

How Much Illumination One Small Candle Can Give!

Here in the Northern Hemisphere we have reached the darkest time of the year, the time when daylight is shortest and the sun is lowest in the sky. When people lived in a state much closer to nature, in a time without artificial light, when the clear night sky was astonishing with stars, the diminishing of daylight had a greater impact than it does today. From time immemorial people have spoken of light symbolically too, in the sense of light as knowledge or enlightenment.

This is an unusual year in that Christmas Eve and the first night of Chanukah coincide. It happens on the average about once every decade and a half. Chanukah always begins at sunset on the 25th day of the month of Kislev in the Jewish calendar. The day begins at sunset because in the Creation story at the beginning of the book of Genesis the number of each day of creation is introduced with the phrase: “it was evening and it was morning...” Chanukah, which literally means “dedication” because it refers to the rededication of the Ancient Temple in 165 BCE, is not a major Jewish holiday primarily because it’s post-Biblical (in terms of the Hebrew Bible). However, Chanukah is also referred to as the Festival of Lights, and its main ritual is the daily lighting of the candles every evening with the addition of one more candle for each of its eight nights. Included in the ritual is the requirement not to use the lights for anything, but simply to look at them and remember the miracles of that time so long ago.

It’s easy to see why light is a universal symbol of knowledge. When we’re in the dark we cannot even make out what’s right in front of us. When we are sitting in complete darkness, it’s striking how much illumination one small candle can provide. Despite the illumination light can bestow, perception is a curious phenomenon. Two people can witness the same event and perceive it very differently. Perhaps we can’t help reading into an event based on our own experiences and presuppositions. Everyone has their own unique experiences and the complexity of what leads each of us to have our particular tendencies and biases is beyond my comprehension.

Is optimism a kind of bias – the tendency to see the good in others and in events and to believe that things will work out? There’s no doubt that our attitudes and assumptions can affect what we do, that if we believe we can achieve something we will probably try harder than if we

assume we cannot achieve that goal. That doesn't mean that there are no limits, but simply that our underlying attitudes have an influence on our outcomes. Our openness to other people and our willingness to give others the benefit of the doubt are both biases that are socially useful, while a bias that leans towards a negative appraisal of another person or group of people, on the other hand, is not. We can't control our thoughts, but we can control our actions and our impulses. Probably most people have thoughts about themselves which are both complimentary and critical, but what we do with these thoughts will make the difference in the habits we create and, consequently, the life we live. The same is true in terms of the society we create. I strongly believe that every action matters, however small it may seem. If we treat another person with dignity, to some degree that encourages the other person to do the same and it cultivates in ourselves that habit of recognizing the dignity and humanity of others.

We can indulge our impulses to be kind to others, while trying to reign in those impulses that divide us from others, or that divide other people, rather than trying to foster peace and harmony between people. What could be more important than working for peace, love, health, and harmony among people? Not everyone has the disposition to be an activist. We all have our own tasks and roles to fulfill. One of my favorite Rabbinic tales is the story of Reb Zusha (1718 – 1800) who said that when it came time to meet the Master of the Universe, he wasn't afraid that he would be asked why wasn't he Moses, but rather that he would be asked why wasn't he Zusha? In other words, why didn't he fulfill what he was able to be?

Among the ideals of our country is that of people having the freedom to fulfill their dreams. There is an essential corollary to that ideal which is that fulfilling our dreams should not be at the expense of someone else's life or well-being. For example, when fossil fuel companies spend hundreds of millions of dollars to lobby for the removal of environmental regulations meant to protect our air, water, and health, and fund advertisements that try to convince the public that fossil fuels are truly environmentally-friendly, clean sources of fuel, their concerns are their profits, not the health of the population and planet.

Cultivating empathy is essential to creating an atmosphere of peace and love between people, pursuing what unites us, what we have in common, rather than what divides us. It's not competition, but cooperation that makes us stronger. If we need competition, we should compete with our own ideal versions of ourselves, with our most generous and loving versions of ourselves, while trying to cooperate with others. That's a worthy goal for this season of lights.

This is the season for bringing light into this world not only symbolically, but concretely too, by our actions, by trying to love our neighbors as ourselves, by trying to love ourselves also, by being kind to ourselves, but not uncritical, so that we may always strive to be better friends, better neighbors, better partners, and better guardians of our planet.

I want to wish you all a Merry Christmas, Happy Chanukah, and a Happy and Healthy New Year!