



On Light and Darkness in
Freemasonry:
A First Degree Presentation

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DEDICATION

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge a few key figures in my Masonic journey thus far. Shlomo, you were the first of the Mount Carmel Brothers I met. You answered my questions, taught me history, and even vetted this very speech. Tony and Abi, thank you for coming over to meet my wife and guide me through the application process. To all of you- Shortly before I was to be initiated, I was hit by a car while crossing Moria. You checked in on my wife and me *before* I became a Brother. You, by your actions, showed a poor candidate the meaning of benevolence.

It is to all of you I dedicate my work this evening.

INTRODUCTION

Good evening Brethren. Tonight I will be presenting an analysis of what is, in my opinion, the highlight of my initiation into Freemasonry: the moment of transition from darkness into light. While the main thrust of this speech will be focusing on what we share in common as Brethren with a singular ritual, I will be spending a few moments speaking about the performance of the ritual here at Mt. Carmel Lodge as well. Together, we will first contemplate the darkness before turning our attention to the light.

I will draw from a number of sources for our work tonight. The V... of the S... L..., The “Standard” Ritual of Scottish Freemasonry (affectionately called the “Green Book”), and works of literature will all have a role to play.

DARKNESS

Prior to being initiated into the body of this lodge “just, perfect, and regular,” where does a candidate find himself? He is presented by the Tyler as a man “in a state of darkness.” Hoodwinked. Blindfolded. Steeped in black. This is a universal aspect of our ritual, set down in the Green Book we in Israel have been following since 1953. The way we do it at Mt. Carmel is the way I know the ritual implementation best, and I will be discussing at greater length in a few more minutes.

So, where were we. The candidate is beginning in a state of darkness. Why? The order of our initiation ritual draws up parallels to the story of creation found in the book of Genesis. As we are an English-speaking lodge, I will be working from a well known English language translation of the work- the JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh.

According to the V... of the S... L..., the first words spoken by T.G.A.O.T.U. are as follows:

Let there be light.¹

Yet there was something there, something *created*, before the first words. As it is written:

When G-d began to create heaven and earth-- the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from G-d sweeping over the water-- G-d said "let there be light".²

From this we learn that before there can be light, we need darkness. All of the Earth, all of Heaven, existed in a state of darkness before the creation of the first light. The darkness here is shown to be a prerequisite to any light. Light was needed before life could even begin.

...before life could even begin...

Ulysses F. Axtell was a Freemason in Cortland, NY. An educator and writer, he chaired the English department at SUNY Cortland from 1909 to 1928. While he is best known for penning the university's anthem, he also wrote on matters of Masonic interest. Around the turn of the 20th century, Bro. Ulysses wrote of light,

Your first great need, O Brother mine,
Is Light,
To know the glow in which you live,
And love:
The ills of life are only dreams
Of night ---
Face but the glorious Light which shines
Above.

Your second need is still more Light---
Nor dream
On lofty peaks alone to see
Its flood;
For down the vale of Brotherhood
Its gleam
In glory fills the darkened world
With good.

At last, with long and steadfast gaze
On Light,
You'll lose the phantom dreams of night---
Nor e-er
Recall those unrealities
Of night,

¹ Bereshit 1:3

² Bereshit 1:1-3

For Light of G-d's eternal day
Is fair.³

Bro. Axtell here can be interpreted as speaking to a candidate. The writing is quite suitable to the moment of initiation. He addresses the reader as “Brother mine” while at the same time speaking of the need for light. Who can be addressed as such? “A candidate in a state of darkness, who has been well and worthily recommended, regularly proposed and approved in open Lodge... [coming] of his own free will and accord, humbly soliciting to be admitted to the mysteries and privileges of ancient Freemasonry.”⁴ Maybe. He has been accepted by vote; the lodge is prepared to see him as a Brother. He is not yet initiated; He yet stands in darkness.

That interpretation of Bro. Axtell's work ignores a more crucial, climactic moment of the ceremony. There exists, for the span of a few heartbeats, a moment where a man IS a Brother, no longer a poor candidate, yet still finds himself in a state of darkness. This is the liminal moment of passage, after kissing the V... of the S... L..., yet before the W.M. ordains that the “blessing [of light] be restored”.⁵ I propose that *this* is the brother to whom Bro. Axtell is directing his words.

This is a Brother who has had naught to contemplate but darkness. This is a Brother who is, beyond a shadow of a doubt, finding light to be that which he most desires.

Even in darkness though, a man fit to be a brother does not find himself wholly lacking. What is this particular darkness? In this darkness, what does one unfit to be a Brother find himself without? What does the man fit to be a Brother possess?

Darkness is firstly what occurs when the light is denied. To whom is the light of Freemasonry denied? Let us look now to those who will forever be in darkness.

Firstly, a Freemason must be a free man. Even today, we do not accept into our fraternal order those men who are not free. What does that mean? Slaves cannot be freemasons. If a man is a slave, he is denied choice. He cannot choose where he is or whom he associates with. How can that man solicit membership in our lodge while assuring us that it is he who wants our secrets, not his master? A slave is a man who can be compelled to obey another, by threat or by harm to himself or his family. We cannot trust such a man to “hele and conceal,” and knowingly putting any man in a position where harm would be a likely outcome of his association with our fraternity would be exceedingly unethical. Thus, only free men can receive our light.

The V... of the S... L... demonstrates that even freed, slaves maintain a certain mentality. The entire generation of Hebrews who themselves knew slavery, the generation of the Exodus, was denied entry to the promised land⁶. Just as with our initiation ceremony, our criteria for membership follow the example shown to us in the V... of the S... L.... As T.G.A.O.T.U. denied the

³ Glick p.33

⁴ The “Standard” Ritual of Scottish Freemasonry p. 5

⁵ The “Standard” Ritual of Scottish Freemasonry p. 13

⁶ Shemot 14:34

freedom that is Israel to those Hebrews who, in their lifetime, knew what it was to look to a fellow man as a higher authority, so to do we refuse entry into our brotherhood to those men who have ever in their lives known what it is to be a slave.

At the same time, lack of freedom can also be construed as presence of coercion. As before, any man pressed into our order is *not* a man who can be relied on to honor an oath. Words spoken under duress are not words that can be trusted to be honored.

A man fit to be a Brother is free.

Secondly, a man fit to be a Brother is of legal age in his jurisdiction. As we all know, a binding oath is made upon our initiation. Who can be bound by an oath? Only those fit to make them. Minors cannot take this upon themselves. Now, we know from the history of stone masonry that apprentice stone masons were much younger than today's E.A.F.s. These apprentice craftspeople would not enter into direct contract with their masters; any agreement was between the apprentice's father and the new master. Speculative Freemasonry is entered in a different way.

Freemasons join our brotherhood not at the behest of a parent but of their own free will. The oath is between Brother and Brother. To make the oath binding, a candidate *must* be of the legal age of majority. As Brothers bound to accept our local customs and laws, we have followed suit with the minimum age needed to enter our Order.

A man fit to be a Brother is of age.

Thirdly, it must be acknowledged that women cannot be Freemasons. The reasons why are far beyond the scope of today's discussion.

A man fit to be a Brother is, well, a man.

Fourth, those who would deny the existence of a higher power we call T.G.A.O.T.U. are refused the embrace of our fraternity. The cornerstone of our order is adherence to a morality as inflexible as the stones worked upon by our predecessors. This bedrock is an unwavering faith in a supreme being. It is the basis of our oaths, and the force behind any consequences of breaking our vows. A Mason's need for faith goes deeper still than just the oaths. Our entire brotherhood is the teaching of morality. Scholarship has shown us that most cultures that successfully pass on an objectivist morality back it with an unwavering faith in something above.

A man fit to be a Brother is a man of unwavering faith in T.G.A.O.T.U..

The fifth hurdle is one of reputation. A Mason is a man who has not proven to be untrustworthy. He and his family are examined, and found to be of stout moral fibre. The man's application and resume are posted in the temple, and all Brethren are afforded to opportunity to bring up any concerns regarding a candidate's suitability for the lodge.

A man fit to be a Brother is a man of good repute.

It is clear who is to be left in darkness due to denial of the light. But darkness is not only the result of *denial* of light; darkness is also the *absence* of light. It precedes light, as we saw in the V... of the S... L..., and it follows after light departs.

In whom does darkness precede the light of Freemasonry? A man. A free man. A man of age. A man of faith. A man of good repute. He is a good person before he find his place among our brotherhood.

Still, even that man finds himself in darkness. This darkness, then, is not the absence of faith or reputation, of ethical living or maturity. It is the unique darkness that precedes the light of Freemasonry.

THE LIGHT OF FREEMASONRY

The W.M., on ordering the removal of the blindfold, instructs the new E.A.F in the emblematical lights of Freemasonry: The V... of the S... L... and the Square and the Compasses. While they are emblematic of the light, a focus of the light, a guide, I would argue that the light itself warrants more exploration than those three ancient symbols bring to the E.A.F.. As every man fit to be a Mason is already possessed of certain essential elements, the light, therefore, is a guide as to what to do with what we have been given, a latticework to train the wild vines of our soul.

The presentation of the working tools shows us how to begin understanding the light. The tools of the E.A.F. are explained twice. The first explanation focuses upon their usage in the hands of practical Masons: To measure, to impact, to shape. The second explanation dwells on the meaning we speculative Masons can draw from the humble stone working tools, namely the proper allocation of our time; the need to apply ourselves in order to achieve our goals; and that education, not ignorance, is paramount when it comes to success. As our ritual teaches us, “from the whole we deduce this moral, that knowledge, grounded on accuracy, aided by labour and prompted by education and perseverance, will finally overcome all difficulties, raise ignorance from its native darkness, and establish happiness in the paths of life.”⁷

Ancient though those words may indeed be, they are forever engraved upon my heart with Bro. Yonatan’s flawless delivery. The light of Freemasonry is a beacon for we Brethren gathered here. It is the glow that gives shape to our energies and our efforts, guiding us in how to best use that which, by the grace of T.G.A.O.T.U., we had while we were still in darkness.

The light of Freemasonry is what turns us as one toward collective charity and benevolence. It is what leads us to new learning daily. It is what we use to measure our every action. Brethren, we each found our way through the darkness alone. In darkness we built reputations, morality, and faith. Alone. However, it is together, in the light of Freemasonry, that we find brotherhood, direction, and growth.

MT. CARMEL 44

As an E.A.F. of Mt. Carmel number 44, the lodge whose implementation of the Green Book I recognize best is our own. While most every English speaking lodge works from the same book and ritual, each lodge that I have seen uses its space in a slightly different manner. We turn now away from the words and focus instead on the pageantry that accompanies them. We will be examining the physicality of the transition from darkness into light.

⁷The “Standard” Ritual of Scottish Freemasonry p. 24

When normally we gather, we do it in the light; we do things a little differently when the ceremony of initiation begins. The candidate enters in a state of literal darkness. He is blindfolded. Hoodwinked. The last time he saw light, it emanated from a single candle on a bone-strewn table in a pitch black room. Our candidate sat by the candle's low guttering light and penned his will, not knowing what was to come. He does not see the light again until he is either an E.A.F., or chooses not to join us.

He sits in darkness alone. When next he sees the light, he is a Brother in the midst of Brethren.

The candidate is not alone in his darkness, however. Before the Tyler raps his knuckles upon the door of the temple, we douse the light within. We sit steeped in shadow ourselves as the candidate and Junior Deacon perambulate. Why? Plainly, eyes are sensitive. The hoodwink obscures vision, but that is not enough. We want to starve the candidate of every iota of light, deprive him of every photon we can. Darkening the temple helps ensure that the very skin of the poor man's exposed breast craves the light.

I would argue that the candidate is not the only one whose experience is enriched by the darkness we welcome into our temple. If we turn to the V. of the S.L., we can see that great moments of sanctity call for a community to be gathered.⁸ Moments of sanctity are not meant to be always experienced alone. Sharing the candidate's darkness, sharing in his rebirth into light, can serve to remind each one of us that we too were once but a poor man in a state of darkness. Every initiation serves the Brothers of the lodge as a visceral reminder of what it is to find oneself stepping out from the darkness and in to the light of Freemasonry.

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⁸ Vayikra 22:32