



HOLDING THE DARK WITH THE LIGHT



Introduction and Framing

As children, we learn to be afraid of the dark—and for good reason. We learn to associate darkness with the unknown, with monsters under our bed, with shadows that loom eerily out of proportion. But, what if we could hold the darkness as we hold the light? What if this year, when we light the candles of our *hanukiyah*, we admire not only the light of the fire but acknowledge the place of the darkness?

We learn in the Talmud that Adam and Eve were also afraid of the dark. The very first night they experienced they spent facing each other fasting and crying the whole night long. What if this was the end? What if the whole world had returned to the *tohu va-vohu* that preceded creation, chaos and darkness, the new forever state? What would a life of continual darkness be? Hour after hour, they mourned the loss of light and feared the dark. And then, dawn broke. Just like that, a night of tears and terror ended with the first light breaking on the horizon. Seeing the light meet the darkness, Adam understood and he said, *minhago shel ha-olam*¹—this is the way of the world. Our daily liturgy marks this rhythm, as we bless God in the opening blessings of the evening Shema, “Who rolls the light away from darkness, and darkness from before light / גולל אור מפני חושך וחושך מפני אור”. Light and darkness are both a fact of life. There is no light that is not followed by darkness and no darkness that does not give way to light.

Adam and Eve were like many of us, mourning the absence of light and fearing the dark. Writer and activist Parker Palmer writes,

When we so fear the dark that we demand light around the clock, there can be only one result: artificial light that is glaring and graceless, and beyond its borders, a darkness that grows ever more terrifying as we try to hold it off. Split off from each other, neither darkness nor light is fit for human habitation. But if we allow the paradox of darkness and light to be, the two will conspire to bring wholeness and health to every living thing.²

We fear the dark and, in an effort to live only in the light, we push off the darkness, we attempt to exile it to the borders of our emotional lives. And yet, the darkness, as Adam discovered, is

¹ Talmud Bavli Avodah Zara 8a.

² Parker Palmer, “There Is A Season,” *The Impossible Will Take Awhile: Perseverance and Hope in Troubled Times*, p. 144.



an inescapable fact of life. It is as much a part of the natural order as is light. As Palmer writes, we can live neither only in darkness nor in light. It is only when we allow both to sit together that we find wholeness.

This has been a year of much darkness. On a personal and communal level, many of us find ourselves grieving very tangible losses: the loss of life above all, the loss of financial stability, and the loss of the intimacy of in-person relationships. At the same time, we find ourselves mourning abstract but very real losses: the loss of the world we once knew, the loss of a sense of security, the loss of normalcy. Sometimes in order to function and make it through the day, we need to push off the darkness.

What if, on Hanukkah, we made space for the darkness as for the light? What if, as we kindle the fire of the candles, we saw not only light, but the darkness that is a part of the light?

As a closing intention for how we can approach Hanukkah this year, the words of Mary Oliver resonate powerfully:

The Uses of Sorrow

(In my sleep I dreamed this poem)

Someone I loved once gave me
a box full of darkness.

It took me years to understand
that this, too, was a gift.

Each night, as you light the candles, take a moment to make space for both the darkness and the light. Take a moment to name, to grieve, and to hold a point of darkness from this past year. Rather than push the darkness away, hold it close and bring it into the light. Then, take a moment to hold the light. Take a moment to name and to give gratitude for a point of light this year.

In the texts that follow, we go on a journey that parallels the position of Beit Shammai.³ When it comes to lighting the Hanukkah lights, the School of Beit Shammai argue that we move from light to darkness, beginning with eight candles and decreasing in light, while Beit Hillel argue that we move from darkness to light, beginning with one candle and increasing in light.

³ Talmud Bavli Shabbat 21b.



While we follow the position of Beit Hillel when it comes to kindling Hanukkah lights, this year we attempt to honor the position of Beit Shammai as we study texts that move from light to darkness. We begin our learning with texts that recognize the power and necessity of light, and then move to texts that acknowledge our fear of the darkness. Ultimately, we close with texts that push us to appreciate and perhaps even bless the darkness.

You'll find in this guide texts to accompany you each night. As your candles burn and you hold both light and darkness, gather yourself and your loved ones and make space in your home for a little learning. We offer the blessings for lighting the candles below for your reference.

May this be a year in which we grow in light and discover the gift of our sorrow,

R. Avi Strausberg and the Hadar faculty



We say all three blessings in the order below before lighting the candles for the first time.
Before lighting candles on subsequent nights, we say only the first two blessings.

First Blessing

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ לְהַדְלִיק
נֵר שֶׁל חֲנֻכָּה.

*Barukh attah Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh ha-olam, asher kid'shanu be-mitzvotav
ve-tzivanu le-hadlik ner shel Hanukkah.*

Praised are You, Our God, Ruler of the universe, Who made us holy through Your
commandments and commanded us to kindle the Hanukah lights

Second Blessing

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שֶׁעָשָׂה נִסִּים לְאַבוֹתֵינוּ בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם
בְּזִמַּן הַזֶּה.

*Barukh attah Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh ha-olam, she-asah nisim la-avoteinu
ba-yamim ha-hem ba-z'man ha-zeh.*

Praised are You, Our God, Ruler of the universe, Who performed wondrous deeds for our
ancestors in those ancient days at this season.

Third Blessing (First night only)

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שֶׁהֵחַיָּנוּ וְקִיְּמָנוּ וְהַגִּיעָנוּ לְזִמַּן הַזֶּה.

*Barukh attah Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh ha-olam, she-hehayanu, ve-kiyyemanu,
ve-higi'anu la-z'man ha-zeh.*

Praised are You, Our God, Ruler of the universe, Who has given us life and sustained us and
enabled us to reach this season.



Below are short texts to study each night of Hanukkah as you watch the candles burn. You might read and discuss these questions with other members of your household. You might read alone and meditate on the questions. You might choose to call a friend. We offer this collection to accompany you through the eight nights.

Night One

מדרש תנחומא (ורשא) פרשת תצוה ו

אמר רבי אבין הלוי ברבי: את מוצא כל מי שמבקש לעשות לו חלונות, עושה אותן רחבות מבפנים וצרות מבחוץ, למה? שיהו שואבות האור. אבל חלונות שבמקדש לא היו כן, אלא רחבות מבחוץ וצרות מבפנים. למה? שיהא האור יוצא מן בית המקדש ומאיר לעולם. והאור יוצא מתוך ביתו ומאיר לעולם. והוא צריך לנרות? אלא לזכותנו בנרות. אמר דוד: "אור זרע לצדיק ולישרי לב שמחה" (תהלים צז:יא).

Midrash Tanhuma (Warsaw) Tetzaveh 6

Rabbi Abin ha-Levi bar Rabbi: You find that when one constructs windows, he builds them wide on the inside and narrow on the outside. Why? He does this so that the light may spread throughout the house. The windows in the Temple, however, were constructed wide on the outside and narrow within, so that the light of the Temple might spread forth to illuminate the world. After all, does God require lamps? Rather, it is for our merit. David said: "Light is sown for the righteous, and gladness for the upright in heart" (Psalm 97:11).

Questions for discussion:

1. The windows in the Temple are designed to let God's light shine out into the world. On Hanukkah, we too turn our light outward. The lights in our windows tonight are meant to shine out and be seen by the world, sharing the miracle publically. What light would you like to send out into the world tonight?
2. God offers us the opportunity to light the Temple *menorah* (and the *hanukiyah* in our day) in order to gain merit for doing so, even though God has no need for it—God is full of light. In what ways do you feel God's light?



Night Two

תלמוד בבלי פסחים ח.

למה צדיקים דומין בפני שכינה? כנר בפני האבוקה...

אמר רב נחמן בר יצחק: זה יכול להכניסו לחורין ולסדקין וזה אינו יכול להכניסו לחורין ולסדקין

רב זביד אמר: זה אורו לפניו וזה אורו לאחוריו

רב פפא אמר: האי בעית והאי לא בעית

רבינא אמר: האי משך נהורא והאי מיקטף איקטופי:

Talmud Bavli Pesahim 8a

To what are the righteous comparable in the presence of the Shekhinah?

To a lamp in the presence of a torch...

Said Rav Nahman bar Yitzhak: The one can be brought into holes and chinks [in the wall], whereas the other cannot be brought into holes and chinks.

Rav Zevid said: The one [throws] its light forward, whereas the other [throws] its light behind.

Rav Papa said: Here [with a torch] one is afraid, whereas there [with a lamp] one is not afraid.

Ravina said: The light of the one is steady, whereas that of the other is fitful.

Questions for discussion:

1. This text describes the process of looking for *ḥametz* before Pesah, which must be done at night, in darkness. Why do you think we do this search at night? What role does the darkness play in focusing our attention?
2. What makes the lamp, the smaller light, preferable over the brighter light of a torch? How can this metaphor help us understand the light that we can bring to the world and how it relates to the divine light?



Night Three

תלמוד בבלי סוטה כא.

והתניא את זו דרש רבי מנחם בר יוסי: "כי נר מצוה ותורה אור" (משלי ו:כג) תלה הכתוב את המצוה בנר ואת התורה באור, את המצוה בנר - לומר לך מה נר אינה מגינה אלא לפי שעה אף מצוה אינה מגינה אלא לפי שעה, ואת התורה באור - לומר לך מה אור מגין לעולם אף תורה מגינה לעולם...

Talmud Bavli Sota 21a

But isn't it taught in a *baraita*: Rabbi Menahem bar Yosei explained: "For the *mitzvah* is a lamp and the Torah is light" (Proverbs 6:23). Scripture hangs the *mitzvah* on a lamp and the Torah on [sun]light. Scripture hangs the *mitzvah* on a lamp—to say to you: Just as the lamp only protects for a moment, so too the *mitzvah* only protects for a moment. The Torah on light—to say to you: Just as light protects forever, so too Torah protects forever...

משל לאדם שהיה מהלך באישון לילה ואפילה ומתיירא מן הקוצים ומן הפחתים ומן הברקנים ומחיה רעה ומן הליסטין ואינו יודע באיזה דרך מהלך, נזדמנה לו אבוקה של אור - ניצל מן הקוצים ומן הפחתים ומן הברקנים ועדיין מתיירא מחיה רעה ומן הליסטין ואינו יודע באיזה דרך מהלך, כיון שעלה עמוד השחר - ניצל מחיה רעה ומן הליסטין ועדיין אינו יודע באיזה דרך מהלך הגיע לפרשת דרכים - ניצל מכולם.

Parable: A person walking in the dark of night and thick darkness is afraid of the thorns, the pits, the thistles, wild beasts, and bandits, and doesn't know on which road he is walking.

If a torch of light comes his way, he is safe from the thorns, the bits, and the thistles, but he is still afraid of the wild animals and of the bandits, and still doesn't know on which road he is walking. When the sun rises at dawn, he is safe from the wild animals and the bandits, but still doesn't know on which road he is walking.

When he comes to the crossroads, he is safe from all of them.



Questions for discussion:

1. Based on the verse from Proverbs 6:23, “כי נר מצוה ותורה אור” - For the *mitzvah* is a lamp and the Torah is light,” this Gemara teaches that *mitzvot* and Torah learning each bring different kinds of light into our lives, indicating that the light of Torah itself is more powerful in dispelling the darkness. How do you understand this difference between Torah and *mitzvot*? What in your life functions like *mitzvot* (offering some immediate guidance) and what functions like Torah (offering more expansive guidance)?
2. This text highlights several things to be afraid of at night: thorns, thistles, and pits, wild animals and bandits, and a loss of direction. Light helps ward off some of these dangers, but even full sunlight doesn’t necessarily mean we will find our way. Only recognizing the crossroads can fully orient us. At what crossroads do you find yourself? How do you center yourself and find direction?

Night Four

מדרש תנחומא (ורשא) פרשת תצוה ח

"שמן זית זך כתיב למאור" (שמות כז:כ). את מוצא מי שנתון בחשך, רואה מה שבאור, ומי שהוא נתון באור אינו רואה מה שבחשך. והקדוש ברוך הוא רואה מה שבחשך ומה שבאור, שנאמר: "ידע מה בחשוכא" וגו' (דניאל ב:כב).

Midrash Tanhuma (Warsaw) Tetzaveh 8

“Pure olive oil beaten for the light” (Exodus 27:20). You find that a person standing in the dark can observe what is transpiring in a lighted place. However, anyone standing in a lighted place is unable to observe what is happening in the dark. The Holy Blessed One, however, can see in the dark or in the light, as it is said: “He knows what is in the darkness...” (Daniel 2:22).

Questions for discussion:

1. This *midrash* challenges our assumption that light always helps us see. In what ways can light obscure vision?
2. How do you relate to being in the dark? Are there things you can “see better” when there is darkness?



Night Five

משנה שבת ב:ה

המכבה את הניר מפני שהוא מתירא מפני גוים, מפני לסטים, מפני רוח רעה, ואם בשביל החולה שיישן, פטור.

כחס על הניר, כחס על השמן, כחס על הפתילה, חיב.
ורבי יוסי פוטר בכלן חוץ מן הפתילה, מפני שהוא עושה פחם:

Mishnah Shabbat 2:5

One who extinguishes the lamp [on Shabbat] because they are afraid because of [threatening] non-Jews, because of bandits, because of an evil spirit, or for the sake of a sick person so that they should sleep—[in all of these cases] they are exempt. [One who extinguishes the lamp because they wanted to] spare the lamp, spare the oil, or spare the wick—they are liable. But Rabbi Yose exempts them in all of [these cases] except for the wick because this makes it into charcoal.

Questions for discussion:

1. This *mishnah* describes situations where one who extinguishes Shabbat candles is exempt from punishment. These are moments when darkness is needed— when someone is in hiding, depressed, or sick. Why do these moments call for darkness? Have there been times in your life when permission for darkness was more important than light?
2. The end of the *mishnah* demands that we never extinguish the Shabbat candles from a place of scarcity, to save fuel. What lights might we be denying the world because we are afraid of using our resources? What might we gain from this image of letting the Shabbat lights burn themselves out?



Night Six

מדרש תהלים מזמור ה

אמר דוד להקב"ה כל מה שנתת לנו טובים ונעימים הם, שנאמר "חבלים נפלו לי בנעימים אף נחלת שפרה עלי" (תהלים טז:ו), וכן הוא אומר "אל תשמחי אויבתי לי כי נפלתי קמתי כי אשב בחשך ה' אור לי" (מיכה ז:ח), אילולי שישבתי בחשך לא היה אור לי.

Midrash Tehillim Mizmor 5

David said to the Holy Blessed One: All that You have given to us—good and sweet are they, as it says, “Delightful country has fallen to my lot; lovely indeed is my estate” (Psalm 16:6). It says likewise, “Do not rejoice over me, O my enemy! Though I have fallen, I rise again; though I sit in darkness, God is my light” (Micah 7:8). [That is to say:] Had I not sat in the darkness, I would not have had light.

Questions for discussion:

1. In this *midrash*, King David attributes his acquisition of light to the time he sat in the dark. In what way can it be said that dark is generative of light? In what ways do we owe our lights to our darkneses?
2. King David seems to take this even one step further—not only is darkness presented as the prerequisite for light, but the subsequent manifestation of light seems to recast the darkness. Therefore, he thanks God for all things, light and dark, as being “good and sweet.” In what ways do light and darkness reshape each other? Do the lights in our lives shed new perspectives on the darkness?

Night Seven

ליקוטי מוהר"ן קטו

"ויעמד העם מרחק, ומשה נגש אל הערפל אשר שם האלקים" (שמות כ:יח)

Rebbe Nahman of Breslov, Likkutei Moharan 115

The people kept their distance and Moses entered the mist where God was.” (Exodus 20:18)...



וְהַשֵּׁם יִתְבַּרְךָ חֹפֵץ חֶסֶד הוּא, וּמִסְתִּיר אֶת עַצְמוֹ כְּבִיכּוֹל בְּהַמְנִיעָה הַזֹּאת (עֵינַי לְמִטָּה). וּמִי שֶׁהוּא בֵּר דַּעַת, הוּא מִסְתַּכֵּל בְּהַמְנִיעָה, וּמוֹצֵא שָׁם הַבוֹרָא בְּרוּךְ הוּא... וּמִי שֶׁאִינוּ בֵּר דַּעַת, כְּשֶׁרוֹאֶה הַמְנִיעָה חוֹזֵר תַּכְף לְאַחֲרָיו

Yet, God “is one who desires kindness” (Micah 7:18) and God hides Godself, as it were, in this obstacle. Thus, someone who is wise will look at the obstacle and discover the Creator there... But someone who is not wise, when they see the obstacle, they immediately retreat.

וּמְנִיעָה הוּא בְּחִינַת עֵנָן וְעֶרְפֶּל, כִּי עֵנָן וְעֶרְפֶּל הֵינּוּ חֹשֶׁךְ, חֹשֶׁךְ הוּא לְשׁוֹן מְנִיעָה, כְּמוֹ שֶׁכָּתוּב: "וְלֹא חֹשֶׁכֶת" (בראשית כב:טז)

Now, an obstacle corresponds to cloud and mist. This is because a cloud and a mist are darkness, [and] *HoSHeKH* (darkness) connotes an obstacle. As it is written (Genesis 22:16), “and you did not *HaSaKH* (hold back).”

וְזֶה פְּרוּשׁ הַפְּסוּקִים: וַיַּעֲמֵד הָעַם מֵרַחֵק – כִּי כְּשֶׁרוֹאִין הָעֶרְפֶּל, הֵינּוּ הַמְנִיעָה כַּנִּל, עוֹמְדִין מֵרַחֵק וּמִשָּׂה, שֶׁהוּא בְּחִינַת דַּעַת כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל, נִגַּשׁ אֶל הָעֶרְפֶּל אֲשֶׁר שָׁם הָאֱלֹקִים – הֵינּוּ אֵל הַמְנִיעָה, שֶׁבָּהּ בְּעֶצְמָה נִסְתָּר הַשֵּׁם יִתְבַּרְךָ...

This is the explanation of the verse: The people kept their distance—for when they see the mist, the obstacle, they keep their distance. And Moses—He corresponds to the *da'at* (holy knowledge) of all Israel—entered the mist where God was. In other words, into the obstacle, which is precisely where God is hidden...

וּמִי שֶׁהוּא בֵּר דַּעַת, יְכוּל לְמַצֵּא אֶת הַשֵּׁם יִתְבַּרְךָ בְּתוֹךְ הַמְנִיעוֹת בְּעֶצְמוֹ, כִּי בְּאֶמֶת אֵין שׁוּם מְנִיעָה בְּעוֹלָם כָּלֵל, כִּי בְּתִקְוָה הַמְנִיעוֹת בְּעֶצְמוֹ נִסְתָּר הַשֵּׁם יִתְבַּרְךָ, וְעַל יְדֵי הַמְנִיעוֹת בְּעֶצְמוֹ דִּיקָא יְכוּלִין לְהִתְקַרֵּב לְהַשֵּׁם יִתְבַּרְךָ, כִּי שָׁם נִסְתָּר הוּא יִתְבַּרְךָ כַּנִּל

And one who is wise will be able to find God within the obstacles themselves. For the truth is that there are no obstacles whatsoever in the world. In the very force of the obstacles themselves, God is hidden. Thus, specifically through the obstacles



themselves one is able to draw closer to the Holy One, for God is hidden there, as mentioned above. Thus, this is the meaning of: “and Moses entered the mist”— the obstacle, where God was.

Questions for discussion:

1. What might Rebbe Nahman mean by saying that, sometimes, the only way past an obstacle is not around, but through? Have you ever had a time in life when you were forced to confront the darkness in front of you?
2. Rebbe Nahman is saying that we must sometimes search for God in the most unexpected places, even in the heart of the darkness. What do you think that means? How does the holiday of Hanukkah ask us to search for God where we might not have seen God before?

Night Eight

תלמוד בבלי עבודה זרה ח.

ת"ר: יום שנברא בו אדם הראשון כיון ששקעה עליו חמה, אמר אוי לי שבשביל שסרחתי עולם חשוך בעדי ויחזור עולם לתווה ובוהו וזו היא מיתה שנקנסה עלי מן השמים, היה יושב בתענית ובוכה כל הלילה וחווה בוכה כנגדו, כיון שעלה עמוד השחר אמר מנהגו של עולם הוא, עמד והקריב שור שקרניו קודמין לפרסותיו שנאמר "והיטיב לה' משור פר מקרין מפריס" (תהלים סט:לב).

Talmud Bavli Avodah Zarah 8a

Our rabbis taught: On the day that the First Man was created, when the sun set upon him he said: Woe is me, as because I sinned, the world is becoming dark around me, and the world will return to the primordial state of chaos and disorder. And this is the death that was sentenced upon me from Heaven. He spent all night fasting and crying, and Eve was crying opposite him. Once dawn broke, he said: this is the order of the world. He arose and sacrificed a bull whose horns preceded its hoofs, as it is stated: “And it shall please the Lord better than a bullock that has horns and hoofs” (Psalm 69:32).



בראשית רבה יא:ב

כיון ששקעה החמה במ"ש התחיל החושך ממשמש ובא ונתירא אדם הראשון, שנאמר "ואומר אך חשך ישופני ולילה אור בעדני", אותו שכתוב בו "הוא ישופך ראש ואתה תשופנו עקב" (בראשית ג:טו) בא להזדווג לי, מה עשה הקב"ה זימן לו שני רעפים, והקישן זה לזה ויצא מהן אור ובירך עליה, הה"ד "ולילה אור בעדני", מה בירך עליה בורא מאורי האש.

Bereisheit Rabbah 11:2

When the sun sank at the termination of the Sabbath, darkness began to set in. The First Man was terrified, as it is said, "Surely indeed the darkness shall bruise me but the night was light about me" (Psalm 139:11): Shall he of whom it was written, "He shall bruise your head and you will bruise him with your heel" (Genesis 3:15) [i.e. the snake], now come to attack me!? What did the Holy Blessed One do for him? God arranged for him two flints which he struck against each other; light came forth and he uttered a blessing over it; hence it is written, "But the night was light about me (*ba'adeni*)" (Psalm 139:11) [i.e. repointing "about me" as "my Eden" (*be'edni*)]. What did he bless over it? [Blessed are You...] Who creates the illuminations of the fire.

Questions for discussion:

1. In the Talmud's version, when the darkness first sets, Adam immediately assumes it's as punishment or a direct result for the sin of eating from the forbidden tree. Why does he immediately attribute this to sin? What does this teach us about how we sometimes relate to the darkness in our lives? What does Adam discover by the end of the text?
2. When Adam sees the dawn breaking, he says, this is the order of the world. What do you think are the emotions behind that statement? What are the different ways we might understand that statement? When in life have you had such a realization?
3. The version from Bereisheit Rabbah offers a picture of Adam learning to create his own light, and then blessing it. What role do we each have in responding to darkness? What role does God play?

