

Sermon by Rabbi Eliezer Hirsch Vayeishev-Chanukah 20 “Led by the Blind”

Gut Shabbos. Shabbat Shalom. And Happy Chanukah! As the end of this year approaches, I’ve noticed in conversation and social media a frequently expressed sentiment: *Good riddance to 2020!* I’m not sure if turning the page on the calendar will make much difference, but the feeling is understandable. And we can find a parallel in Yaakov’s wishes at the beginning of our parsha. It starts off *Vayeishev Yaakov, and Yaakov dwelled*, and while this verse literally means *He sat*, Rashi brings the midrash that this pasuk expressed Yaakov’s desire to withdraw from the troubles of the world. The midrash says that God challenged Yaakov, asking, *It’s not enough that the righteous have the world to come; they need to relax in this world too?* And without missing a beat, God sends Yaakov major problems with Joseph.

I always wondered, what was so bad about Yaakov’s wish? After all, it’s not as though he was hoping to live out his days lounging in a rocking chair. At the beginning of his life when the Torah describes him, it says *Yoshev Ohalim, He sat in tents*, which means he devoted himself to study.

What he seeks at the outset of our parsha with ***Vayeishev Yaakov*** is to resume his former way of life and study Torah! I think the message here is that it's a fruitless quest to withdraw from the challenges in this world, since our very purpose here is to overcome those hardships and, in the process, develop our personal identities. Essentially, our job is to turn each complication of life into a productive opportunity.

And the timing of our parsha each year is fitting, since I think this is the message of Chanukah as well. The Sages split the holiday's name into 2 parts: *Chanu*, meaning *they rested*, and *chaf hey/25* as in the 25th day of the month of Kislev, the date we begin commemorating the miracle of Chanukah. But *chanu* does not mean that they stopped to settle down and end their journey. It connotes a pause to rest before continuing on their way.

We find the same lesson in the Zohar, which says that the relationship between God and the Jewish people on Chanukah is akin to a blind person who uses a candle to lead a regular person in darkness. Obviously, God doesn't need our candles. But the candle represents the light within each of our souls, as the pasuk says, ***נר ה' נשמת האדם***, *the human soul is the candle of God*, and the midrash is telling

us that God allows us to take the lead as we each make choices in the darkness that becomes enlightened by our individual and collective souls.

So as we enter the secular new year, the message of Chanukah and our parsha is that life may be dark right now, but we can each light up the world with our unique contribution to the problems confronting us, and with our collective accomplishments, God willing, we'll find our way out of this darkness. Shabbat shalom. Chanukah Sameach.