

“How do we celebrate the "Festival of Lights" in the summertime ?”

Rabbi Sandra Kochmann

Those of us who grew up in the southern part of the globe (I am from South America) experience the Jewish holidays differently in terms of nature: the month of Kislev falls in late spring and early summer. Therefore, the experiences related to the Hanukkah season are a bit different.

For one thing, the school year draws to a conclusion at this time of year, so learning about the sources of Hanukkah or celebrating the holiday within the Jewish schools is uncommon. Instead, the communities and synagogues assume this responsibility. On each night of the holiday they hold a brief family and community ceremony centered on candle lighting. In addition, since the sun sets at a relatively late hour, the time for lighting the candles is also late.

But, is it logical to celebrate the "Festival of Lights" under these circumstances?

If, for a moment, we set aside the historical-national and religious sources of Hanukkah, it is obvious that the holiday indeed has its roots in ancient sources connected to the seasons of the year and agriculture. We know that it is no coincidence that we celebrate a festival related to light in what is the darkest period of the year in the northern part of the world. Other cultures performed various rituals and celebrations related to the subject of light at this time of year, as well. For example, the Persians lit bonfires and the Romans celebrated Saturnalia for eight days with candlelight and torches. From these examples, clearly the motif of light and the lighting of the candles on Hanukkah symbolize the expulsion of darkness.

This ancient tradition, which is connected to the season of the year, is referred to by the Jewish Sages as "the festival of [Adam] the first man".



"Our sages explained: When the first man saw the day diminishing, he said "Woe is me, lest because of my sins the world has gone dark and is returning to chaos and this is a death that was my punishment from heaven. " He went and spent eight days in repentance and prayer. Since he observed the period of Tevet and saw that the days grew longer, he said, "This is the way of the world" and he went and did good for eight days, and the following year, he made all the days ones for doing good. He set aside these days for the sake of God, while others set them aside for the purpose of idolatry (Avodah Zarah 8: 1).

According to the Jewish Sages, on the one hand, the period of the year with the shortest days is connected to man's fears: we are afraid of what we cannot see, and we are afraid of the unknown that undermines our sense of control over our existence. On the other hand, however, as soon as the shortest day is over and the days start to lengthen, happiness returns and optimism is renewed, because the world is beginning to gradually fill with light.

The Jewish People are dispersed throughout the world and therefore the nature-related roots of the Jewish holidays are not always appropriate. Nevertheless, the shared foundation of faith, history, and past unite us and give us hope for a better future, if we can successfully integrate the unique personal light that exists in each and every one of us, wherever we are.

Wishing you a joyful month and a Happy Festival of Light!

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