

## THE FESTIVAL OF CHANUKAH

# The Essence Within

The tiny golden flames glow against the frosted windowpanes, telling all the passersby in the street below that Chanukah, the Festival of Lights, has arrived. It is a time for families, for joyous celebration, for thanking the Almighty for the miracles He has performed in the past and praying for His continued beneficence in the future.

What miracles do the Chanukah lights commemorate? The story is well-known. After Alexander the Great's conquest of the Middle East, Judea came under the power of the Greeks, who tried to eradicate the Torah and impose their own culture on the Jewish people in its stead. But the Jews revolted, drove out their Greek oppressors and reclaimed the Temple Mount. Unfortunately, they could find no uncontaminated oil with which to kindle the lamps of the Golden Menorah. Just one small jug, enough for a single day, miraculously, however, this small amount of oil burned for eight days until a new supply of oil arrived. In commemoration of this miracle, the Sages instituted the festival of Chanukah during which we light the *menorah* for eight days.

Let us reflect for a moment. Is this really the miracle that we celebrate, that a tiny amount of oil burned for seven days? And what about the victory over our oppressors? What about the struggle on the battlefields?

Furthermore, we can well imagine the state of the Temple when the victors wrested it from the grip of the Greeks. It must have been an utter shambles, and the work of restoration undoubtedly took a goodly amount of time. Why then were the victorious Jews in such a rush to rekindle the Menorah? Why didn't they turn their immediate attention to repairing the damaged structures and the fixtures and restoring the Temple to its proper condition?

The commentators explain that it is precisely this very act that highlights the quintessential difference between the Jews and the Greeks. What motivated the Jewish people to fight so tenaciously to throw off the yoke of the Greek oppressors? Was it the desire for political freedom or unrestricted economic opportunity?

Not at all. It was to preserve the pure flame of Jewish spirituality from contamination by the Greeks. They did not fight for the bricks and the mortar of the Temple but for the pure light that burned within, and therefore, their first act was to restore that light.

Had the tables been turned, the Greeks would have focused on restoring the architectural beauty of the Temple, but to the Jewish people external esthetics were secondary to the restoration of spiritual purity. Therefore, the light that were miraculously restored were established as the immortal symbol of the Jewish victory.

*A great sage was walking with a young disciple in the market place. In front of one of the stalls there were two baby carriages. One was large, richly upholstered and lavishly adorned. The other was small, simple and shabby.*

*“Which of those two carriages is more beautiful?” the sage asked.*

*“I do not understand the question,” the disciple replied. “Clearly, the larger one is the more beautiful. There is no comparison. Am I wrong?”*

*“I am not sure,” said the sage, “but I suspect you may be.”*

*He strode over to the carriages and peeked inside.*

*“Just as I suspected,” he declared. “I heard a cry emanating from the smaller one, but the larger one is strangely still. I thought it might be empty, and indeed, it is. Without a child inside, a carriage is nothing, no matter how richly it is adorned. Beauty is always measured by the essence within.”*

In our own lives, we cannot let ourselves be distracted by the glitter and gleam of superficiality. Contemporary society is adept at creating alluring exteriors that draw and entice, but what do we discover when we get there? More often than not, the interior is empty. It is all form and no substance. Better that we should focus on those aspects of life that are not only pleasing to the eye but also fulfilling to the heart, the mind and the spirit. Only these things deliver lasting satisfaction.