

LIGHT AND THANKS

The Rare Coincidence of Hanukkah and Thanksgiving in 2013

by

Christopher P. Benton

In the year 2013 we will witness an extremely rare event that is unlikely to ever happen again, the overlap of *Hanukkah* and the American holiday of *Thanksgiving*. In this year the first day of *Hanukkah* will commence the evening before *Thanksgiving* resulting in the greater part of each being celebrated simultaneously. Consequently, this has prompted me to muse about each festival and to contemplate the deeper meanings of harvest and winter celebrations, in general. Thus, let's begin with an overview of the *fall harvest festival* known as *Thanksgiving*.

Thanksgiving

During the first winter of Plymouth Colony in 1620 supplies were short and the winter cold was brutal, so brutal that approximately half of the colonists died prior to the first *Thanksgiving*. In fact, of the 102 people who made that first voyage on the *Mayflower*, only 53 made it to that first harvest celebration. This number included 49 men and only 4 women. Regarding this, Plymouth Governor William Bradford wrote, "*Of these one hundred persons who came over in this first ship together, the greatest half died in the*

general mortality, and most of them in two or three months' time¹". Fortunately, though, the colonists were able to subsequently make an alliance with the *Wampanoag* nation and their leader, *Massasoit*, and with their help they had a bountiful harvest in the fall that followed that was also supplemented by good hunting. The results of their endeavors are chronicled in *Mourt's Relation* written by former Plymouth colony governor, Edward Winslow.

"We set the last spring some twenty acres of Indian corn, and sowed some six acres of barley and peas, and according to the manner of the Indians, we manured our ground with herrings or rather shads, which we have in great abundance, and take with great ease at our doors. Our corn did prove well, and God be praised, we had a good increase of Indian corn, and our barley indifferent good, but our peas not worth the gathering, for we feared they were too late sown, they came up very well, and blossomed, but the sun parched them in the blossom.

Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might after have a special manner rejoice together after we had gathered the fruit of our labors; they four in one day killed as much fowl, as with a little help beside, served the company almost a week, at which time amongst other recreations, we exercised our arms, many of the Indians coming amongst us, and among the rest their greatest King Massasoit, with some ninety men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted, and they went out and killed five deer, which they brought to the plantation and bestowed on our governor, and upon the captain, and others. And although it be not always so plentiful as it was at this

¹ Patricia Scott Deetz; James F. Deetz (2000). "[Mayflower Passenger Deaths, 1620–1621](#)". *The Plymouth Colony Archive Project*.

time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want that we often wish you partakers of our plenty.”

Furthermore, in *Of Plymouth Plantation*, we read the following words of Governor William Bradford.

“All the summer there was no want. And now begin to come in store of fowl, as winter approached, of which this place did abound when they came first (but afterward decreased by degrees). And besides water fowl, there was great store of wild turkeys, of which they took many, besides venison, etc.”

Although the details are sketchy, it appears that the first *Thanksgiving* was a three-day celebration of an excellent harvest and hunt and that their *Wampanoag* allies partook of the feast. It is also presumed that William Brewster, the spiritual head of the pilgrims, gave a benediction at that time. Furthermore, within this celebration we also see many items which reflect standard Jewish values. In particular, community, festivals of harvest, inclusion of strangers, sharing with others, and giving thanks to *God*. Below are some passages speaking to these values that come from rabbinic literature and the *Bible*.

“Hillel said, ‘Do not separate your self from the community.’”

(Pirkei Avot 2:4)

“You shall observe the Feast of Booths seven days, after you have gathered in your grain and your wine. And you shall rejoice in your feast, you, and your son, and your daughter,

and your manservant, and your maidservant, and the Levite, the stranger, and the orphan, and the widow, who are inside your gates.”

(Deuteronomy 16:13-14)

“He lends generously at all times; and his seed is blessed.”

(Psalm 37:26)

“He who gives kindly to the poor lends to the Lord.”

(Proverbs 19:17)

“Charity is equivalent to all the other religious precepts combined.”

(B. Baba Bathra 9a)

“R. Hanina b. Papa said, ‘To enjoy this world without a benediction is like robbing the Holy One.’”

(B. Berachoth 35b)

As with many things, the format of *Thanksgiving* developed over time from the bottom up rather than the top down, thus reflecting the will and inclinations of the people. During Abraham Lincoln’s presidency, Lincoln issued a proclamation that *Thanksgiving* should be celebrated on the last Thursday in November, and on December 26, 1941, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed a joint resolution of Congress that changed the time of the celebration from the last Thursday in November to the fourth Thursday in

November, presumably to give the country an economic boost in the month before *Christmas*. Next, we look at the Jewish fall *harvest festival* known as *Sukkot*.

Sukkot

The fall *harvest festival* that is *Biblically* mandated is *Sukkot* which may be better known to some as the *Feast of Booths*. In *Leviticus* we are instructed to dwell in temporary shelters or booths for seven days in remembrance of the exodus from Egypt. Nonetheless, the *Biblical* text also makes it clear that this is additionally an agricultural festival, and some scholars believe that the temporary shelters are actually supposed to represent the outdoor structures that one might dwell in during the time of harvest.

“Also in the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the fruit of the land, you shall keep a feast to the Lord seven days; on the first day shall be a sabbath, and on the eighth day shall be a sabbath. And you shall take on the first day the boughs of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, and the boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days. And you shall keep it a feast to the Lord seven days in the year. It shall be a statute forever in your generations. You shall celebrate it in the seventh month. You shall dwell in booths seven days. All who are Israelites born shall dwell in booths, that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel to dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt.”

(Leviticus 23:39-43)

Sukkot is also the third of the three pilgrimage/harvest festivals that are described in the *Torah*, the other two being *Pesach* and *Shavuot*

“The Feast of Unleavened Bread shall you keep. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, as I commanded you, in the time of the month Abib; for in the month Abib you came out from Egypt. All that opens the matrix is mine; and every firstling among your cattle, whether ox or sheep, that is male. But the firstling of an ass you shall redeem with a lamb; and if you redeem him not, then shall you break his neck. All the firstborn of your sons you shall redeem. And none shall appear before me empty. Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, in plowing and in harvest you shall rest. And you shall observe the Feast of Weeks, of the first fruits of wheat harvest, and the Feast of Ingathering at the year’s end.”

(Exodus 34:18-22)

Over the centuries, customs surrounding *Sukkot* arose that are not explicitly described in the written *Torah*, and I suspect that many of these customs evolved from the ground up rather than the top down. In other words, that they were first created by the collective will of the people, and only later formalized by the powers that be. In particular, the *Talmud* describes joyous celebrations and activities that took place during *Sukkot* that would rival the revelry found at any modern day renaissance festival. Consequently, *Sukkot* is also known as *zeman simhateinu*, the season of our joy.

Our Rabbis taught, He who has not witnessed the rejoicing at the place of the Water-Drawing has never seen rejoicing in his life.”

(B. Sukkah 51b)

“It was taught: They said of R. Simeon b. Gamaliel that when he rejoiced at the Rejoicing at the place of the Water-Drawing, he used to take eight lighted torches and throw them in the air and catch one and throw one and they did not touch one another. And when he prostrated himself, he used to dig his two thumbs in the ground, bend down, kiss the ground, and draw himself up again, a feat which no other man could do. ... Levi used to juggle in the presence of Rabbi with eight knives, Samuel before King Shapur with eight glasses of wine, and Abaye before Rabbah with eight eggs or, as some say, with four eggs. It was taught: R. Joshua b. Hanania stated, When we used to rejoice at the place of the Water-Drawing, our eyes saw no sleep.”

(B. Sukkah 53a)

A second tradition that is associated with *Sukkot* is the reading of *Ecclesiastes*. Upon reflection, this seems quite fitting because the cyclic nature of the universe is one of the primary themes in *Ecclesiastes*, and *Sukkot* occurs at the end of the annual cycle of planting and harvesting. Thus, it is quite apropos that we read the following in *Ecclesiastes*.

“To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven. A time to be born, and a time to die, a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted.”

(Ecclesiastes 3:1-2)

A third custom that has grown around the observance of *Sukkot* is the *ushpizin*, the inviting of guests into the booth or *sukkah*. This custom is described in the *Zohar*, and it refers to both guests who are currently alive as well as to the souls of the patriarchs of *Judaism*. During the *Kabbalistic* revival in Israel in the sixteenth century town of *Safed*, communion in the *sukkah* with these departed patriarchs was widely practiced.

“Observe that when a man sits in this abode of the shadow of faith, the Shekinah spreads her wings over him from above and Abraham and five other righteous ones make their abode with him.’ R. Abba said: ‘Abraham and five righteous ones and David with them. Hence it is written, “In booths ye shall dwell seven days”, as much as to say, “Ye seven days shall dwell in booths”, and a man should rejoice each day of the festival with these guests who abide with him.’ R. Abba further pointed out that first it says “ye shall dwell” and then “they shall dwell”. The first refers to the guests, and therefore Rab Hamnuna the Elder, when he entered the booth, used to stand at the door inside and say, Let us invite the guests and prepare a table, and he used to stand up and greet them, saying, In booths ye shall dwell, O seven days. Sit, most exalted guests, sit; sit, guests of faith, sit. He would then raise his hands in joy and say, Happy is our portion, happy is the portion of Israel, as it is written, “For the portion of the Lord is his people”, and then he took his

seat. The second “dwell” refers to human beings; for he who has a portion in the holy land and people sits in the shadow of faith to receive the guests so as to rejoice in this world and the next. He must also gladden the poor, because the portion of those guests whom he invites must go to the poor. And if a man sits in the shadow of faith and invites these guests and does not give them their portion, they all hold aloof from him, saying “Eat thou not the bread of him that hath an evil eye” (Proverbs 23:6). That table which he prepares is his own and not God's. Alas for him when those guests leave his table.’ R. Abba further said: ‘Abraham always used to stand at the cross roads to invite guests to his table. Now when a man invites him and all the righteous and King David and does not give them their portion, Abraham rises from the table and exclaims, “Depart, I pray you, from the tents of these wicked men” (Numbers 16:26), and all rise and follow him. Isaac says, “The belly of the wicked shall want” (Proverbs 13:26). Jacob says, “The morsel thou hast eaten thou shalt vomit up” (Proverbs 23:8). The other righteous ones say, “For all tables are full of vomit and uncleanness” (Isaiah. 28:8). In those ten days during which David judges the world, that man is judged who has treated him more ungratefully than Nabal.’ R. Eleazar said: ‘The Torah does not demand of a man more than he can perform, as it says, “Each one man shall give as he is able,” (Deuteronomy 16:7). A man should not say, I will first satisfy myself with food and drink, and what is left I shall give to the poor, but the first of everything must be for the guests. And if he gladdens his guests and satisfies them, God rejoices with him and Abraham proclaims over him, “Then shalt thou delight thyself in the Lord”, etc. (Isaiah 58:14). Isaac proclaims, “No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper” (Isaiah 54:17).’ R. Simeon said: ‘This verse is said by King David, because all royal weapons of war have been handed to

David. What Isaac says is, “His seed shall be mighty on the earth” (Psalm 112:2). Jacob proclaims, “Then shall thy light break forth as the morning” (Isaiah 58:8). The other righteous say, “The Lord shall guide thee continually and satisfy thy soul in dry places” (Isaiah 58:11). Happy the lot of the man who attains to all this!’
(Zohar III:103b-104a)

Thus, in this *Biblically* mandated *harvest festival* we find joy and celebration and the communal sharing of food, and, of course, there are also scripted prayers to be recited during the festival. Furthermore, one can find many other fall *harvest festivals* that are held around the world, and as with *Thanksgiving* and *Sukkot*, they typically tend to contain common elements of feasting, community, and prayers for the times to come. Some such as *Samhain*, the precursor of *Halloween*, also contain more supernatural elements and communication with departed spirits, and others, such as the *Moon Festival* of Vietnam and China, contain elements of light and fire as well. And this leads us naturally to our next Jewish festival, *Hanukkah*, the *festival of light*.

Hanukkah

The story of *Hanukkah* that most people are familiar with is the one of a small band of Jews led by Judah Maccabee who defeated King Antiochus of Syria to recapture the Temple in Jerusalem. They then rededicated the Temple and, according to the legend, lit a small quantity of oil that should have lasted for only a single day, but instead lasted for eight days, thus creating the miracle of *Hanukkah*. Many also know of the tradition of

eating latkes (fried potato pancakes) in remembrance of the oil found in the Temple and the tradition of children playing with the *dreidel*, a four-sided top with the Hebrew letters *nun*, *gimmel*, *hey*, and *shin* on the respective sides. An old story is that the *dreidel* game was instituted as a way of teaching children the Hebrew alphabet during a time when Jewish learning had been suppressed. However, that and many other stories about *Hanukkah* are simply not true.

The word *Hanukkah* means “dedication” in Hebrew, and it refers to the rededication of the Temple after the defeat of King Antiochus. By the way, there is evidence that this war was not so much a war between the Jewish people and a Syrian king as it was a civil war between two Jewish factions, one favoring a Hellenistic way of life and the other promoting a more traditional way of Jewish living. According to this view, at some point King Antiochus lent his support to the Hellenistic Jews who favored Greek philosophy and lifestyles. And as for the *dreidel* gambling game that children enjoy today, it comes directly from the sixteenth century German game of “totum,” the name of which is derived from a Latin word meaning “all.” In this German game, a top called a *trundle* was spun. On the sides were four letters, *N*, *G*, *H*, and *S*. Depending upon which letter landed facing up, a player either experienced nothing, won everything in the pot, won half, or put an extra coin into the pot just like in the traditional game of *dreidel*. In particular, the letters stand, in German, for *nichts* (nothing), *ganz* (all), *halb* (half), and *stell ein* (put in).

And now, regarding the miracle of *Hanukkah*, there is absolutely no mention of it in either the *first* or *second Book of Maccabees*. Instead, we find the following.

“Early in the morning on the twenty-fifth day of the ninth month, which is the month of Kislev, in the one hundred and forty-eighth year, they rose and offered sacrifice, as the law directs, on the new altar of burnt offering which they had built. At the very season and on the very day that the Gentiles had profaned it, it was dedicated with songs and harps and lutes and cymbals. All the people fell on their faces and worshiped and blessed Heaven, who had prospered them. So they celebrated the dedication of the altar for eight days, and offered burnt offerings with gladness; they offered a sacrifice of deliverance and praise. They decorated the front of the temple with golden crowns and small shields; they restored the gates and the chambers for the priests, and furnished them with doors. There was very great gladness among the people, and the reproach of the Gentiles was removed. Then Judas and his brothers and all the assembly of Israel determined that every year at that season the days of dedication of the altar should be observed with gladness and joy for eight days, beginning with the twenty-fifth day of the month of Kislev.”

(I Maccabees 4:52-59)

“Now Maccabeus and his followers, the Lord leading them on, recovered the temple and the city; and they tore down the altars which had been built in the public square by the foreigners, and also destroyed the sacred precincts. They purified the sanctuary, and made another altar of sacrifice; then, striking fire out of flint, they offered sacrifices,

after a lapse of two years, and they burned incense and lighted lamps and set out the bread of the Presence. And when they had done this, they fell prostrate and besought the Lord that they might never again fall into such misfortunes, but that, if they should ever sin, they might be disciplined by him with forbearance and not be handed over to blasphemous and barbarous nations. It happened that on the same day on which the sanctuary had been profaned by the foreigners, the purification of the sanctuary took place, that is, on the twenty-fifth day of the same month, which was Kislev. And they celebrated it for eight days with rejoicing, in the manner of the feast of booths, remembering how not long before, during the feast of booths, they had been wandering in the mountains and caves like wild animals. Therefore bearing ivy-wreathed wands and beautiful branches and also fronds of palm, they offered hymns of thanksgiving to him who had given success to the purifying of his own holy place. They decreed by public ordinance and vote that the whole nation of the Jews should observe these days every year.”

(II Maccabees 10:1-8)

Two things stand out from these accounts from *I Maccabees* and *II Maccabees*. First, there is absolutely no mention of a miracle, and second, it appears that *Hanukkah* was really just a late observance of *Sukkot*, the *Feast of Booths*. However, by the time we reach the work *Antiquities of the Jews* by the Jewish historian *Flavius Josephus* (37 CE - 100 CE), *Hanukkah* is referred to by the name *Festival of Lights*, and in the *Talmud*, the festival of *Hanukkah* has been fully transformed from a military victory into a miracle of light.

What is the reason of Hanukkah? For our Rabbis taught: On the twenty-fifth of Kislev commence the days of Hanukkah, which are eight on which a lamentation for the dead and fasting are forbidden. For when the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oils therein, and when the Hasmonean dynasty prevailed against and defeated them, they made search and found only one cruse of oil which lay with the seal of the High Priest, but which contained sufficient for one day's lighting only; yet a miracle was wrought therein and they lit the lamp therewith for eight days. The following year these days were appointed a Festival with the recital of praise and thanksgiving.”

(B. Shabbat 21b)

The question now becomes one of who transformed this military victory into a religious miracle and why? Many believe that this was done purposefully by the rabbis for two reasons. First, it was done to give the festival a more religious tone. After all, popular as it has become, *Hanukkah* is not a religious holiday rooted in *Biblical* text, and the rabbis of the day could have felt uncomfortable by the presence of such a secular festival. And second, the celebration of a military victory by a subjugated people could have made those foreign powers that were currently ruling Israel feel very uncomfortable. This latter rationale is a very strong reason for changing the character of the celebration. However, I suspect that, as often happens, change came from the bottom up even if it was assisted from the top down. It is often the people who collectively decide the path to take even if those in charge disagree. Consequently, let's examine what the need of the people might have been.

Hanukkah, or the *Festival of Lights*, begins on the 25th of *Kislev* in proximity to the winter solstice. However, while it doesn't always overlap with the shortest day of the year, it does always overlap with the new moon, and this means that *Hanukkah* occurs during the darkest period of the year. And this is a time that is often cold and dreary and without much light. In fact, the absence of daylight can lead to a depressed condition that physicians now call *seasonal affective disorder* or *SAD*. Hence, people have a need for light and joy at this time in order to counteract the dreariness of the winter, and thus, it is no wonder that *Hanukkah* is not the only *festival of light* in existence. Many peoples have created their own joyous winter festivals that involve light. For example, we have the religious festival of *Christmas* that is today often accompanied by elaborate displays of light, a practice that was presumably started by Martin Luther, and there is also the Hindu late fall festival of *Diwali* that is popularly known as the *festival of lights*. The interesting thing about this latter festival is that it celebrates both exterior light and inner, spiritual light. In addition to various religious *festivals of light* there are also many secular *festivals of light*. For example, there is the well-known *Berlin Festival of Lights*, and, of course, there is all the light and festivity that occurs around the world these days in celebration of *New Year's Eve*. However, what I see all of these *festivals of light* having in common is the application of light to the dark time of winter as a form of *tikkun olam*, repairing the world. Additionally, since the word *olam* also means *eternity*, there is a time as well as spatial aspect to this word. Hence, in this instance, I also interpret the phrase *tikkun olam* as meaning *repairing the time*. These festivals repair the psychological and spiritual problems associated with this particular time. In other words,

winter can be a very dreary time, and all *festivals of light* are aimed, whether we realize it or not, at correcting the deficiency that comes with this season.

In *Judaism*, though, light is also a reference to righteousness and spirituality as can be deduced from the quotes below.

“I the Lord have called you in righteousness, and will hold your hand, and will keep you, and give you for a covenant of the people, for a light to the nations.”

(Isaiah 42:6)

“Light is sown for the righteous, and gladness for the upright in heart.”

(Psalm 97:11)

“For the commandment is a lamp, and the Torah is light.”

(Proverbs 6:23)

“The Lord make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you.”

(Numbers 6:25)

“It is written: “And God said, Let there be light, and there was light” (Genesis 1:3). Said R. Jose: ‘That light was hidden and kept in store for the righteous in the world to come, as already stated; for it is written, “A light is sown for the righteous” (Psalm 97:11). Thus, that light functioned in the world only on the first day of Creation; after that it was

hidden away and no longer seen.’ Said R. Judah: ‘Had it been hidden away altogether, the world would not have been able to exist for one moment. But it was only hidden like a seed which generates others, seeds and fruits, and the world is sustained by it. There is not a day that something does not emanate from that light to sustain all things, for it is with this that the Holy One nourishes the world. Moreover, whenever the Torah is studied by night, a little thread of this hidden light steals down and plays upon them that are absorbed in their study.’”

(Zohar II 148b-149a)

Related to light, of course, is fire from which light is inseparable, and in *Judaism* it is often through the medium of fire that *God* speaks to *Moses* and to others.

“And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush; and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. And Moses said, I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt. And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I.”

(Exodus 3:2-4)

“And you came near and stood under the mountain; and the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven, with darkness, clouds, and thick darkness. And the Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire; you heard the sound of the words, but saw no form; you only heard a voice.” (Deuteronomy 4:11)

When the *Prophet Elijah* is spoken to by *God*, it is through a small, still voice that emerges via the medium of fire. What I find extremely beautiful, though, is an explanation given in the *Zohar* that it is we who must become still in order to hear this inner voice.

“And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake; And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice.”

(I Kings 19:11-12)

“it is called “great voice”, and also a “still small voice” (I Kings 19:12), i.e. a clear though tiny light which illumines all things, but a “still voice” also because men must be filled with awe and silence to hear it, as it is written: “I said, I will take heed to my ways, that I sin not with my tongue; I will keep my mouth with a bridle” (Psalm 39:2).”

(Zohar II:81b)

In summary, all use of light near the time of the winter solstice is a *tikkun olam*, a repairing of the sadness and depression that would generally prevail at such a time. However, in *Judaism*, in particular, this light also represents spiritual connection and communication with *God*.

Using Judaism to Symbolically Connect Hanukkah and Thanksgiving

The Menorah Psalm

At this point, my desire is to find something within *Judaism* that I can use to not only help us metaphorically establish a connection between *Hanukkah* and *Thanksgiving*, but to also deepen our understanding of both holidays. For this purpose I have chosen *Psalm 67* which is also known as the *Menorah Psalm*. Below is a brief analysis of some of its details, but for a more complete analysis, see my paper *The Menorah Psalm as a Continuation and Completion of the Priestly Benediction*² that may be found online at the *Maqom Journal for Studies in Rabbinic Literature*.

When you remove the introductory verse of *Psalm 67*, you are left with seven verses that have been traditionally arranged in the form of a *menorah*.



Psalm 67

² <http://www.maqom.com/journal/paper36.pdf>

Also, while this is an image of a *Temple menorah* and not a *Hanukkah menorah*, nonetheless, both *menorahs* represent light, and thus, we can use this as a symbolic connection to the *Festival of Light*. Furthermore, verse 7 of the *Menorah Psalm* refers specifically to the *produce of the earth*, and this can be used by us as a symbolic link to *harvest festivals* such as *Sukkot* and *Thanksgiving*.

When one first reads the *Menorah Psalm*, the thing that may first strike one is its similarity to the *Priestly Benediction* found in *Numbers 6:24-26*. Below, for comparison, is the *Priestly Benediction* followed by verses 2 through 8 of *Psalm 67*. Notice, in particular, the similarity between the *Priestly Benediction* and verse 2 of the *Menorah Psalm (Psalm 67)*.

“The Lord bless you, and keep you;

The Lord make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you;

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.”

(Numbers 6:24-26)

2. God be gracious to us, and bless us; and let His face shine upon us. Selah.

3. That your way may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations.

4. Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.

5. O let the nations be glad and sing for joy; for you shall judge the peoples righteously, and govern the nations on earth. Selah.

6. Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.

7. *The earth has yielded her produce; and God, our own God, shall bless us.*

8. *God shall bless us; let all the ends of the earth fear him.*

(Psalm 67:2-8)

There are also contrasts between the two works which are very important in showing that they actually have a complementary nature. For example, in the *Priestly Benediction* we find the use of the *God* name *yud-hey-vav-hey* which in rabbinic literature is commonly associated with *mercy*, while in the *Menorah Psalm (Psalm 67)* we find the *God* name *Elohim* which in rabbinic literature symbolizes *justice*. Thus, while these two pieces of text are connected, they are going to be more like bookends rather than exact copies of one another. They are opposite ends of a very interesting puzzle.

In Hebrew, verses 2 through 8 of the *Menorah Psalm* are comprised of 49 words, and thus, this *psalm* has also been used to help count the forty-nine days between *Passover* and *Shavuot*. Hence, we can also symbolically connect this *psalm* with not only *Sukkot*, but also with the other two pilgrimage festivals of *Passover* and *Shavuot*. Additionally, forty-nine is seven sevens, and thus, this number is symbolic of completion³. Indeed, we will see specific ways in which the *Priestly Benediction* is completed by the *Menorah Psalm*.

If we go back and look a little more closely at the structure of the *Menorah Psalm*, it becomes apparent that we should pair the second verse with the eighth, the third with the

³ A week is completed in seven days, and so seven sevens is a week of weeks, thus representing the completion of an even larger cycle.

seventh, the fourth with the sixth, and then find the central meaning of this *psalm* given to us by the fifth verse. Pairing the verses in this manner results in couplets that have similar meanings, and since verses four and six are actually identical, this is the key that the author has embedded to let us know that this is what we should do. Below are the results of our rearrangement.

The first pairing expresses the concept of *God's* blessing.

2. God be gracious to us, and bless us; and let his face shine upon us. Selah.

8. God shall bless us; let all the ends of the earth fear him.

The verses in the next pairing both mention the earth, and they refer to the harvest from the earth.

3. That your way may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations.

7. The earth has yielded her produce; and God, our own God, shall bless us.

As mentioned above, verses 4 and 6 are identical, and they highlight that our response to *God* should be praise.

4. Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.

6. Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.

And finally, the core meaning of the *Menorah Psalm* may be found in verse 5.

5. O let the nations be glad and sing for joy; for you shall judge the peoples righteously, and govern the nations on earth. Selah.

Think of the references to *justice* in this verse as not meaning punishment or repression, but rather divine law, or, if you wish, science. In other words, the laws of nature that *God* has provided result in regularity and order in our lives. Because of the divine order of things, the sun rises in the morning and our car starts when we turn the key, and our response to such divine regulation should be one of praise and to give thanks.

In ancient *Biblical* literature, poetry was often achieved not through rhyming schemes, but through word play and the creation of both simple and intricate numerical patterns. In particular, if we look at the Hebrew for verses 2 through 8 of the *Menorah Psalm*, then we'll notice that the respective word counts in the verses are 7, 6, 6, 11, 6, 6, 7. This pattern is hardly accidental, and it reiterates other messages in the *Menorah Psalm* regarding how the verses should be paired. Furthermore, the word counts of verses 2 and 8 suggest seven sevens which is 49, the same as the number of words in the *psalm* and a number of completion. If we repeat this with verses 3 and 7, then we get six sixes or 36 which is the number often associated in rabbinic literature with *righteousness*⁴. Repeating the procedure with verses 4 and 6 also results in 36, and if we add the two thirty-sixes together, then we get 72 which is the *gematria* or numerical value of *chesed*, (*mercy*). This is meaningful because the *God* name of *yud-hey-vav-hey* that is used in the *Priestly Benediction* is associated with *God's mercy*, and this provides a specific link between the *Priestly Benediction* and the *Menorah Psalm*. Furthermore, we can strengthen the argument that this is not a random association simply by looking at the first letter of each of the verses 2 through 8. If we add up their numerical values, then the

⁴ The world never has less than thirty-six righteous men who are vouchsafed a sight of the Shechinah every day, for it is said, "Happy are they that wait 'lo,' for Him," and the numerical value of lo is thirty-six. (*B. Sukkah 45b*)p

result is *aleph + lamed + yud + yud + yud + aleph + yud* = $1+30+10+10+10+1+10 = 72$. And finally, if we do the same with the last letter of each of the verses 2 through 8, then we obtain *hey + caf + mem + hey + mem + vav + tzaddi* = $5+20+40+5+40+6+90 = 206$ which is the same as the numerical value of the phrase *peoples praise you* (*yud + vav + dalet + vav + caf + ayin + mem + yud + mem* = $10+6+4+6+20+70+40+10+40 = 206$) that is found in verses 4 and 6. Hence, as a whole the *Menorah Psalm* seems to be both a continuation and completion of what is begun in the *Priestly Benediction*, and just as the *Priestly Benediction* explains the gift of spiritual light that *God* shines upon us, so does the *Menorah Psalm* explain how we can complete this interchange by offering praise in return back to *God*. And these notions of praise and *God's* light as the two component parts of a completed covenant of partnership between us and the *Life of the Worlds* certainly give us some deeper thoughts to contemplate during the 2013 conjunction of the *Festival of Lights* with the American *Thanksgiving*.

Final Thought

In conclusion, I would like to mention that one other interesting thing, besides *Hanukkah* and *Thanksgiving*, is also occurring on November 28, 2013. This is also the date on which the newly discovered comet *ISON* makes its closest approach to the sun, and there is the possibility that this comet may brilliantly light up the skies in the latter part of this year, thus, creating a cosmic *festival of light*. In times past, there have been cultures that have looked upon comets as portents of great change and doom. For example, in 1066 there was an appearance of *Halley's comet*, and subsequently, *King Harold* of England died at the *Battle of Hastings*, and *William the Conqueror* changed the face of the British

Isles forever. Similarly, *Shakespeare* wrote, “*When beggars die there are no comets seen; The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes (Julius Caesar, II, ii, 30-31).*” However, in *Judaism* in the *Zohar*, comets are looked upon in a more positive light as harbingers of growth and healing.

“In the Book of the higher Wisdom of the East, it says, speaking of certain stars which form a tail (scepter) in the firmament, that on the earth there are herbs, of the kind that are called “elixirs of life”, and precious stones, and fine gold, which forms within the breast of high mountains, under shallow water- which are all ruled by those comets by whose influence they grow and increase. It is the glance of that luminous tail which such stars trail after them across the sky that causes those things to flourish. Certain illnesses of men, as jaundice, can be cured through the patient's gazing upon shining steel, which is held before his eyes and rapidly moved from side to side, so that, like a comet's tail, it sends flashes of light into the face, thus healing the disease. Therefore all those objects over which such stars as these are appointed can have no proper development and growth unless the light of the comet actually passes over them, whereby they are enabled to renew their color and their energy according to their need. This must be true, since it is similarly indicated in the Book of King Solomon, in regard to the science of precious stones, that when these stones are denied the light and sparkle of certain stars, their development is retarded and they never reach their full perfection. And the Holy One, blessed be He, has ordered all things so that the world may be perfected and beautified, and accordingly it is written that the stars are “to give light upon earth” (Genesis 1:17), in all the things which the world needs for its perfection.’” (Zohar II:171b-172a)

Thus, may our experience this year of *harvest festivals* and *festivals of light* not only bring us an inner light and peace that is followed by gratitude, but may it also restore our health and our ability to grow and comprehend the wonders that lie before us.

“The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.”

(Psalm 19:2)