



“These Lights are Holy...”: An Instruction for Meditation

Chanukka (2015 / 5776)

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Based on teachings by R. Tsadok HaKohen¹ and R. Yitzchak Ginsburgh²

...הַנִּירוֹת הַלְלוּ קֹדֶשׁ הֵם. וְאִין לָנוּ רְשׁוּת לְהִשְׁתַּמֵּשׁ בָּהֶם. אֲלֵא לְרֵאוֹתָם בְּלֶבֶד. כְּדֵי לְהוֹדוֹת וּלְהִלֵּל לְשִׁמְךָ הַגָּדוֹל
עַל נִסֶּיךָ וְעַל נִפְלְאוֹתֶיךָ וְעַל יְשׁוּעָתֶךָ:

“...These [Chanukha] lights are holy. We are not permitted to make use of them rather only to gaze at them—to awaken gratitude and praise for Your miracles, wonders and redemptions.

Each day after lighting our Chanukka menorah we recite this instruction to remind ourselves not to read by the candles or navigate by them—not to use them for personal benefit in any way. That’s the basic intent of our affirmation.

Yet there is further guidance embedded in that statement when it’s applied to the custom of gazing upon the menorah after lighting it. Our simple affirmation now becomes a deep teaching about the practice (and powers) of meditation.

Chassidim interpret the phrase—“only to gaze upon them” (אֲלֵא לְרֵאוֹתָם בְּלֶבֶד)—as a directive, a positive instruction to, yes, spend time contemplating the Chanukka lights. The previous phrase—“These lights are holy and we are not permitted to make use of them”—presents a guideline about how to conduct that meditation. Its rule, if practiced for (at least) these eight days, is a training regimen. It drills us in the habits required to become masters of our inner world.

One of the most difficult and subtle challenges of a spiritual path is the matter of “strange fire” which we’ll define as: “taking pleasure from something that violates one’s own moral code.” The head says, “No, this is wrong.” But the heart’s more primitive instincts respond to the stimulus and enjoy it. Strange fire often refers to illicit sexual arousal, but it also includes other things like taking pleasure from someone else’s shame, or enjoying the ego inflation evoked by flattery, etc.

We might try to just avoid the problem by not looking at the things that trigger the passions we are trying to quell. That’s a sensible place to begin. In religious parlance it’s called *shomer einayim* (guarding your eyes).

But if that is the only solution, we are unlikely to succeed. First because the problematic stimuli are so pervasive that there is just no way to avoid them completely. In the most unlikely moments, from the most unlikely corners, something (perhaps completely innocent) triggers a chain of associations and, before we know it, there we are, entranced by strange fire.

Second (says the Tanya), if we are *triggerable*, then we are not *tsaddikim*, which means we still have impurities of soul (inherited from the primordial breaking of vessels...no blame) and, consequently part of our lifework is to transmute them. Even if we *could* create an environment that is hermetically sealed from temptation, wayward impulses would still occur, because they arise from within. As long as they stay dormant, they’re inert and avoid/evade removal. Only once they activate can we instigate their *tikun*. But what exactly does that entail? We can’t actually eliminate wayward desires (says the Tanya) but we *can* choose not to get pulled in by their drama.

The natural (unrectified) state of affairs is expressed by the maxim:

The eye sees, the heart desires, and the body commits the sin (Rashi on Bamidbar 15:39).

In this scenario the heart and body are ruled by the eyes, and the only way to escape sin *is* to avoid visual temptation. Once the eye “sees” the heart cannot help but desire, and the body cannot help but sin.

Yet our Chanukka affirmation paints a different picture. It asserts the possibility (and even the obligation) of disrupting the link between eye and heart—of learning “to see” without stealing pleasure from the encounter. That is what our Chanukka meditation trains us to do.

“...These [Chanukha] lights are holy. We are not permitted to make personal use of them rather only to gaze at them...”

Two things are likely to happen as we sit before our menorah and observe its holy flames:

1) Our encounter with them deepens as our awareness slowly penetrates to their essence. This tends to produce a heightened sense of Presence, a flow of insight, a wave of gratitude, awe, praise, or unselfconscious delight. The Zohar informs us that a candle is not just a source of illumination. It is a living symbol that broadcasts the truth of Divine oneness into the psyche of those looking on.

Whoever desires to grasp the wisdom of holy oneness should observe a flame ascending from a burning candle. [Zohar 1:51a]

2) But we will also notice that we (periodically) lapse into pleasure-*taking*. Instead of just *being* in the delight we steal benefit and exploit the moment for its ego gratification: “Look at me, I am so enlightened;” “I wish *so and so* could see me now;” “How can I share this peak experience without appearing to boast;” “I’m so spiritual.” We don’t just appreciate the holy lights, we capitalize upon them. We can’t seem to just enjoy their beauty without wanting to profit from it—which is exactly what our affirmation warns us against.

The Chanukka declaration not only instructs our behavior; it guides our meditation. It expects us to note when we’ve lapsed into ego-gratification, to let it go, and return to the menorah. And the practice of contemplating, lapsing, noticing, detaching, and returning...over and over again throughout the course of these eight days trains us to master our inner life. Just because our eye sees *does not mean* that our heart must ruminate upon it, and our body must sin. We can choose to focus elsewhere. We can choose to not get hijacked by the ego’s need to exploit the world for its own gratification. And the more we practice this skill on Chanukka, the more we can master the challenge of strange fire in daily life.

Let us fulfill our Chanukka mission on every level. Let us radiate the truth of Divine Oneness to all the corners of the world including the depths of our very own souls. May our chanukiya’s holy flames bring an end to the rule of “strange fire” both in our own hearts and in the world at large.

¹ R. Tsadok HaKohen, Pri Tsadik, Chanukka, 20.

² Unpublished lecture, 1983.