

# The Jewish Festival of Lights

## —a celebration of the spirit

by Rabbi Henri Noach

*We are honored to offer this contribution from Rabbi Henri Noach, Rabbi of the Jewish Community of Japan. Rabbi Noach has been a lecturer and professor at various institutions in Japan and abroad, and was a guest representative at the Symphony of Peace Prayers ceremony held at Fuji Sanctuary in May 2006. More details on his distinguished background can be found in Byakko #97.*

It is truly fortuitous that just as we approach the Jewish Festival of Lights (Hannukah), I have been given the opportunity to share with the readers of *Byakko* some insights on a subject of common interest to us. In the writings of Masami Saionji, I have discovered many parallels with ancient Jewish teachings. In the present article, I will focus on some of these shared attributes. These similarities enlighten us to the universality of truth as it radiates through the prism of diverse cultures.



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God is One, the Universe is One, we are One. The unity of all existence flows inexorably from the Unity of God. This principle likewise underscores the growing awareness of the intrinsic oneness of Science and Religion. In a verse from the Hebrew Biblical Book of the Prophet Isaiah, it is written that God *forms* light and *creates* darkness (45:7). Indeed, at the very beginning of God's creation of the universe, as described in the Book of Genesis, "the earth was *unformed* and void, and *darkness* was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters. And God said: 'Let there be light'" (Genesis 1:2-3). Light is the first manifestation of the gradual ordering

of the primeval cosmic chaos that Big Bang theorists call the Black Hole. This latter was an infinitesimally small space in which the entire universe was contained at the very beginning of the formation of the universe. Over seven hundred years ago, the Jewish Biblical commentator, Nahmanides, wrote: "In the beginning, from total and absolute nothing, the Creator brought forth a substance so thin that it had no corporeality, but that substanceless substance could take on form. This was the only physical creation. Now this creation was *a very small point*, and from this all things that ever were or will be formed". The modern theory of the Big Bang was clearly prefigured in Jewish tradition! And the Bible states a truth that was only discovered by astro-physicists in the modern era: light was *formed* out of the primeval darkness.

We tend to take order for granted. We speak of the *laws* of nature, assuming more often than not that the prevalence of order is a *natural* phenomenon. But there is no such thing as a natural phenomenon. The order we perceive in the universe is the exception, not the rule. As one prominent scientist, Gerald Schroeder, has written, the second law of thermodynamics—that of increasing entropy or disorder—is a universal phenomenon: "The trend in the universe is toward chaos, not cosmos", he writes in *Genesis and the Big Bang*. Similarly, Albert Einstein wrote that, "the most incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible". In the first chapter of Genesis, the Hebrew Bible depicts the formation of this seemingly incomprehensible harmonious construct of the cosmos in simple words, in a verse that is reiterated at the end of each day of creation: "It was morning (*boker*) and it was evening (*erev*)". These two Hebrew words, however, bear another meaning: the root of the word *erev* signifies chaos; that of *boker* means order. The order in the universe is an act of God! The Biblical narrative of Creation aptly concludes with the words: "And God saw *all* that He had made, and, behold, it was *very good*" (Genesis 1:319). Each day of Creation is proclaimed to be good; the totality, the *all*, the harmonious construct of the Universe we call Nature, is *very good*: the unity of nature bears witness to the *miracle* of Creation.

Light is the first manifestation of order out of chaos. It bears witness to the miracle of all existence. It testifies to and veritably *reveals* the reality of the Spirit, which pervades and unifies all existence. Spirit is not the antipode of

Matter. Spirit explains Matter! In fact, “it appears that mind...is to some extent inherent in every atom” (Physicist Freeman Dyson, upon his acceptance of the prestigious Templeton Prize).

Herein, I believe, lies the secret of one of the great scientific paradoxes: light is both a material substance, comprised of particles called photons, and a wave. The light that subsumes and suffuses all existence is both an effect and a cause. Likewise on the micro level of our individual existence, dichotomy of body and soul is illusory. In the 16th century, the great Kabbalistic master, Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, stated it thus: “There is no body without soul; body is soul, for the soul sustains the body in life. Were soul to withdraw from body, the latter would revert to dust...which is why that which is body is soul.”

The unity of light and matter, and of body and soul, is no mere theoretical construct. It can become an operative principle, “to live a life of endlessly unfolding splendor”, if we focus our minds “on our ultimate aim of encountering our inner, true identity and drawing out our infinitely vast potential” (Masami Saionji, *Vision for the 21st Century*). The unity of cause and effect—a unity that is inferred from the unity of mind and matter—conditions our ability to break loose from the grip of causality. To do so, as Masami Saionji suggests, one must live by a principle “not of *cause* and *effect*, but of *effect* and *cause*”. We can recreate ourselves if “we ...direct our consciousness exclusively toward the positive.”

The *mystery of human consciousness...the spiritualization of humanity*, and like terms that are so central to this line of thinking find an echo in the Hebrew language. The key word is *emuna*. Simply translated, it means faith. The root of this word, however, means ‘art,’ or ‘craft.’ The modern mind has become habituated to the illusion of a dichotomy of mind and matter. Hidden from our sight, behind the veil of what Masami Saionji calls the “three-dimensional plane” of physical existence, or “the realm of visible manifestations”, is “the (spiritual) realm of life itself”. The Tangible and Intangible are not distinct realities. By a “large-scale shift in consciousness ...to the flow of our own evolutionary and self-creative process”, mind can recreate matter; the chain of causality can be reversed, when we focus our attention on the desired effect. This is the power of *emuna*!

At the time of the winter solstice, Jews celebrate a festival called Hanukkah. It commemorates the victory of the Jews over an oppressive regime, in the 2nd century before the common era. Vastly outnumbered, they succeeded in defeating the armed forces of the Greek Seleucid king, Antiochus Epiphanes, who had enacted decrees to suppress the Jewish religion. The leaders of this revolt, known as the Maccabees, re-established an independent Jewish kingdom, known as the Hasmonean dynasty—for the first time since Judea had been subdued by the Babylonians, some four centuries before. The Talmud, that monumental repository of ancient Jewish tradition, describes a miracle that was wrought at the time: “When the Greeks had entered the Temple of Jerusalem, they defiled all the oils therein, and when the Hasmoneans defeated them, they searched and found only one cruse of oil which lay with the seal of the High Priest, but which contained sufficient oil for only one day’s lighting; yet a miracle was wrought and they lit the lamp therewith for eight days. The following year, these days were appointed a Festival with the recital of praises and thanksgiving” (Talmudic Tractate Shabbat, 21b).

This military victory was rendered possible by a faith that overrode the seemingly inexorable force of inertia. The true victory, which we celebrate annually for over 2,000 years since the event, lies way beyond the military or political plane. It is that of the Spirit; the vision of a desired effect that prevailed over the chain of mundane causality. The Hebrew language holds the secret to the veritable meaning of this Talmudic narrative that tells of the oil that sufficed for one day and that continued burning for eight days. Oil is called *shemen* in Hebrew. It shares a root with the word *neshama*—‘spirit!’ So does the Hebrew word *shemona*, signifying ‘8.’ And the number 8, when inverted, signifies immortality—that which transcends the realm of time of and space—just as 8 transcends the 7 days of Biblical worldly Creation!

The lesson is timeless, and universal: “The future is waiting to be created”—at all times, in every place, and it begins with ourselves, “when all you need to do is observe the one universal ray that resonates within you” (Masami Saionji).