

# Chanukah—The *Chag* of *Torah SheB'al Peh*

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The Gemara (*Yoma* 29b) singles out the miracle of Chanukah as the only commemorated miracle that was not recorded in writing in the Tanach, but rather preserved solely by oral tradition. Many *Acharonim* (e.g., *Sfat Emet*, Chanukah 5644) speculate that it is not coincidence that Chanukah is the only classical Jewish holiday whose roots lie in the *Torah SheB'al Peh* (the Oral Tradition); rather, the essence of Chanukah is a celebration of the unique role and power of the *Torah SheB'al Peh*. *Sfat Emet* points out that not only is Chanukah not included in the Tanach, but it is not even discussed, except tangentially, in the Mishnah. There is no *Masechet Chanukah*, or even one *perek* or one *mishnah* which actually states that we should celebrate or light candles on Chanukah. Why would Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi have omitted this significant holiday from the Mishnah? *Sfat Emet* suggests that even when it became necessary to write down the *Torah SheB'al Peh* and canonize it in the Mishnah, the story and mitzvot of Chanukah had to remain in their pristine state of *Torah SheB'al Peh*, because their essence was *Torah SheB'al Peh*.

The evidence for *Sfat Emet's* thesis is compelling, but it remains for us to explicate in what way the story of Chanukah, as opposed to any other miracle in Jewish history, is substantively connected to the nature of *Torah SheB'al Peh*.<sup>1</sup> In order to do so, we must take a fresh look at both the story of Chanukah and the nature of *Torah SheB'al Peh*.

The obvious enemies in the Chanukah story are the Syrian-Greeks, who attempted to suppress our religion with murderous force. The most dangerous and insidious enemy, though, was not the Greeks but their Hellenistic philosophy and lifestyle, which captured the hearts and minds of much of the Jewish people.<sup>2</sup> It is well known that the first enemy killed by the Maccabees was a Jewish Hellenist who was attempting to lead his fellow Jews into the world of paganism.<sup>3</sup> In order for the Maccabees to declare victory, then, they had to not only militarily defeat the Greeks, but convince their fellow Jews to abandon Hellenism and remain true to their faith. The war was fought not only on the military battlefield, but on the intellectual battlefield as well. Could Judaism withstand the onslaught of Greek philosophy? Could the Jewish people defend its uniqueness in the cosmopolitan Greek polis? Could the mitzvot of the Torah compete with

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<sup>1</sup> The *Sfat Emet* himself provided a different explanation regarding the nature of this connection, based on *Shemot Rabba* (47:1, quoted in Tosafot to *Gittin* 60b).

<sup>2</sup> See I *Maccabees* 1:11-15.

<sup>3</sup> I *Maccabees* 2:24.

the advanced Greek culture, art and entertainment? If the heroes of Chanukah did not have answers to these questions, they would have lost the war even before the fighting began.

The Torah, of course, does contain within it the answers to the challenges of Hellenism. Jewish history has proven that our *mesorah* (tradition) can withstand the intellectual challenges of every generation, whether they emanate from Hellenism, Christianity, Islam, the Enlightenment, Marxism or contemporary post-modernism. But where did the Maccabees find the power to combat Hellenistic culture? The Tanach is replete with devastating critiques of ancient paganism, but nowhere explicitly addresses the intellectual challenges of Plato and Aristotle. So wherein lies the eternal power of the Torah? What makes it relevant and compelling to Jews facing challenges that could not have been foreseen by previous generations?

To explain this, we must understand the essential nature of *Torah SheB'al Peh*. Why would Hashem want one portion of the Torah to be transmitted in written form and another portion to remain unwritten?<sup>4</sup> Rav Moshe Shmuel Glasner, in the introduction to his commentary *Dor Revi'i* on *Masechet Chullin*, explains that Hashem, in His divine wisdom, devised a plan to make the Torah relevant to every generation.<sup>5</sup> He took the essentials that are constant throughout history and wrote them in the *Torah SheBichtav* (the written Torah), and then gave us a system of interpretation and exposition by which we can derive from the Torah the answers to halachic and hashkafic questions that arise in future generations, and thereby apply the timeless wisdom of the Torah in a manner that is relevant to a particular time and place. *Torah SheB'al Peh* represents the dynamic aspect of our *mesorah*, that aspect which Chazal referred to (*Chagigah* 3b) when they said "*Divrei Torah parin veravin*" – the words of Torah are fruitful and multiply.<sup>6</sup> In His infinite wisdom, Hashem hid within the Torah the truths relevant to every generation throughout Jewish history, and gave the Jewish people the interpretive tools for uncovering those truths as they are needed.<sup>7</sup>

Our *mesorah* defeated Hellenism because of this power of *Torah SheB'al Peh*, which made the Torah relevant and compelling to a generation suffused with Hellenistic influence. It is this aspect of Torah which allows us today to find the answers to contemporary ethical dilemmas and technological developments, as well as inspiration to help us navigate the challenges of contemporary Western society, in the same Torah that guided our ancestors three thousand years ago. This is the essence of what we celebrate on Chanukah. Unlike Purim, Chanukah does

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<sup>4</sup> For complementary explanations, see also Bavli *Eruvin* 21b, *Bamidbar Rabba* 14, *Moreh Nevuchim* I:71, and the preface to *Sefer Mitzvot Gadol* ("Smag").

<sup>5</sup> Rav Glasner's basic thesis is already found in the Yerushalmi, *Sanhedrin* 4:2. See the *Korban HaEdah* there, s.v. *lo hayta laregel amidah*.

<sup>6</sup> See also the preface to *Ktzot HaChoshen*, who understands the formulation found in *Birkat HaTorah*, "*vechayei olam nata betocheinu*" – and 'planted' amongst us everlasting life, as similarly referring to the dynamic growth of Torah via the process of Rabbinc interpretation.

<sup>7</sup> See Rav Moshe Chaim Luzzato, *Adir BaMarom*, v.1 p. 70, for a kabbalistic exposition of the process by which the Torah truths necessary for each generation are revealed to the Sages of that generation.

not celebrate the survival of the Jews, who were not physically threatened by the Syrian-Greeks, but rather the miraculous survival of Judaism.<sup>8</sup> We celebrate the power of *Torah SheB'al Peh*.

This theme is beautifully captured by the unique mitzvah of Chanukah, i.e., lighting candles. Chazal tell us, in a halachic context (*Bava Kama* 3b), that fire is unique because "*ko'ach acher me'urav bo*"—other forces, such as people, animals and wind, perpetuate and magnify a fire by adding fuel and spreading the flame. Nonetheless, the Gemara concludes (*Bava Kama* 23a) that "*isho mishum chitzav*"—a fire, even if it spread by other forces, is the action of the one who originally ignited it. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that the Torah is compared to fire (*Devarim* 33:2). Hashem lit the fire at Sinai, and even though we have developed and perpetuated that flame by the process of Rabbinic interpretation, *isho mishum chitzav*, the final result is no less of a Divine revelation than the *Torah SheBichtav*. Although Chazal (*Shemot Rabba* 51) teach us that "*Kelalim Limduhu HaKadosh Baruch Hu leMoshe*"—Hashem taught Moshe only the general principles of *Torah SheB'al Peh*, they also tell us (*Berachot* 5a, *Vayikra Rabba* 22) that Mishnah, Gemara and every novel interpretation of subsequent Torah scholarship was revealed to Moshe on Har Sinai. The unique power of *Torah SheB'al Peh*, embedded in the infinite complexity of Divine revelation, is that the Torah innovated in each generation ("*chidushei Torah*") is not a new creation, but rather a discovery of the truth hidden in the original revelation and handed down to us from Sinai.

It is thus not surprising that the one halachic passage in which the Gemara clarifies the relationship between Divine revelation and Rabbinic innovation is found in the context of Chanukah. The Gemara states:

*What blessing should one recite? Who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to light the Chanukah candle. Where were we commanded? R. Avia said from the verse "Do not stray" [from the words of the judges of your generation].*

### **Shabbat 23a**

מאי מברך מברך אשר  
קדשנו במצותיו וצונו  
להדליק נר של חנוכה והיכן  
צונו רב אויב אמר: מלא  
תסור.  
**שבת כג.**

How we can say "Who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to light the Chanukah candle," if Chanukah is a post-Biblical innovation? The Gemara's answer is that the authority of all Rabbinic legislation derives from the original revelation of the Torah. While the same question could have been asked about any of dozens of Rabbinically legislated commandments, perhaps Chazal chose to reveal this insight, i.e., that later Rabbinic tradition is also included in the Sinaitic revelation, specifically with regard to Chanukah, whose essence encapsulates this crucial theme.

The candles of Chanukah thus represent to us the flame of *Torah SheB'al Peh* and the awesome miracle of the eternity of Torah. We justly declare, "*HaNeirot halalu kodesh hem*" – these candles are holy, because they burn with the light of our *mesorah*. These candles are holy because they perpetuate that great fire, lit at Sinai and handed down from generation to generation, which our ancestors bequeathed to us so that we may pass it on to our descendants, until it finally blazes with the light of the ultimate redemption.

<sup>8</sup> *Levush* (O.C. 670:2) uses this observation to explain why Purim is celebrated with physical feasting and drinking, while Chanukah is celebrated with purely spiritual expressions of joy, i.e., Hallel and thanksgiving.