

Festival of Fire or Festival of Lights?

When two sisters became observant against the wishes of their parents, the Rebbe made sure that the family relationship remained intact.

The Two Searching Sisters

Let me tell you about two sisters who grew up in a Jewish home in the early 1970s, part of an affluent family in New Jersey. Their ancestors had immigrated to the United States well before the Civil War in 1861, and by the time the sisters were born, not much was left of the Judaism their family had brought with them across the ocean.

Like many kids their age, their parents sent them to Hebrew school. But it was boring and uninspiring, and the girls just couldn't connect with it. Summers were spent at a Jewish camp for two months, but their family was so distant from their Jewish heritage that the parents hadn't even given the girls Hebrew names. When asked if they were Jewish, they'd reply, "Our parents are Jewish, but I'm not sure if I am."

Their parents encouraged them to try every experience life had to offer. They made sure the girls learned to play musical instruments, sent them to Israel to take part in archaeological digs, and enrolled them in summer camps where they spent weeks learning about social issues—things like connecting with

marginalized communities—all the sorts of activities that were popular in those days.

They attended prestigious high schools designed to help students get into top-tier universities. But like many young people in the 1970s, they started to wonder: Is life about more than just getting into the best college?

The older sister went off to university, but after a while, she realized it wasn't the right fit for her. She dropped out and set out on a journey to "find herself."

She ended up in Boston, where she had friends from her trip to Israel. While there, she got into "macrobiotic nutrition," a diet that focuses on eating mostly raw fruits and vegetables. For a time, she thought she had finally found meaning and purpose. But less than a year later, she came to the conclusion that healthy eating, on its own, wasn't enough to give her life real direction.

Her search continued, and somehow, she came across the name "Meir Abuchatzira." In Chabad circles, he was famously known as "the Rebbe's whistler." During weekday *farbrengens*, when the Rebbe encouraged singing, he would signal to Meir to start whistling. Meir would whistle with all his energy, and others would join in, lifting the joy and energy of the room.

Meir, at that time, a newly observant Jew living in Flatbush, also was a macrobiotic enthusiast. When the sisters found this out, they immediately felt a connection to him. One of them received an invitation to spend Shabbat with his family, and for the first time in her life, she traveled to Brooklyn.

She stayed in Meir's small apartment with his wife and six children for the entire Shabbat. The experience was unlike anything she had ever known.

After Shabbat, she called her sister and said, "I think I've found the place that has answers to all the big questions." Then, after a pause, she added, "But it's not for me."

Coming to Judaism

Through him, the sisters began exploring Judaism and gradually started reconnecting with it. It was a slow process that took years. At first, their parents were supportive, even encouraging them to learn more about their Jewish roots. But as the girls took their newfound faith more seriously, their parents began to worry.

Suddenly, the sisters were keeping Shabbat and kosher. Things started to escalate, and soon, bigger challenges arose. Proposals for *shidduchim* (matches) with newly observant Chabad men started coming in. At first, even the sisters were unsure about the idea, but over time, they grew comfortable with it. Their parents, however, were a different story—they were far from thrilled.

Initially, the parents assumed this Hasidic phase was just a passing trend that would eventually blow over. But when the girls started seriously considering marriage to religious men, the reality hit hard. The older sister entered a *shidduch*, but she tried to postpone the wedding as much as possible to give her parents time to adjust to the idea of her marrying a Chasid.

The parents were somewhat cooperative. They offered to hold the wedding in Central Park, Manhattan, and even found a spot where the *chuppah* could be set up outdoors, in line with Chabad tradition. However, they attached one strict condition: “Only ten people wearing kippahs can attend the wedding!”

The sisters couldn’t agree to this restriction, so the decision was made to hold the wedding in Crown Heights instead. A kind family in the community that had embraced the bride stepped in and covered all the wedding expenses. The bride’s parents said that they would not attend the wedding and asked their daughter not to invite their family or friends to what they called a “Hasidic wedding in Brooklyn,” but she went ahead and invited them anyway.

The day before the wedding, the bride called her parents and pleaded with them to come. She told her mother, “You’ll regret it if you don’t come to the wedding.”

On the wedding day, to their surprise, some of the parents’ friends and family arrived to join the celebration. But as the preparations for the *chuppah* progressed, the bride’s parents were still nowhere to be seen. Finally, just moments before the *chuppah*, they arrived in a large limousine, along with the grandparents, brother and his girlfriend.

Immediately after the *chuppah*, the parents left. The bride was so heartbroken that she told herself, “I won’t call them for a very long time.”

The next morning, she received a message from the Rebbe’s secretariat instructing her to continue her relationship with her

parents. She called them immediately, and they were thrilled to hear from her. Her parents decided to host a reception and take the entire wedding party for dinner at a kosher restaurant in Manhattan.

Three months later, the younger sister got married. A week before the wedding, their mother, overwhelmed and frustrated by the changes in her daughters' lives, decided to write a letter to the Rebbe and pour out her feelings. In her letter, she described herself as "just a regular housewife."

In his reply, the Rebbe wrote that he felt compelled to address her description of herself as a "regular housewife." He explained: "For me," the Rebbe wrote, "a housewife, especially a Jewish housewife, is far from an ordinary role. A Jewish woman has been given the immense responsibility of building a Jewish home where she is the foundation and essence of the household, bringing light and warmth into it. And surely, Hashem provides the Jewish woman with the strength to fulfill this mission."

The Rebbe continued, "I am convinced that you will feel true joy in knowing that your daughters have chosen the path of Judaism," adding that he was certain they would be a source of Jewish Nachas for their parents and the entire family.

The same benefactor who funded the older sister's wedding also covered the expenses for the younger sister's wedding. Following the Rebbe's guidance, the daughters did everything they could to maintain a connection with their parents.

Then, a year after the wedding, they finally came around. Their

father called to ask exactly how much the two weddings had cost, and he repaid every penny. (Embrace spring 5784)

Why Light a Menorah?

We're now celebrating Chanukah, the holiday when we light the menorah to remember the miracle that took place in the Temple after the Hasmoneans recaptured and purified it.

But why was the menorah lit in the Temple in the first place? Temple services started at dawn and ended before sunset, so no one was there at night. On top of that, the menorah stood in the Heichal—the inner sanctum—a private room with only a few furnishings: the table for the showbread on the north side, the golden incense altar in the center, and the menorah on the south side. So, who was the menorah for?

The Talmud asks this very question and answers: "It is a testimony to the world that the Divine Presence rests among Israel." But how was the menorah a testimony? The Talmud explains: "What is the testimony? Rav says it is the western lamp, into which the same amount of oil was poured as the other lamps, yet it burned longer than all the others, lasting until the next evening, from which the other lamps were relit."

The Rebbe teaches that the menorah's purpose was to bring spiritual light to the world, as a sign that "the Divine Presence dwells among Israel." The miracle of the menorah didn't just inspire the Jewish people—it sent a message to humanity. Everyone who heard about it recognized that G-d resides among the Jewish people.

This idea is even more relevant when it comes to the Chanukah lights, whose purpose is *pirsumei nisa*—publicizing the miracle. The oil that was miraculously found in the Temple after the Greeks had defiled all the others continues to light up the darkness for generations, reminding us that the survival of the Jewish people goes beyond the natural order.

How do we bring this light to the entire world?

The Rebbe says that it's hidden in the name: "What spreads and illuminates for everyone isn't the fire—it's the light. Fire stays confined to the menorah itself; only the light of the oil spreads and brightens everything around it" (*Toras Menachem*, 5724, Vol. 1, p. 323).

Fire consumes and destroys, while light uplifts and illuminates. That's why Chanukah is called the "Festival of Lights," not the "Festival of Fire." Chabad's approach mirrors this idea—it's not about fire and fury, yelling at people or pointing out how wrong they are. Chabad's way is about spreading light and positivity. Don't argue or try to prove you're right; it rarely changes anything.

This idea was central to the Rebbe's guidance for the bride whose parents walked out of her wedding. Although she was sure she would never speak to them again, the Rebbe told her the very next morning to reach out and renew her relationship with them. The results were immediate and transformative.

When you show warmth and positivity to others, Hashem reflects that light back to you. And soon, in our time, that light will shine across the entire world.