

# Channukah: Gratitude and the Transmission of Light

Channukah, the Festival of Light, actually holds a close spiritual and historical connection to the Festival of Sukkot, which celebrates the autumnal harvest and is the season of thanksgiving and gratitude. The link between the two provides us with a very interesting spiritual juxtaposition.

Sukkot renders thanks to God by celebrating on the one hand the agricultural harvest, the culmination of a long season working the land and rejoicing in the bounty, and on the other it represents the culmination spiritually of all the inner work we have done through the process of the High Holidays. We are celebrating and honoring on multiple levels all the richness that God's blessing has yielded to us as a result of the work we have done.

Harvest is the process of ingathering. This is true on a couple of interconnected levels. On Sukkot, we gather the produce of the land in thanksgiving and in gratitude for God's concern for our physical wellbeing. The fruits of the land are collected and we rejoice, for we are rewarded for our physical labors. At the same time, the holiday is a time for experiencing true joy. It is then that we experience the inner elevation and heightened spiritual awareness that comes from the long hard work of inner search, repentance and atonement that is the hallmark of the High Holy Days.

When Adam and Eve were exiled from the Garden of Eden, God did not punish them. The Holy One simply changed the ground rules. Since man, by partaking of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, chose the route of discrimination, discernment and self-direction, God adjusted the basic rules of physical existence accordingly.

Making decisions is a process of real value only if there is a correlation between the action taken and the results derived from it. When humankind opted for the power of discernment and decision, living by their own lights, so to speak, cause and effect emerged as a central reality in human experience. What human beings did or did not do would now have direct and understandable consequences for them.

What emerged from the decision to eat of the Tree of Knowledge was both the appearance of Karma on the one hand, and the learning process on the other. Humanity now had to live by the work of one's hands as well as deal with responsibility for one's actions. Only through effort and struggle was any fruit to emerge, be it from the land or from one's inner world. The harvest is the tangible effect of a season of labor. It is the

reward of concentrated effort, diligence, focus, sweat and blood. The harvest affirms our relation to God both as physical beings and as souls.

Channukah is the season of light, and in working with the light, we act as co-creators with God. The Holy One creates the world and showers it with light on many levels. By accessing light, we provide the care, effort and labor necessary to bring forth into the light the potential that is hidden within the structure of Creation. The end result is the harvest, the manifestation of good.

Working to further light and goodness exemplifies and defines our capacity as beings made in God's image. It validates our struggles and reveals the blessings we have brought into the world. For within the light we work, and through the light we have much to be grateful for. Light illuminates the soul through the progressive revelation of the good we have done, the wisdom we have attained and the growth that has been achieved.

The holiday of Channukah is eight days, because the harvest festival of Sukkot is eight days. The celebration of Increasing Light was historically initiated when the Temple was rededicated by the Maccabees. Channukah was modeled deliberately and thoughtfully on the Sukkot festival.

Throughout the Second Temple period, Sukkot was held to be the most important holiday of the year. Besides being the major harvest festival, the time of blessing and abundance, Sukkot was also considered to be the time when the Redemption and the Coming of the Messiah would occur. During the years when the Greeks controlled the Temple in Jerusalem, there were no worship services. So, when the Maccabees rededicated the Temple and reinstated the holy services, they were celebrated as Sukkot.

The Maccabees saw a direct inner connection between the Sukkot celebration and that of rededication. Not only was the reopening of the Temple and the reestablishment of the Holy Temple Service an occasion for profound thanksgiving, but, like the sukkah, the Temple was the holy place, specifically reserved for the prayers and expression of thanksgiving of the nation as a whole.

In the struggle to become a free people, we reclaimed our sacred space, in which to express our innermost gratitude for God's love and grace. We had to struggle to survive as a people. We had to fight to be free. That struggle returned to us the Temple, the place where God dwells and where we serve God.

When we exert ourselves and wrestle with life, not to survive, but to learn, to experience and to grow, we create sacred space. We create a doorway that connects Heaven

and Earth, both within ourselves and in the world around us. When we, as a result of our efforts and our conviction, find ourselves within the realm of spiritual nearness to God, abundance and blessing follow.

When what we have done in our daily lives opens up doors of perception, we see the divine sparks within everything around us. Our experience and our labors then take on meaning. Our lives suddenly become comprehensible and fulfilled. We have harvested our work and the toils of our lives have produced fruit. For this we must be truly thankful.

It is no accident that the central act of Channukah is the expansion of light. Throughout the festival, we continue to kindle additional candles, increasing the amount of light available in the world. Our focus is on the light because light represents spiritual fruition. With the proper kavannah, that is, the proper focus on the sanctity of our daily lives, we can transform the mundane into the holy. Our daily toils and personal struggles can yield spiritual space.

When one enters that space, light fills the soul and one embraces life with joy. That joy is the core of thanksgiving. At this time of year with its turning point toward lengthening the day, may we have the wisdom to view and to use the expanding light as increasing sacred space, and the emerging days as intensification of that light. May we experience growth and be truly thankful to God for the gift of life. May we be increasingly conscious of the sanctity of our lives, with the kindling of every successive Channukah candle.

I wish you Light and Life, Blessing and Peace.

Rabbi Fisdell