Jews and Candles

We are celebrating the holiday of Hanukka. And whenever this festival approaches, I reflect on one important question: what does it mean to be a Jew? There are many answers to this question—technical, spiritual, and political. However, the answer I want to share with you today transcends these definitions. Let's explore it together and see what you think.

BEING A JEW AND BEING A CANDLE

Each Jewish person is like a candle. Judaism, the Tora, is the flame of that candle. This metaphor is neither arbitrary nor capricious. The Tora has always been compared to "light." In fact, the Hebrew word *Tora* originates from the root *or*, meaning "light." Our mission as a nation is to be, as the prophet Yesha'ayahu said (Isaiah 42:6) "or lagoyim," a light to the nations. Remarkably, we fulfill this mission without acts of proselytism or missionarism. To illuminate, we only need to be lit. The word *Tora* shares the same root and is nearly identical to the word *morá*, which means "teacher." For Jews, the process of learning is one of intellectual and spiritual enlightenment. The Tora is "our teacher"; it educates, illuminates, and guides us. Through its teachings, it dispels darkness from our lives, shows us how to live, and grants us clarity.

CANDLES: LIT OR UNLIT?

Now that we understand why the Tora can be compared to light or a flame, let's return to the candles, the receptacles of the flame: the Jewish individual. If a Jew (*Yehudi*) does not learn Tora, does not study it, and does not observe its commandments, is he still Jewish? The answer is an unequivocal "yes." A Jew never loses his or her Jewish status (*Yisrael af al pi she'chata, Yisrael hu*). A Jew without Judaism is like a candle without a flame. A flameless candle is still a candle.

And while it is not yet fulfilling the purpose for which it was created, it remains a candle nonetheless. Importantly, it can always be "lit." Often, all this candle needs is another candle, already burning with a strong flame, to approach it, offer its light, and help it ignite.

THE CANDLE The metaphor of the candle and the flame is particularly fitting for Hanukka. It helps us understand why we celebrate a great military victory by lighting candles. Let's delve into this.

Throughout history, our enemies have often sought to destroy the candles. In such cases, their aim was our extermination. They didn't care whether the candles were lit or not. For example, during the Shoa (Holocaust), a Jew who said, "I don't believe in God. I'm not observant. Let me go," would still be taken to the concentration camps. The anti-Semitic enemy, as in the days of Haman and Ahashverosh, didn't care about the flame; their hatred was directed at the candles themselves. Their goal was to destroy the Jewish people entirely. By destroying the candles, they also sought to extinguish the flames.

THE FLAME Hanukka, however, tells a different story. During this time, as in the era of the Inquisition, the enemy's objective was not to destroy the candles but to extinguish the flames. They sought to replace the flames of Judaism with a cross or a Greek deity. The Hashmonayim, our heroic ancestors who triumphed during Hanukka, did not fight to save their physical lives. Their lives were not under immediate threat. Rather, they fought—and were willing to sacrifice their lives—to preserve the flames of Judaism. Lighting candles is the most fitting way to commemorate their victory.

THE MIRACLE Finally, the miracle of Hanukka, when a small amount of oil burned for eight days, has much to teach us. When we follow the example of the Hashmonayim and work to strengthen and multiply our flames—sharing the light of the

Tora with others—we can be assured that HaShem is on our side. Even when we feel that our efforts or abilities are enough to light only one candle, HaShem will grant us the inspiration and strength to light many more.

This Hanukka, may we all strive to keep our candles burning brightly and help others rekindle their flames.