

The Charge of the Light Brigade

by Rabbi Zev-Hayyim Feyer

One hundred forty-five years ago this month, Alfred, Lord Tennyson's poem "The Charge of the Light Brigade" was first published. What does that have to do with this season of the year? If we look only at the content of the poem, perhaps nothing. Or perhaps a great deal, but that is a subject for another essay.

But this season of the year is very much the time for the charge of the light brigade – another type of light brigade, quite different from Tennyson's. In the great majority of the religious faith traditions of the Northern Hemisphere, this is the season which is celebrated with light. The Jewish tradition celebrates Hanukkah by lighting candles. Christians decorate their homes, their businesses, their offices, with lights. The Hindu and Buddhist holiday of Diwali, also celebrated at this time of year, is proclaimed by the lighting of fires. African-Americans observe Kwanzaa with candles. The pre-Christian Scandinavians called this season "Yule" and celebrated it by felling the tallest tree in the forest and burning it, adding smaller logs from time to time so that its flame would continue until the following Yule. And adherents of the "Earth Religions" and the "Nature Religions" observe the Winter Solstice, the time when the sun seems to stand still in the heavens before returning from the Southern sky to the North, by the kindling of flame. The Moslem holy month of Ramadan, which this year began on December 9, is not celebrated by lighting candles or fires, but, because the Moslem religious calendar is a lunar and not a solar calendar, Ramadan does not always fall at the same period of the solar year.

Why the candles? Why celebrate with light? Each religious faith tradition has its own reasons – historical and theological – and each of those reasons is different from the others. But there are two things which unite all these celebrations of light, however different their conscious or "official" motivations may be, and which unite all the celebrators of light and, indeed, all humanity.

We are children of our Creator, created in the image and after the likeness of our Divine Parent, and we are instructed to follow in God's ways. Throughout the year, God grants light to the world – the light of the sun, the moon, the stars. At this time of the year, then, when the natural light is at its least, we step in and, following in our Creator's ways, fill the gap, providing light to our world.

On another level, we note that most of our actions are either self-motivated – I do it because it benefits me – or altruistic – I do it because it benefits someone else. Not so the providing of light. If I light a candle for myself, I cannot then contain its light; others will benefit from it as well. And if I light a candle for another, again its light cannot be contained; it burns for me as well as for the one for whom I lit it.

Let us, then, join the brigade of light; perhaps not exactly what Tennyson meant by the Light Brigade, but perhaps far more important in our day.