Light and Shadows: Thoughts for Hanukkah

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The Talmud (Shabbat 21b) records a famous debate between the Schools of Shammai and Hillel as to how to light the Hanukkah lights. Bet Shammai rules that we should light 8 lights the first night, and then subtract one light each ensuing night. After all, the original miracle of the oil in the Temple would have entailed the oil diminishing a bit each day.

Bet Hillel rules that we should light one light the first night, and then increase the number of lights night after night. (This is the accepted practice.) A reason is suggested: in matters of holiness, we increase rather than decrease. The miracle of Hanukkah is more beautifully observed with the increasing of lights; it would be anti-climactic to diminish the lights with each passing night.

Increasing lights is an appealing concept, both aesthetically and spiritually. But the increase of light might also be extended to refer to the increase in knowledge. The more we study, the more we are enlightened. When we cast light on a problem, we clarify the issues. We avoid falling into error. The more light we enjoy, the less we succumb to shadows and illusions.

Aesop wisely noted: Beware lest you lose the substance by grasping at the shadow. It is all too easy to make mistaken judgments by chasing shadows rather than realities.

Professor Daniel Kahneman, the Israeli Nobel Prize winner in Economics, has coined the phrase “illusion of validity.” He points out that we tend to think that our own opinions and intuitions are correct. We tend to overlook hard data that contradict our worldview and to dismiss arguments that don’t coincide with our own conception of things. We operate under the illusion that our ideas, insights, intuitions are valid; we don’t let facts or opposing views get in our way.

The illusion of validity leads to innumerable errors, to wrong judgments, to unnecessary confrontations. If we could be more open and honest, self-reflective, willing to entertain new ideas and to correct erroneous assumptions—we would find ourselves in a better, happier and more humane world.

In her powerful book, “The March of Folly,” Barbara Tuchman studied the destructive behavior of leaders from antiquity to the Vietnam War. She notes: “A phenomenon noticeable throughout history regardless of place or period is the pursuit by government of policies contrary to their own interests.” She points out: “Government remains the paramount area of folly because it is there that men seek power over others—only to lose it over themselves.”

But why should people with political power succumb to policies that are wrong-headed and dangerous? Tuchman suggests that the lust for power is one ingredient in this folly. Another ingredient is an unwillingness to admit that one has made a misjudgment. Leaders keep pursuing bad policies and bad wars because they do not want to admit to the public that they’ve been wrong. So more people are hurt, and more generations are lost—all because the leaders won’t brook dissent, won’t consider other and better options, won’t yield any of their power, won’t admit that they might be wrong. These leaders are able to march into folly because the public at large allows them to get away with it. Until a vocal and fearless opposition arises, the “leaders” trample on the heads of the public. They are more concerned with their own power politics, than for the needs and wellbeing of their constituents.

The march of folly is not restricted to political power. It is evident in all types of organizational life. The leader or leaders make a decision; the decision is flawed; it causes dissension; it is based on the wrong factors. Yet, when confronted with their mistake, they will not back down. They have invested their own egos in their decision and will not admit that they were wrong. Damage—sometimes irreparable damage—ensues, causing the organization or institution to diminish or to become unfaithful to its original mission. The leader/s march deeper and deeper into folly; they refuse to see the light.

Bet Hillel taught the importance of increasing light. Shedding more light leads to clearer thinking. It enables people to see errors, to cast off shadows and cling to truth.

It takes great wisdom and courage to avoid having the illusion of validity. It takes great wisdom and courage to evaluate and re-evaluate decisions, to shed honest light on the situation, to be flexible enough to change direction when the light of reason so demands.

The lights of Hanukkah remind us of the importance of increasing the light of holiness and knowledge. As we learn to increase light, we learn to seek reality and truth---and to avoid grasping at shadows and illusions.