

# The Candle of God



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Adin Steinsaltz

# The Candle of God

DISCOURSES ON  
HASIDIC THOUGHT

EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY

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# Contents

*Translator's Preface xi*

## **HIDDEN ASPECTS OF SHABBAT**

*Chapter one 3*

*Chapter two 7*

*Chapter three 15*

*Chapter four 21*

*Chapter five 27*

*Chapter six 35*

## **THE WAY OF THE SOUL AND TORAH:**

### **ESSENCE AND STRUCTURE**

*Chapter one 45*

*Chapter two 49*

*Chapter three 55*

*Chapter four 63*

*Chapter five* 71

*Chapter six* 75

## **SANCTITY AND RESTRAINT**

*Chapter one* 83

*Chapter two* 89

*Chapter three* 99

*Chapter four* 107

*Chapter five* 113

*Chapter six* 119

*Chapter seven* 127

*Chapter eight* 135

## **THE TRIALS OF LIFE**

*Chapter one* 145

*Chapter two* 153

*Chapter three* 159

*Chapter four* 169

*Chapter five* 171

*Chapter six* 175

*Chapter seven* 179

*Chapter eight* 183

*Chapter nine* 187

*Chapter ten* 193  
*Chapter eleven* 201  
*Chapter twelve* 211  
*Chapter thirteen* 219  
*Chapter fourteen* 227

**IMPLICATIONS OF THE MENORA**

*Chapter one* 237  
*Chapter two* 243  
*Chapter three* 247  
*Chapter four* 251  
*Chapter five* 255  
*Chapter six* 261  
*Chapter seven* 269  
*Chapter eight* 275  
*About the author* 281

## *Translator's Preface*

**L**ike the previously published *Discourses on Hasidic Thought* by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, this is a selection of talks commenting on the writings of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, founder of the Chabad movement, and of his grandson, Rabbi Menahem Mendel (Tzemaḥ Tzedek). More than the other collections, however, the present work focuses on certain aspects of Jewish wisdom that have become obscured and gone underground, so to speak, in the modern world.

As with all such genuine assertions of wisdom, all we can do is provide a clue, like the saying, “The soul of man is the candle of God” (Proverbs 20:27), an idea that is often repeated in this book. And then, in making the (manifestly impossible) endeavor to explain what the soul of man consists of, and in grappling with what is meant by “the candle of God,” we are brought a little closer to earnest comprehension.

Jewish tradition has preserved the religious insights of the past in a marvelously consistent fashion. Sometimes we may become impatient with seemingly irrelevant details in the Bible, Talmud, Midrash, and Kabbala, but we are grateful for the help of commentators throughout the generations. Even if they don't always agree, they at least elucidate the matter in a deeply satisfying way.



## Translator's Preface

In the following selection of talks excerpted from this tradition, some passages may sound too abstract or even, for many readers, esoteric. This can be attributed to a certain historical neglect in Jewish education. There is a gap between the reasonable and the mythological that need not have come about. Because, in point of fact, the essence of Jewish spirituality is very intimate, existential, personal. So much of it goes back to life and love as it was lived by the people – which is one of the reasons the Kabbala has remained closely connected with ritual, legend, and custom.

Accordingly, in an effort to bridge a certain gap between Jewish wisdom and modern life, the following five series of discourses were chosen for the present book. The titles are my own.

1) “Hidden Aspects of Shabbat” based on *Likkutei Torah (Beshallah)* by Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, does not pretend to exhaust the subject of rest, respite, and passivity. It concentrates rather on the delight inherent in such sanctified rest, the Divine delight providing the Sabbath with a purpose and meaning beyond anything we can reckon.

2) The series on the “The Way of the Soul and Torah” based on *Likkutei Torah (Vayikra)* may seem abstract for those unfamiliar with Kabbalistic terminology, but in an inexplicably direct fashion, the lively interaction between the individual Jew and Torah strikes one’s intelligence sharply.

3) “Sanctity and Restraint” based on *Likkutei Torah (Pekudei)* is a rather unusual argument, with provocative ramifications, in order to explain the superiority of the commandments “not-to-do” over the commandments “to-do.” It pursues the Jewish principle that right action is what counts; then it subtly confutes the contention that the highest virtue resides in carrying out the positive commandments “to do.” The argument dwells on the spiritual reality behind restraint, on the power that is added to oneself and to the world by deliberately not doing certain things that life seems to call forth. The humanity behind “Thou shalt not” is given its higher dimension.

4) Perhaps most challenging of all are the relatively practical discourses on “The Trials of Life,” based on *Derekh mitzvotekha* (p. 370, *Aharei*), by Rabbi Menahem Mendel (the *Tzemaḥ Tzedek*). We are

drawn to admit that although all men are confronted by trouble and affliction, few know how to engage properly and to emerge more or less unscathed. The old wisdom is here presented with a gentle, if startling, persistence, and one is brought to a strange threshold: Suffering can indeed be emancipatory.

5) Finally, the book dares to touch on some of the ancient and profound “Implications of the Menora,” based on *Likkutei Torah* (*Beha’alotekha*). Mostly its fascination lies in the evocation of spiritual emanations in terms of light – light as higher layers of the national consciousness, as a social atmosphere, as knowledge, and as enlightenment.

Not in vain does the present work quote the saying about the soul of man being the candle of God. Once, this was quite self-understood by the Jewish people. Now we need to be reminded and even to have it explained to us. We can only be thankful that there are men like Rabbi Adin around who can do this, naturally and without much fuss. Indeed, what each commentator adds to the traditional wisdom is ascertainable, not only by history but also by a perceptive reader’s heart.

Yehuda Hanegbi



# Hidden Aspects of Shabbat



## Chapter one

**T**orah and mitzvot are called the way of God, as it is written: “Its ways are the ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace” (Proverbs 3:17). For the ways of Torah are to keep to the paths of the Lord, to do charity and justice. In another passage, we find a statement to the effect that the Heavenly world and this world are built on two letters of one of the Divine Names – the Heavenly world by the letter *Yod*, and this world by the letter *Heh*.

What does this mean? Why should the letter *Yod*, the smallest and most insignificant of the alphabet, be that which becomes the basis for the most spiritual of worlds? And the answer is that *Yod* is ten; by ten Divine utterances did Creation take place, and thus, according to the ten *Sefirot*, were the worlds formed. To be sure, it has to be remembered that God is not the same as His creation, that there is an unbridgeable gap between the actuality of Divine Being and the actuality of all the worlds, from the most spiritual to the most material. That is to say “for with You is the source of life, and in Your light shall we see light” (Psalms 36:10), meaning that in the next world the souls (of men) enjoy the radiance of the *Shekhina*, Divine presence. This bliss is not other, cannot be more than what a person is capable of grasping. It is not a matter of the mind,

obviously; it is a spiritual situation. At the same time, just as with intellectual matters or even physical, the soul has to be able to receive that which is bestowed on it; the bliss is only proportionate to the capacity of the individual to absorb it.

The other side of this concept is that the soul is able to absorb something of the Divine splendor, that the infinite light of the next world is not so far beyond the human that it is inaccessible. It is made available to a person by descending level upon level of purity and light. Ultimately it is available, and it can be experienced as real. To be sure, it is a very much condensed and contracted Divine Joy, as we have said, and for all its being intangible, it is not a nothing; being spiritual, it is a positive existence, a genuine reality. It is a nothing only in the sense that it is not anything that we can identify or grasp, as well as being so greatly contracted, and a something in the sense that it is the source of bliss, “for You are the source of life.” Bliss and life are identical here. Since the actuality of the Divine is not given, nor even the possibility of being with Him even when in His presence, we say that we can be in His light. And that is the meaning of the *Yod* as a symbol of the great diminution and contraction, of the available reality of the next world for the soul.

Following upon this is the concept of the extension of reality from the *Yod* through all the letters of the Divine Name, the *Tetragrammaton*, which is the key to the order of Creation. But this is a profound kabbalistic way of interpreting the world of God and man. For our purpose, it is enough to note the significance of a beginning point, a point of departure, so to speak, which is in itself meaningless for all but the One Who is giving. For this One Who wishes to transmit something, it is necessary to extend the initial impulse or inspiration through a number of gradations or channels: thought, speech, and action. The receiver does not have to do more than receive through the channels of transmission and somehow reconstruct the message. An idea is expressed in words; the listener has to interpret the words back to the idea. Sometimes a message is transmitted through electromagnetic waves and it has to be rechanneled through a proper electronic apparatus to be heard. In all cases, from the point of departure the message has to take form and go through a channeling, and then there must be a corresponding instrument to receive and “interpret” it.

Thus, the *Yod* of beginnings is the source of life. It has to extend in all dimensions and contract in terms of Infinite Light in order to become reality. For man, the capacity to “contract” in this way is also the beginning of expression. Without gathering together one’s impressions and mental processes, focusing them somehow, nothing significant can be done. Speech needs a prior contraction of thought, just as any transmission requires an ordering of the factors involved.

The “contraction” can take several forms besides that of actual diminution or shrinkage. It can be a concealment or screening process that beclouds the light (like smoked glass), shielding the receiver and making it possible to absorb the rays of the sun or the higher worlds without injury to one’s self. Another kind of contraction is by the use of a transmitter. The moon can be safely looked at even though its light is of the sun, because it is an agent, lessening the light by reflecting, by transmitting on a lower key, giving off less than it receives. Thus, the higher light of God can usually be received only through those lights that are able to transmit it to us in safety.

Similarly, the Torah has many degrees of light and transmission.

But to return to the concept that the next world was created by the letter *Yod*. The premise is that this world is the revealed world; the next world is really the source, that from which this world gets its substantiality. The Heavenly world is illumed and infinite; this world below is dark, limited, and material; it is revealed only in the sense that it is a visible portion of reality, like the dry land surrounded by the sea. And of course there is considerable hiddenness also within the revealed, but altogether our world is “this” world, that to which we can point and with which we can interact as part of our existence, the world of good and evil.

This, in turn, brings us to the scriptural commandment to “do it today” (Deuteronomy 7:11). Besides the simple fact that this is always good sense, there is the well-known dilemma of putting off till tomorrow. Both the *tzaddik* and the wicked are constantly provoked by the bad impulse as well as the good. The essential difference between the virtuous person and the sinful one is the difference between the postponement of the good impulse, and its immediate putting into action, today, and whether the bad impulse is deferred or eagerly realized now.



## *Hidden Aspects of Shabbat*

In this way we live on in this world of ours, oscillating between a constant choosing of one thing or another.

Consequently, the world also presents a challenge. We are charged with the task of revealing the Divine, of bringing God out of His concealment by overcoming the obscuring barriers. This does not exist in the next world, where the Divine is available according to one's capacity – where there is no object of desire, no privilege or duty. Everything is given and nothing is left to be yearned for. It is a static non-state in which one performs neither mitzva nor transgression. The next world is complete and infinitely satisfying. This world, in contrast, is marked by the need “to do it this day,” for only the present strives for perfection.

All of which is only an introduction to our subject of the Shabbat. The speculations concerning the nature of the next world are based on the insights of the Sages as well as reasonable hypotheses. Our intention is to show that the essence of Shabbat is really a trickle, an infiltration, of the next world into this world. It is a percolation and diffusion of an existing Divine Reality.