

Lessons from the Chassidische Parsha

The teachings of the Alter Rebbe in Torah Ohr and Likkutei Torah

Anatomy of a candle

ד"ה ת"ר מצות נר חנוכה

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Chanukah is the festival of lights. Light and candles are prominent motifs in Torah thought and particularly in the mystical teachings of Chassidus and Kabbalah.

The metaphor of a candle is used to describe the Mitzvos נר אור - "a Mitzvah is like a candle". The Neshama is also likened to a candle נר ה' נשמת אדם - "the candle of Hashem is the soul of man".

An oil lamp is made up of multiple elements; oil, a wick and a flame. The Zohar further identifies that the flame itself is made up of two parts; the dark flame that surrounds the wick and the white flame of illumination that the candle creates.

When the oil is drawn up the wick in small amounts, it is able to combust and produce light as it burns. Without the wick the oil could not give light. On the contrary, the oil would extinguish the flame. Likewise, without the oil, the wick would burn up and be immediately consumed.

The oil of the candle represents the Mitzvos. In Kabbalah, oil represents the Sefirah of Chochma, the primary Divine intellectual aspect. The source of Torah and Mitzvos emanate from the Divine Wisdom and Will of Hashem.

The physical substance of the oil represents how the G-dliness of the Mitzvah descends into this world and is hidden within the physical object and finite action through which the Mitzvah is fulfilled.

This is why the oil itself cannot generate light. The object of the Mitzvah itself is physical and the physical alone in its natural state, cannot be a vessel for G-dly light, the Or Ein Sof.

Just like the oil requires a wick to be able to produce light, the Mitzvos need a wick. The wick is the Neshama of a Jew. When a Jew fulfils a Mitzvah, the combination of the 'wick' and the 'oil' produce light, as the Mitzvah draws down a revelation of Hashem's infinite light.

This is the inner meaning of the Posuk אשר יעשה אותם האדם. The Posuk means "the Mitzvos that a person does". But the word יעשה can also mean to make. The Torah is telling us that it is the Jew through their action, that creates (makes) the Mitzvah itself.

This is because unlike the physicality of the Mitzvah, the Neshama is inherently connected to and surrendered to Hashem, like the wick which is connected to the flame.

Just as a single wick is capable of consuming a large quantity of oil, so too, every Neshama is able to perform many Mitzvos through the course of its lifetime in this world.

Neshamos in Heaven cannot fulfil Mitzvos. Because the Mitzvos are physical acts, the Mitzvah can only be fulfilled by a Jew in this world, where the Neshama has been encloded in the physicality of the body and animalistic soul.

But the Neshama does not only come into this world to serve Hashem through fulfilling Mitzvos and studying Torah. The Neshama has another mission and that is to refine the coarse physicality of the body and our animalistic soul.

These two aspects of the Neshama's service, produce the two different coloured flames.

The white flame which produces light and illumination, comes from the burning of the oil. This is the G-dly light that is drawn down through the fulfillment of the Mitzvos.

The dark flame which surrounds the wick, comes from the slow consumption of the wick itself. This is the Avodah of refining and transforming the coarse physicality and negativity of the body and animalistic soul.

The reason that this flame is dark is not because it is a lesser Avodah. On the contrary. Whilst we often associated darkness with evil and negativity, the mystics describe a darkness within holiness. Light represents G-dly revelations. Darkness represents the essence of G-dliness that it beyond revelation.

The same is true in the Avodah that generates these flames. Fulfilling Torah and Mitzvos comes from the 'revealed', conscious levels of the soul. To transform the physicality of our bodies and the emotions of our animalistic soul, we need to tap into the deeper hidden powers of the Neshama.

The difference between these two services is like the difference between a window and a mirror. A window lets the light in and through it, one can see a great distance. This is like the service of the Neshama in Torah and Mitzvos.

When you add a coating of silver to the back of the glass, it becomes a mirror in which one can see oneself and that which is behind. The advantage of this reflective light comes through the force of obstruction by the coating - but only if the coating is polished. So too, through refining the concealment of the animalistic soul, one reveals their deeper self.