May this chanukka-instigated enlightenment seep into our psyche, and change the world, from inside out, in ways that are only good.

חנוכה שמח

¹ Zohar 1:50b-51b.

² R.Y.Y.Y. Safran, *Heichal HaBracha Siddur*, p. 720.

³ It is noteworthy that in Yechezkel's mystical vision, “the likeness of the appearance of a man upon the throne” is divided: Its upper half is like the color of *chashmal*, and Its lower half is like the appearance of fire.

⁴ ספר הדעייה ח"א ; ספר בעל שם טוב על התורה - פרשת אחרי (תויי פי מצורע דצ"ג ע"ד) רי שלמה אלישוב-דרוש הי סימן הי אות הי

⁵ Zohar, 1:83a. Come and see. If Avraham had not gone down to Egypt and forged a connection there, he would not have been chosen by the Holy One. Similarly with his children and their own Egyptian exile...

⁶ From *Tanya*, chapter 9, Zohar 11b/12a, *Kuntres Hitpaalut*.

⁷ Metok Midvash on 50b-51b, talks about the different properties of the different elements of the dark flame.

⁸ Ari, *Eitz Chayim, Shaar Miyut HaYareach*, Chapter 1.