I have been thinking a lot about lights and candles lately. Its that time of year, the days get dark so early, the stars are so clear in the cool night sky. Where ever you drive people have the Christmas lights out and they glow and tinkle so beautifully. And of course Chanukah is coming the festival of lights.

We are a people of candles, a people in love with the lighting of tapers. If you think about it we light candles in Judaism nearly as often as we celebrate with food. The festivals and sacred times that extend throughout our year are like a chain of lights – a torch passed from one runner to the next. So it is that every part of a Jewish life is ultimately about illumination -- a struggle to push back the darkness.

At the heart of everything is the weekly candle lighting on Friday nights – a graphic symbol of all that Shabbat represents: a peaceful home, a warm, loving circle around the family table, a respite from the bright lights of commerce and industry; a celebration of the spirit. When the match is struck on a quiet Friday afternoon at sunset, clarity and purpose enter a Jewish home: the candles illuminate what truly matters in life.

When the stars come out on Saturday night, the gentle, braided lights of Havdalah console us for the passing of Shabbat; new lights are kindled to inspire us to live the coming week with purpose and integrity. To challenge us to intertwine the light of our souls like the flames of the havdallah candles, nestled together brighter because we burn together toward a common purpose.

On every holy day and festival – Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, Pesach, Sukkot and Shavuot – candles on our table reflect the beauty of reliving sacred time together with our people.

Candles extend throughout the Jewish life cycle as well. Fascinated by the flame – the way it flickers and falters, but always stretches higher, Jewish mystics likened it to the human soul – fragile and uncertain, seeking always to be reunited with its Divine source. Thus, candles are lit at the bris or naming for a newborn baby to signify the arrival of a new soul in the world. And a candle, called the *ner neshama*, the light of the soul, is lit when a soul departs; it burns for seven days after death in the home where the soul once dwelt, and is lit again each year on the yahrzeit – the anniversary of remembrance; its fragility reminds us that life is finite and precious.

So to the candles we light in our homes at this Chanukah season are about all these things and more. They signify warmth and light and beauty, joy and celebration, the human aspiration to reach higher; but above all the lights of Chanukah are about something very pure and basic: they are about fuel. They are about energy. They are about power.

An oil lamp was lit, once, when there was almost nothing left; barely enough to burn for a day. And yet the light did not go out. Thus the tradition says. And ever since, Chanukah reminds us to trust in a power that endures against all the odds, the light of the human spirit that can illuminate even the darkest of moments and events.

When the world is in darkness, when our spirits are tired and depleted, when a sense of doubt or futility assails us – as devastating as the ancient wars we read about at this season or the modern wars we worry about every day – Chanukah teaches us to believe that the light will not die, that the human spirit will burn brighter still. The more darkness we know the more powerful one simple flame to shed light and dispel the darkness.

Throughout the years, throughout our lives, we go on doing the same simple Jewish acts -- striking matches, kindling flames, filling our homes with candles. In the end, you see, the lights are all the same. Every flame is at its source the light of creation – the same light that hangs above the holy ark in our synagogues; the same light that Moses met at the burning bush; the same light our people met when long ago we stood at Sinai and the mountain was wreathed in flames; the light of our Menorah in our kitchen window. It is the fire that would not go out; it is inexhaustible power; it is spirit that cannot be quenched. It is a *Ner Tamid*. It burns inside us just as it has burned in all the generations before us.

Chanukah reminds us of the power of that light, the power each of us has to kindle many others, We are each of us one simple flame, but together we are a menorah, the biggest menorah in the world, together we can use our light to kindle the fires of justice, of compassion, of understanding, of tolerance. Together we can truly be an or l'goyim a light unto the nations, and in the process perhaps we be a light unto ourselves as well.