

# Understanding the Miracles of Chanukah

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There are a number of questions to be asked regarding Chanukah:

1. Why was the celebration of the eight days of Chanukah instituted to commemorate the miracle of the *pach hashemen* (jug of oil)? After all, the military victory was by far a more significant miracle. How do we classify these two miracles?
2. The **Tz'lach**, in his Drashot (#34) asks: Since the *Yevanim* contaminated many items in the Mikdash, for example, the *solet l'minachot* (flour for the flour offerings) and the *yayin l'nisachim* (wine for the wine libations), why was the *shemen* (oil) singled out by Hashem for the *nes* (miracle) of Chanukah?
3. Why does the Rambam (Hilchot Chanukah, 4:12) call the mitzvah of Chanukah, a “*mitzvah chavivah ad me'od*” (a very beloved mitzvah)? After all, there are other mitzvot whose purpose is to publicize a miracle, e.g. *mikrah Megillah* (reading of the Megillah)?

The concept of a *nes* is central to Chanukah. What is a miracle? Of course, the Ramban says in his commentary on the Torah at the end of *parshat Bo* that even *tevah*, nature, is a *nes*; everything is a result of and an expression of God's will. However, we would say that a miracle is a change in the normal course of events, a happening which contradicts the laws of physics or astronomy.

The idea of a miracle is problematic. The foundation of all science is the Law of Causality. This law states that whatever happens in the world of Nature is a result of a cause which both preceded it, and which brought about the effect in a necessary way. The laws of Nature have a power unto themselves. Whatever is, is a result of a previous cause. And that cause, in turn, is the result of a cause that preceded it. And so on. This chain of cause and effect doesn't lend itself to change; it is not subject to alteration. All of science is based on this principle.<sup>1</sup>

It is interesting to note Moshe Rabbeinu's response to the “*s'neh boer ba'eish v'eineinu ochal*” (the bush is burning but is not consumed). Moshe Rabbeinu does not respond by shouting “Miracle, miracle!” Rather, he comes close to investigate the situation. He is curious, and wants to understand “*asura nah ve'er'eh*” (I will turn aside now and look).

Were we to accept the empirical argument and reject the principle of Cause and Effect, we could

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<sup>1</sup> The British philosopher, David Hume, questioned the belief in the principle of causality. He demonstrated that the principle of Cause and Effect cannot claim for itself any scientific, empirical proof. Empirical evidence can merely demonstrate that Event A took place **prior** to Event B, but cannot establish that Event A **caused** Event B.

suggest a simple understanding of a miracle. There are no definite laws of nature. A miracle is any event which is a result of the intervention of God in the course of events. Only after Moshe hears the voice of Hashem addressing him, does he recognize the burning *s'neh* as a miracle.

However, even if we accept the classical approach to Causality and the Laws of Nature, we can still maintain that the philosophical problem is really not severe. To one who believes in God as Creator, it is simple enough to say that He, who is the Author of nature and its laws, has the power to change nature, and bring about miracles.

However, the real problem regarding our understanding of the concept of *nes* is not the **possibility** of miracles (as a philosophical question), but rather, the **necessity** of miracles (as a theological dilemma). Why is a miracle necessary? Doesn't the concept of miracle imply that God's intervention in a miraculous manner is a result of some "mistake" or "failure" in the mechanics of nature, i.e. in the "original plan" of the Creation? How are we to understand this?<sup>2</sup> If imperfect man creates a plan based on his understanding of certain rules and principles, the plan must be changed when imperfect man becomes aware of his mistakes in understanding these rules. But it's quite another thing when God creates; when He produces a natural order. Could there be "mistakes" in the creative act and the Divine plan of the Perfect Being?<sup>3</sup>

The resolution of this dilemma is that our belief in miracles is based on another belief, namely, man's freedom of choice. There is one area of movement within the vast endless universe, which is uncontrolled by the Laws of Nature. Freedom of will in the human sphere is a fundamental belief in Judaism. It is this principle which underlies the tenet of *schar v'onesh*, reward and punishment. What sense would punishment and reward make if man's actions are determined, if everything we do is a result of a previous cause which makes our actions necessary?

The belief in Free Will is based not only on our Torah, but on our intuition as well; we experience freedom of choice on a daily basis, constantly. Therefore, it is impossible to say that the Universe is perfect. In order for there to be Free Choice, *man must be imperfect*. If man were perfect, there could be no Good and Evil. It is only because of the imperfection of man, that responsibilities and challenges are imposed upon him to achieve higher levels of existence.

If man is to be challenged, he must exist in an imperfect universe. What challenge would face man if he lived in a perfect world? We say that man must perfect ('*mitaken*') himself and the world in which he lives, and this demand is a result of the imperfection of the world. As the kabbalists would have it, a "corner" of the created universe was left in a state of "*tohu va'vohu*," and man is called upon to perfect this chaos - "*asher bara Elokim la'asot*."

Now we can understand the necessity for miracles. Since God created man as an imperfect being, there is a need, on occasion, for God to intervene in the course of human events through the medium of a miracle. The freedom granted to man can sometimes lead man to the abyss of a

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<sup>2</sup> There was a theological movement called the Deists, who actually denied the possibility of miracles. Since the Universe is an expression of the Wisdom of God, and God's Wisdom is perfect, therefore the Laws of the Universe are perfect and could never be altered.

<sup>3</sup> See Dr. Eliezer Berkowitz, "The Scientific and the Religious Worldview", Geshet, 1976, vo. 5, pp 75-87

bottomless pit, to the point of destruction, not only of himself, but also of the world around him. When man abuses his Free Will, he may bring the universe to the brink of devastation. God is very tolerant of man. God waits patiently, “*Ki lo yachpotz b’mot ha’mait ki im bishuvo*” (Hashem does not desire the demise of the wicked, but rather his repentance). But sometimes, man goes too far, and Hakadosh Baruch Hu will not stand by and allow history to take its course. If He were to do so, His purpose in creation would be undermined. The underlying purpose of “*nes*” is to preserve the possibility of the fulfillment of the teleological goal of creation. We can never know when the situation will arise which will precipitate a miracle. But we know that the purpose of the miracle is to stop man before he goes too far.

This is the explanation for the miracle of the military victory against the Greeks. The Greeks wanted to destroy the Jewish ideology. The Greeks emphasized only the *chitzoniut*, the physical aspects of man, whereas the Torah says that man is essentially a spiritual being, and sanctity (*kedushah*) defines the essence and purpose of man. Had the two cultures, the two ideologies, been able to co-exist, there would be no need for a *nes*. Only when the existence of Klal Yisrael, as a unique People, was in danger did Hashem intervene and bring about a miracle. Only when religious persecution became so severe that the survival of Klal Yisrael as the spiritual force of the universe was jeopardized, did God get involved in altering the natural law. Hakadosh Baruch Hu brought about the miracle of “*rabim be’ad me’atim*” (the many in the hands of the few) and “*t’meyim b’yad t’horim*” (the impure in the hands of the pure). Chazal constantly emphasize that the ultimate purpose of God’s creation was and is Klal Yisrael.<sup>4</sup> It is by means of the One People who proclaim the existence of the One God that the Divine purpose is achieved. Without this People, there could be no universe. The *nes ha’nitzachon*, the miracle of the victory, was necessary in order to facilitate the fulfillment of the Divine plan of creation.

But there had to be a second *nes*. The message of the first miracle had to be “loud and clear.” There was a need to demonstrate that it was the *taharah*, purity, of Klal Yisrael that was at stake in the battle between the Jews and the Greeks. It was crucial to publicize that the *nes ha’nitzachon* was implemented for the sake of the special role of Israel in this world and in order to sustain the unique covenantal relationship between God and Knesset Yisrael. The miracle of the *pach hashemen* would reveal that God had intervened to change the course of natural history on behalf of His People.

How was this demonstration achieved through the miracle of the oil? What did the *menorah* symbolize? The *Gemora* (*Shabbat* 22b) establishes the unique essence of the *menorah* service: “*Edut he liba’ey olam she’hashechinah shorah b’Yisrael*”, i.e. the *menorah* testified to the world that God’s Divine Presence rests upon Klal Yisrael. No other dimensions of the *Mikdash* service embody this testimony. This explains why *hashgacha* singled out the *menorah* for the *nes* of Chanukah.

It is for this reason that Chanukah is described as a *mitzvah chavivah ad me’od*. Jews the world over identify with Chanukah. In the Chanukah experience we publicize the unique role of our People in the Divine scheme of creation. The light that shines forth from the *pach hashemen* reveals the essence of our nation and its purpose in this world.

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<sup>4</sup> See Brachot 6a: The tefilin of God contain the posuk “*Mi ke’amcha Yisrael goy echad ba’aretz.*” See also Rashi’s commentary at the beginning of *B’raishit*.