

Chanukah Message

Chanukah is a fun time for all the family. We have the doughnuts and latkes, the gelt and the dreidels, the presents, and the traditional and not so traditional songs. And of course, at the centre of our celebration is the chanukiah. We light the candles over the eight days of Chanukah in order to remember the miracles that Hashem performed at this time of year for our forefathers in days of old. Indeed, there are few images that are as striking as that of a flame dancing against the darkness of a winter night. In my work as a display calibrator I know that we are always drawn to the brightest object in a room. Walk into a TV show room to buy a new TV and your eye will be drawn to the brightest TV. TV manufacturers know this so they pump up the brightness of their product so that you'll hopefully walk up to view their TV as opposed to the slightly dimmer one next to it. What most people are unaware of, however, is that what looks good in a show room can often look terrible when you get it back to your home. And that's why you need your TV calibrated! But that's another story... The point is though that bright images, especially when set against a dark background, attract us, and this is certainly the case with a candle flickering in the backdrop of the night. It's a picture of profound contrast which is both compelling and, some might say, romantic, and one that is especially welcome at this time of year when there is so little light around. Winter days are short aren't they? It's dark when you get up and go to work and it's already dark when you make the return journey. It's enough to get you down, to depress your soul isn't it? Indeed, many people suffer as a result of what is called SAD - Seasonal Affective Disorder. Seasonal Affective Disorder symptoms tend to appear during late autumn or early winter, as days begin to darken, and go away during the sunnier days of spring and summer. The lack of light triggers symptoms of depression including irritability, tiredness or low energy, problems getting along with other people, hypersensitivity to rejection, heavy, "leaden" feeling in the arms or legs, oversleeping, appetite changes, especially a craving for foods high in carbohydrates, and weight gain. People who suffer with SAD are also likely to experience other symptoms typically associated with depression such as feeling hopeless or worthless, losing interest in activities they once enjoyed, having difficulty concentrating, and having frequent thoughts of death or suicide. Given that this is so would it surprise you if I told you that the country with the highest suicide rate in the world is Greenland? It's a curious name isn't it, because Greenland is anything but green! In fact, Greenland, the world's largest island, is situated well within the Arctic Circle and is basically a block of ice. In the summer temperatures hover between freezing and a balmy 10 degrees celsius. During the winter, however, the average temperature plummets to around -20 degrees. And the darkness! Wow! In Greenland the sun never rises for a whole 108 days. That, combined with the intense cold, makes living there particularly hard. Unsurprisingly, many people in the Arctic Circle consequently suffer from insomnia. When you get month after month without light, and then month after month without darkness, because the sun never sets, your internal clock can get truly messed up. And swift on the tails of a messed up internal clock comes mental instability. Little wonder then that alcoholism is rife in the Arctic Circle as people seek to self medicate. Impaired rationality, chronic depression and alcoholism are a deadly mix that has resulted in nearly 20% of Greenland's population admitting that at some time or other they have

Chanukah Message

attempted suicide at least once. Sadly, 83 out of every 100,000 Greenlanders succeed in their attempts. To put this in context, this compares to an average of 10.8 for men and 5.2 for women out of every 100,000 here in the UK. By way of further comparison, the highest suicide rate in the UK in 2014 was for men aged 45-49 at 26.5 per 100,000 - which is an appalling statistic, but which also falls far, far short of the Greenland experience.

The effect on mood caused by the lack of light during the long months of the Antarctic winter is something that American Polar explorer Frederick Cooke spoke about when he and his team wintered over in 1898. "The curtain of blackness which has fallen over the outer world of icy desolation has descended upon the inner world of our souls. Around the tables, in the laboratory, and in the forecabin, men are sitting about sad and dejected, lost in dreams of melancholy." It's still a problem today for those who winter over in the high tech bases that are dotted around the Antarctic. Staff are carefully vetted for this difficult task, with particular attention being paid to history of mental instability or alcoholism. As Mark Hay explained in an article for Vice magazine, "Whether they embrace the experience or spiral into depression, all winter-overs experience the mental duress of sensory deprivation. Even with full spectrum lighting, it becomes easy to lose track of time and command over language and social communications. "People slowly divest themselves of concerns about the external world," write the Mastros. Spindler refers to this as part of "winter-over syndrome," which some people call getting "toasty," an effect of sensory deprivation, isolation, and maybe even the effect of extreme cold on the thyroid gland, which can cause memory loss, sleepiness, sluggishness, or depression. Even the most eager can slowly grind down under unexpected pressures or bad social dynamics." "We try to break the monotony of the long winter nights at every chance," writes two-time winter-overer Guillaume Dargaud. "Birthday parties, Easter, Labor Day... every date in the calendar is a reason to make an even nicer dinner than usual." Crews use rec rooms, movie nights, and massive themed parties to help keep their spirits and community up, the most important of which are the mid-winter celebration and the return of the sun."

This helps to explain why from time immemorial in practically every culture and religion the return to longer, lighter days has been celebrated. The Romans, for instance, had Saturnalia, their mid-winter festival, which climaxed on December 25th, around the time of the winter solstice. As Matt Salusbury has written in History Today: "The first-century AD poet Gaius Valerius Catullus described Saturnalia as 'the best of times': dress codes were relaxed, small gifts such as dolls, candles and caged birds were exchanged. Saturnalia saw the inversion of social roles. The wealthy were expected to pay the month's rent for those who couldn't afford it, masters and slaves to swap clothes. Family households threw dice to determine who would become the temporary Saturnalian monarch. The poet Lucian of Samosata (AD 120-180) has the god Cronos (Saturn) say in his poem, Saturnalia: 'During my week the serious is barred: no business allowed. Drinking and being drunk, noise and games of dice, appointing of kings and feasting of slaves, singing naked, clapping ... an occasional ducking of corked faces in icy water - such are the functions over which I preside.'" "The poet Statius (AD 45- 95), in his

Chanukah Message

poem *Silvae*, describes the lavish banquet and entertainments Domitian presided over, including games which opened with sweets, fruit and nuts showered on the crowd and featuring flights of flamingos released over Rome. Shows with fighting dwarves and female gladiators were illuminated, for the first time, into the night." Saturnalia didn't end with the conversion of the Emperor Constantine to Christianity. On the contrary, Saturnalia continued into the century afterward. "The Christian calendar of Polemius Silvus, written around AD 449, mentions Saturnalia, recording that 'it used to honour the god Saturn'. This suggests it had by then become just another popular carnival." Saturnalia had a rival though, "the festival of *dies natalis solis invicti*, 'birthday of the unconquered sun'." As Salusbury states, "The Philocalian calendar also states that December 25th was a Roman civil holiday honouring the cult of *sol invicta*. With its origins in Syria and the monotheistic cult of Mithras, *sol invicta* certainly has similarities to the worship of Jesus. The cult was introduced into the empire in AD 274 by Emperor Aurelian (214-275), who effectively made it a state religion, putting its emblem on Roman coins. *Sol invicta* succeeded because of its ability to assimilate aspects of Jupiter and other deities into its figure of the Sun King, reflecting the absolute power of 'divine' emperors. But despite efforts by later pagan emperors to control Saturnalia and absorb the festival into the official cult, the *sol invicta* ended up looking very much like the old Saturnalia. Constantine, the first Christian emperor, was brought up in the *sol invicta* cult, in what was by then already a predominantly monotheist empire." As the centuries subsequently went by these mid-winter pagan festivals morphed with Christian belief into Christmas, reinterpreting the Sun King as the Son King. Contemporary demands of traditional Christians to put 'Christ back into Christmas' reflect an awareness that wider society is increasingly less concerned with the religious gloss that Christendom historically imposed on these pagan solstice celebrations, than it is with a mid-winter knees up. Christians feel that they are losing their grip on Christmas, and so they are. And yet Christmas in its less than Christian, secular form, *Santa et al*, is more popular than ever - a testament if ever there were one that human beings are instinctively drawn to the idea of light dispelling the darkness.

It doesn't matter what religion or culture you come from darkness is universally regarded as a fearful thing. It stands to reason that this is so on a practical level. Terrible things can happen in the dark, more specifically at night, because you can't see what either you or other people are doing. As Londoner Phyllis Warner described in her diary on the outbreak of the Second World War: "For the first minute going out of doors one is completely bewildered, then it is a matter of groping forward with nerves as well as hands outstretched." Accidents multiplied so that by the end of the war thousands had died, mostly as a result of collisions with cars, whose lights were dimmed. Crime flourished too in the dark, in particular muggings, burglary and looting. Such was the effect of the blackout that in 1941 doctors diagnosed a new condition among factory workers - blackout anaemia. Depression was rife. No wonder the Vera Lynn song, "When the Lights Go On Again All Over the World" had such resonance on the home front. Indeed, Chinese scientists recently ran a series of tests which demonstrated that our instinctive fear of the night is not only hard-wired but primeval. As the Daily Mail reports, "These scientists recruited 120 women who were tested, on their own, in a

Chanukah Message

windowless cubicle in one of four conditions - light in daytime, dark in daytime, dark at night-time and dark at night-time. On a computer screen they were shown 100 fear-inducing images, such as an assault in progress, and 50 neutral images, such as household items. They also listened to 100 fear-inducing sounds, such as screams, and 50 neutral sounds, such as a whirring fan. The temperature of the rooms was strictly controlled and responses were measured using physiological data - such as sweating, assessed through a skin conductance test, and heart rate - as well as the women's own reports. The researchers found that there was no difference in the responses to the neutral images and sounds between the day and night. However, the fear-inducing images and sounds made the women more frightened at night than in the day. The women responded to potential threats more effectively at night, while their attention to 'safe' situations remained unchanged. Writing in the International Journal of Psychophysiology, the researchers suggested that our circadian rhythm - the 24-hour cycle of biological processes - influences our fear-sensitivity." The scientists concluded that we are biologically predisposed to amplify threat-related information at night in order to keep ourselves alert and therefore safe, no doubt because, back in the day, when human beings were not at the top of the food chain, they were predated upon at night by sabre-toothed tigers and other dangerous creatures.

Our instinctive fear of the night and craving for light helps to explain why, during the exodus, one of the plagues that Hashem inflicted on the Egyptians was darkness. As we read, (Shemot 10:21-23), "ADONAI said to Moshe, "Reach out your hand toward the sky, and there will be darkness over the land of Egypt, darkness so thick it can be felt! Moshe reached out his hand toward the sky, and there was a thick darkness in the entire land of Egypt for three days. People couldn't see each other, and no one went anywhere for three days." (Shemot 10:21-23). Imagine how scary that was! Indeed, this darkness was scarier than usual. It was darkness so thick it could be touched, an explanation that has lead many scholars to propose that this darkness was the product of an extraordinary occurrence of a wind that is known in the Middle East as the khamsin. Apparently this scorching sirocco wind blows in each spring from Saharan Africa or from Arabia, enveloping the land in thick sand and dust. It may even often persist for several days and blacken the sky in its wake. In the present case, it is suggested, the first khamsin to arrive in March would have been far more intense than usual. It would additionally have borne aloft the red soil deposited by the earlier torrential rains, now sunbaked and particulate, following the destructive action of the locusts, which had already denuded the land of vegetation. Thus it is suggested that an extreme khamsin combined together with the dust of the ground to blot out the sun and literally produce a darkness that could be felt. Furthermore, since the khamsin may travel northward in bands, rather than be diffused, it is even also proposed that the Israelite area of Goshen, situated at right angles to the Nile valley, could therefore have escaped its effects thus leading to the peculiar situation described in the Scriptures that while darkness prevailed over most of Egypt for three whole days, the Israelite residents of Goshen continued to enjoy the usual clear, bright skies through which the light of the sun, moon and stars could plainly be seen. In the religiously soaked ancient world however darkness wasn't just an absence of light, it had metaphysical

Chanukah Message

implications. As fearful as the darkness would have been on a natural level, the message it communicated to the sun-worshipping Egyptians would have been dire. The sun's daily rising was conceived to be a triumph over the demon Apophis, the embodiment of darkness, who struggled daily to vanquish it. Imagine then the fear and panic among the Egyptians when the sun failed to rise for three whole days! The demon Apophis had finally triumphed. The Egyptians must have feared that this was a portent of the end of the world! And yet the Jews had light in their homes! Similarly we read in Ester, "The Jews had light and gladness, and joy and honour".

The promise of light for the Jewish people in the midst of darkness is one that is frequently made throughout the Tanakh, and given the heightened religious sensitivities of our people in ancient times we can appreciate how important these promises must have been in the popular mindset. Let us remember that in ancient times there were no street or other kinds of internal or external light. When night fell, all work and other activities ceased. People would naturally have been tempted to fear the terrors of the night, just like any other people. And yet, Hashem assured Israel, that "You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday." For, in contrast to the darkness, Hashem is revealed as the God of light. It is because of this that when Hashem or any of his angels appear physically in Scripture they are usually surrounded by blinding light. Thus Hashem's presence led Israel through the wilderness in the form of a column of fire. This column separated the Israelites from the Egyptians so that "there was cloud and darkness here, but light by night there". Thus also Moshe's face shone with the imparted light of God's presence. Indeed, we are told that the brilliance of Hashem's presence is too bright even for the keruvim to stand so that they must cover themselves with their wings. But Hashem's light isn't just physical it is principally metaphysical. This difference is noted as early as the creation account when we observe that light and darkness were established several days before the sun and the moon. Thus, Rav Shaul, referring to this metaphysical light, says that Hashem is "immortal... [and] dwells in unapproachable light that no human being has ever seen or can see." Yochanan adds that, "God is light, and there is no darkness in him — none!" It is this metaphysical unseen light of Hashem that we celebrate too at this time of Chanukah alongside that of the victory of the Maccabees because it is the greatest hope of our hearts, in line with the promise of our prophets, that one day we shall be privileged to see this light. And yet, as Rav Shaul also says, for this to happen "that which is corruptible must become incorruptible, for flesh and blood cannot not share the kingdom of God, nor can something that decays share in what does not decay. Look, I will tell you a secret — not all of us will die! But we will all be changed! It will take but a moment, the blink of an eye, at the final shofar. For the shofar will sound, and the dead will be raised to live forever, and we too will be changed. For this material which can decay must be clothed with imperishability, this which is mortal must be clothed with immortality. When what decays puts on imperishability and what is mortal puts on immortality, then this passage in the Tanakh will be fulfilled: "Death is swallowed up in victory. "Death, where is your victory? Death, where is your sting?" The sting of death is sin; and sin

Chanukah Message

draws its power from the Torah; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Yeshua the Messiah!"

You know, it is true to say that in as much as the Messiah has taken root in our hearts through faith, we see the light. For the Messiah came to bring the light of God to those dwelling in darkness. The Midrash tells of how the primordial light of the first day of creation was hidden away, but would be revealed to our people again in the acharit hayamim by the Mashiach. And so it is! For as Yeshayahu says, ""Arise, shine (Yerushalayim), for your light has come, the glory of ADONAI has risen over you. For although darkness covers the earth and thick darkness the peoples; on you ADONAI will rise; over you will be seen his glory." (Isa 60:1-2). Moreover, "there will be no more gloom for those who are now in anguish. In the past the land of Z'vulun and the land of Naftali were regarded lightly; but in the future he will honour the way to the lake, beyond the Yarden, Galil-of-the- Goyim. The people living in darkness have seen a great light; upon those living in the land that lies in the shadow of death, light has dawned." It is our Messianic belief that Yeshua *is* precisely the light that the prophets spoke about. As Shimon said concerning Him, "Now, ADONAI, according to your word, your servant is at peace as you let him go; for I have seen with my own eyes your yeshu'ah, which you prepared in the presence of all peoples— a light that will bring revelation to the Goyim and glory to your people Isra'el."" (Lu 2:29-32). Moreover, as Yeshua himself stated: "I am the light of the world; whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light which gives life."" (Yochanan 8:12) And yet, as wonderful as this light is, spiritually sensed in this Olam HazeH, I posit that it is only a faint glimmer compare to the light that shall yet be in the Olam Haba! For this mortal must put on immortality. This corruption must put on incorruption. The message of the Scriptures is now, but not yet! There is more, much more to come, and it is the hope of this that both comforts us and strengthens us in the night of all our present troubles. Let's meditate upon this as tonight we light the last of our chanukah candles.