

Chanukah in Hashkafa and Halachah: Peninei Halacha on Chanukah

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The Holiday of Chanukah is Eternal

During the Second Temple era, “The Greeks entered the sanctuary and defiled all the oil that was there. When the Hasmonean dynasty gained power and defeated them, they searched [for pure oil] and found only one flask that was marked with the seal of the High Priest, but it had enough oil only to light [the Menorah] one day. A miracle occurred and they lit [the Menorah]

¹³ The following article is translated from *Peninei Halachah* by Rabbi Eliezer Melamed *shlita*. R. Melamed is the Rosh Yeshiva and communal rabbi of Har Berachah in the Shomron and is a prolific author on both halachic and hashkafic issues. To date, he has written eleven volumes of *Peninei Halachah*, on a wide range of halachic topics, and three volumes of *Revivim*, on hashkafic issues. The *Peninei Halachah* series passes down the tradition of generations of halachic decisions in a refreshing, Israel-spirited fashion. The books are written in a clear and modernized language, clarifying the *halachot* with their spiritual meanings, and relating to the customs of the various ethnic groups. The *halachot* are explained starting from the general rules down to the minor details, with an emphasis on relevant issues that have arisen in the recent past. R. Melamed’s goal is to strengthen the knowledge of *halachah* amongst the Jewish nation, so that it can serve as a bridge between the lofty morals of the Torah and everyday life.

Peninei Halachah has received wide-acceptance among students in numerous institutions. In *yeshivot*, pre-military academies, and women’s seminaries, the books are learned joyfully and studiously. In Israeli high schools, as well, the books have made their mark, enabling students to strengthen and grow in the study of *halachah*. The books have even been incorporated into various educational programs, and the Ministry of Education has approved matriculation exams based on the series. Over 150,000 copies are in print.

The current article is from the volume entitled *Zemanim*, on the minor holidays. It covers approximately three-quarters of the eleventh chapter, focusing mainly on the history and *hashkafah* behind Chanukah. The complete translation is due out towards the end of 2011. Several other volumes are currently being translated into English and other languages.

The translator, Rabbi Moshe Lichtman, is a graduate of Yeshiva College, RIETS, and the Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education. He also received *semichah* from the Chief Rabbinate of Israel. R. Lichtman has translated and/or written several popular volumes, mostly on Religious-Zionist philosophy. They are: *Eim HaBanim Semeichah*, *An Angel Among Men* (a biography on Rav Kook), *A Question of Redemption*, *Eretz Yisrael in the Parashah*, *What’s the Purpose?* and *Rise From the Dust*. For more on Rabbi Melamed and Yeshivat Har Berachah, visit yhb.org.il

for eight days with this oil. A year later, [the Sages] established [these days] as a holiday, making them [a time] for praise and thanksgiving,” and one may not fast or deliver eulogies on these days (*Shabbat* 21b, *Megillat Ta’anit* 9:2).

The Sages established many more holidays for the Jews during the Second Temple era, to thank God for and rejoice over the salvations He performed for them. They are all mentioned in [an ancient scroll called] *Megillat Ta’anit*. Many of these holidays commemorate the victories of the Hasmoneans, like Nicanor Day – the 13th of Adar – on which the Hasmoneans defeated a large Greek army and killed their commander, Nicanor. On the 14th of Sivan, they conquered Caesarea. On the 22nd of Elul, they killed the apostates who refused to repent. On the 23rd of Mar-Cheshvan, the Hasmoneans destroyed the brothel that the Greeks had built near the Holy Temple. On the 25th of the same month, they conquered Samaria and began settling it.¹⁴

However, the halachic authorities determined that [the holidays enumerated in] *Megillat Ta’anit* were annulled after the destruction of the Second Temple (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim* 573:1). After all, once the Temple was destroyed, all the good things that happened on these days faded away and there is no longer any reason to celebrate them. It is even permissible to fast and deliver eulogies on these days. Chanukah is the only holiday that retained its special status and remains in effect throughout the generations. The Sages explain that this is because of the special miracle that took place with the oil-flask and the *mitzvah* of lighting the candles that the Rabbis enacted to publicize the miracle. And once we already keep the *mitzvah* of lighting the Chanukah candles, we also preserve the other aspects of the holiday: we insert *Al HaNissim* into our prayers, recite *Hallel* to praise and thank God for saving His nation, and refrain from fasting and delivering eulogies throughout the holiday (see *Rosh HaShanah* 18b, with Rashi and Ritva).

In order to better understand the significance of Chanukah and the miracle of the oil-flask – the only remnants of all the holidays that existed during the Second Temple era – we must elaborate a bit on the events that occurred in those days and explain their meaning.

The Greek Empire

Over the course of hundreds of years, the Greeks developed a culture that realized great achievements in science, philosophy, literature, art, architecture, military strategy, and politics. And its strength grew ever greater. After defeating his adversaries, Philippos, King of Macedonia, succeeded in uniting all of the Greek states under his rule. He invited the greatest

¹⁴ Additional examples: Because of the Hasmonean revolt, the wicked Antiochus went up to Jerusalem to destroy the city and annihilate the Jews. Upon hearing troubling reports of rebellion in the eastern part of his kingdom, however, he was forced to end the siege on Jerusalem, on the 22nd of Shevat (167 BCE). He was eventually killed in the rebellion. The 3rd of Kislev: on this day, the Hasmoneans removed the emblems of the Greek troops from the Holy Temple. On the 24th of Av, they reinstated Torah law as the law by which the Jews adjudicate themselves, instead of Greek law. The 23rd of Iyar marked the day on which Shimon son of Matityahu the Hasmonean conquered the Fortress of Chakra, in which there remained a Greek garrison even after Jerusalem was liberated. On the 27th of Iyar the Hasmoneans (apparently during the rule of Yonatan son of Matityahu) abolished the signs of idolatry that hung upon the entrances of the houses and stores. The 15th and 16th of Sivan: this is when the Hasmoneans conquered Beit Sha’an and drove out the heathens who oppressed the Jews. The Sages also established holidays when the evil kings who persecuted them died: King Yannai on the 2nd of Shevat and King Herod on the 7th of Kislev. Many other dates are mentioned in *Megillat Ta’anit*.

Greek philosopher and scientist [of the time], Aristotle, to teach his son Alexander. When Alexander [the Great] ascended the throne, he began a campaign of conquests, and within three years (3426-3429, 334-331 BCE), the Greeks conquered vast expanses of territory – Asia Minor, *Eretz Yisrael*, Egypt, and the entire mighty Persian Empire, until India.

After Alexander of Macedonia died, the generals of the Greek army began fighting over the throne. In the end, they divided the vast territory under their control into several Greek kingdoms.

As a result of the conquests, Greek culture spread throughout the world, consuming all the other cultures and forming a singular Hellenistic civilization. The system of government, language, culture, and sporting competitions in every country were Hellenistic. The rich and dignified people in every land assimilated with the Greeks and imitated their ways.

Judea, as well, was ruled by the Greeks, and there, too, Hellenism spread. The Jews, however, were different from all the other nations, and the process of Hellenization proceeded relatively slower in Judea. Nevertheless, over the course of 160 years of Greek rule, their influence grew stronger and stronger, mostly over the rich. It reached the point where the High Priests, Jason and Menelaus, were leaders of the Hellenists, working to increase Greek influences in Judea. They built a wrestling stadium near the Holy Temple and preferred watching the matches over performing their sacrificial duties in the Temple.¹⁵

Evil Decrees and Rebellion

In the year 3591 from creation (169 BCE), around 160 years after the Greeks conquered *Eretz Yisrael*, Antiochus IV (Epiphanes) began oppressing the Jews. Under his rule, the Greeks despoiled the holy vessels of the Temple, breached the walls of Jerusalem, murdered thousands of Jews, and enslaved many others. In 3593 (167 BCE), Antiochus decreed that the Jews must forsake the Torah and its *mitzvot* and worship idols. He made it a capital crime to perform *mitzvot*, abolished the sacrificial service in the Temple, and turned the Temple into a place of idolatry. Torah scrolls were torn and burnt. Antiochus' soldiers went from town to town forcing the Jews to eat pig and erect an altar for idol worship. Ritual circumcision was outlawed and Jewish women who insisted on circumcising their sons were executed. As a result of these decrees, many pious Jews fled to the deserts, caves, or other countries; and many were murdered in sanctification of God's name.

The intense pressure that the Greeks exercised against the Jews enkindled a spark in their souls,

¹⁵ Alexander the Great died in 3437 (323 BCE). At first, Ptolemy and Seleucus fought Antigonus, defeating him in a battle near Gaza in the year 3448 (312 BCE). The winners divided the spoils, and Ptolemy took Egypt, while Seleucus received Syria and Babylonia. Later on, the two fought each other over *Eretz Yisrael*, and the Ptolemy dynasty prevailed, taking control of the Holy Land for over a hundred years, starting in 3459 (301 BCE). In the year 3562 (198 BCE), Antiochus III, a descendant of the Seleucus dynasty, conquered *Eretz Yisrael*, but his power waned toward the end of his life. He attempted to conquer the Pergamon kingdom in Asia Minor, but the Romans intervened on their behalf and defeated Antiochus, who was forced to pay heavy compensation fees. Antiochus Epiphanes, the wicked king who enacted evil decrees against the Jews, took the reigns of power after his namesake's demise (3584-3596, 176-164 BCE). (Most of the information in this and the following footnotes is taken from Dr. Mordechai Breuer's *Divrei HaYamim LeYisrael U'leUmot HaOlam*, Mossad HaRav Kook Publishers.)

and when the Greeks arrived in the village of Modi'in, with the intention of forcing Matityahu son of Yochanan the High Priest to worship idols, Matityahu rose up and killed the Greek officer and his Hellenized collaborators. The novelty of his action was that instead of dying in sanctification of God's name, like the other pious Jews, he decided to kill the oppressor. By doing so, he, together with his sons, raised the banner of rebellion against the Greeks and Hellenism.

The war was difficult. Yehudah the Maccabee, the bravest of Matityahu's sons, led the fighters. With courage and skill, the Hasmoneans overcame the Greek forces, and after two years of fighting they succeeded in conquering Jerusalem. On the 25th of Kislev, 3596 (165 BCE), they began purifying the Temple and restoring the sacrificial service to its original state. This is when the oil-flask miracle took place.

Later on, the Greeks returned to *Eretz Yisrael* with reinforcements, conquered Jerusalem, and put Hellenized *kohanim* (priests) in charge of the Temple. However, in order not to exacerbate tensions with the Jews, they abolished the evil decrees and allowed the Jews to keep the Torah and its *mitzvot*. But this did not stop the rebellion; the Hasmoneans continued to fight against the Greeks and Hellenism. The war effort knew ups and downs, but the Hasmonean brothers combined strength, diplomacy, and cunning to eventually gain political independence, decades later. Granted, the Jews lived under the aegis of the mighty empires – first the Greeks and then the Romans – but the governance of the Land was controlled by the Jews for the Jews.¹⁶

¹⁶ On the thirteenth of Adar 3599 (161 BCE), the troops of Yehudah the Maccabee defeated the army of Nicanor; Nicanor was killed and the remnants of his troops retreated. This day was celebrated for generations. Immediately thereafter, the Greeks sent Bacchides at the head of a large army. Yehudah, unable to mobilize a great number of fighters, stood against him with a mere 800 soldiers. Yehudah was killed in this battle (3600, 160 BCE). Bacchides conquered the entire Land and awarded the position of High Priest to Alcimus, a Hellenist, who executed sixty of Israel's elder sages. Yonatan, Yehudah's brother, assumed command of the remaining Hasmonean fighters, who fled and went into hiding. Over time, the Hasmoneans regained their strength and managed to harass the Greeks, but they were unable to re-conquer Jerusalem. Then, a threat arose against King Demetrius' rule, and [in order to maintain his power] he made a pact with the Hasmoneans, giving them Jerusalem and autonomy. Yonatan took advantage of the struggle for power in the Seleucid dynasty and received additional benefits from Demetrius' rival. Thus, in the year 3608 (152 BCE), the Hellenist administrators of the Holy Temple were deposed and Yonatan began serving as High Priest. Diodotus Tryphon, one of the Greek rulers who opposed Yonatan's increasing power in Jerusalem, lured him into joining him for friendly talks and then murdered him (3618, 142 BCE). Shimon inherited his brother's command and made a treaty with Tryphon's rival, in exchange for a tax exemption for the Jews of Judea. While the Greek kings were preoccupied with internal battles, Shimon cleansed the Land of the vestiges of Greek influence, conquered the Fortress of Chakra (Iyar 23, 3619; 141 BCE; the date was established as a holiday), conquered additional cities surrounding Judea, and fortified its political independence. When Antiochus Sidetes defeated his enemies and no longer needed Shimon's aid, he instigated a conspiracy against him, and indeed, Shimon's son-in-law, Ptolemy, rose up and murdered Shimon, along with two of his sons (3625, 135 BCE). With Antiochus Sidetes' help, Ptolemy tried to take control of Judea, but Yochanan Hyrcanus, Shimon's faithful son, fought him. Then, Antiochus Sidetes came to assist Ptolemy the murderer, pillaging Judea and bringing Jerusalem under heavy siege. However, Sidetes was forced to retreat because of revolts that sprang up against him elsewhere. He accepted Yochanan's peace proposal, which stated that the Jews would pay a heavy tax to the Greeks in exchange for partial autonomy. Yochanan was appointed High Priests and Nasi (President). Shortly thereafter, Antiochus Sidetes' army was crushed by the Parthians and Sidetes himself was killed. At this time, Yochanan began conquering additional territory in *Eretz Yisrael*, in order to expand Jewish settlement, at the expense of that of the Gentiles, and to cleanse the Land of idolatry. These conquests brought the Jews wealth and

It seems quite evident that had the Greeks been more patient, Judea would have succumbed to Hellenism, just like the other nations did. But the hand of God, which conceals itself in the historic process, generated the conflict. Just as He hardened Pharaoh's heart during the Exodus, so too, He hardened Antiochus' heart, and in the process helped Israel reveal the faith, self-sacrifice, and courage [hidden deep inside its collective soul].

Trouble in the Hasmonean Dynasty

After the war against the Greeks ended in a military and political victory, the cultural struggle returned to the fore. We still needed to defend ourselves against the tremendous sea of Hellenism that engulfed all of the surrounding cultures. Greek culture was very powerful. Its methods of scientific research were advanced; its military strategy was excellent; its system of government was efficient; its sculptures and architectural designs impressed all who saw them; its plays were enchanting; and its sporting events thrilled everyone. This is why Greek culture succeeded in spreading so vigorously throughout the inhabited world. Hundreds of years later, when Rome had already become the major [military] power in the world, Greek culture still dominated the world, culturally speaking.

Even though the [Hasmonean] rebellion impeded the process of Hellenization, it did not stop it entirely. A few decades later, Hellenism once again struck deep roots among the wealthy Jews and among those who came in close contact with the Gentiles. The Hellenists of the Hasmonean era were called *Tziddukim* (Sadducees). They did not advocate total assimilation; rather, they believed that it was possible to combine, within a Jewish national framework, loyalty to the Written Law and Greek culture.

One of the great tragedies of Jewish history is that the descendants of Matityahu, who sacrificed his life to fight Hellenism, got caught up with the Hellenists and persecuted the Sages of Israel, those defenders of our tradition. Matityahu's great-grandson was King Yannai, who also served as High Priest. He was an evil man, and he reckoned that his death would gladden the Rabbis and their supporters. In order to spoil their joy, he commanded that immediately following his death a large number of Rabbis be executed. After he died, however, his heirs, led by his wife Shlomtzion, disobeyed his orders. The Rabbis established the date of his death as a joyous day of thanksgiving, marking the demise of an evildoer and the salvation of the Sages.

Eventually, the Hasmoneans' servants – foremost among them, Herod – overpowered their masters, annihilated them, and ruled in their stead. It came to the point that *Chazal* said, "Anyone who claims to be from the Hasmonean dynasty is either a slave or a liar" (*Bava Batra 3b*).¹⁷

economic prosperity. Yochanan ruled Judea for thirty-one years (3625-3656, 135-104 BCE), acting righteously most of his days and strengthening the *Sanhedrin*. At the end of his life, however, he joined the Sadducees.

¹⁷ After the death of Yochanan Hyrcanus (3656, 104 BCE), troubles began. His heirs did not obey his last will; his oldest son, Yehudah Aristobulus, an ally of the Sadducees, acted like a Hellenist ruler, throwing his mother and brother in jail and declaring himself King and High Priest. He died a year later, after which his brother Alexander Yannai reigned for 27 years. He was a Sadducee, who favored the Hellenists and fought against the Pharisees (rabbinic Jews). However, he continued to extend the borders of Israel. He repented towards the end of his life, realizing that his ties with the Sadducees undermined Jewish nationalism. He therefore commanded that his righteous wife, Shlomtzion, sister of Shimon ben Shetach, inherit his thrown. She reigned for nine years (3684-

Now we can understand the criticism that certain sages leveled against the Hasmoneans, accusing them of failing to appoint a king from the tribe of Yehudah, as the Torah prescribes: *The staff shall not depart from Yehudah* (*BeReishit* 49:10; see Ramban there). At first, the Hasmonean leaders were called *nesi'im* (princes), but they eventually crowned themselves as kings. They also reserved the position of High Priest for themselves. Clearly, their involvement in matters of state interfered with their priestly duties, blemishing the holy service, which was supposed to be performed in sanctity and purity, and strengthening Hellenism's influence. From a political standpoint, as well, their kingdom was lacking, for it existed in the shadow of the mighty empires and, more often than not, under their auspices. This political weakness also strengthened Hellenism's influence over Judea.

Lasting Spiritual Accomplishments

Despite all the shortcomings, the Hasmonean victories had great value. The political independence that they won, albeit limited, contributed to the prosperity of the Jewish population in *Eretz Yisrael* in every way. Previously, around forty percent of Judea's produce was taken by the Greeks as a tax; now all of it remained in the Land, stimulating economic growth. By virtue of the victories, Jewish settlements sprung up throughout the country, Jews immigrated from the Diaspora, birthrates rose, and the Jewish nation, which had undergone destruction and exile, rehabilitated itself, to a large degree.

Through the medium of political independence, *Eretz Yisrael* became, once again, the national and spiritual center of the Jewish people. Study halls flourished and expanded, fulfilling completely the behest of the Men of the Great Assembly: "Produce many disciples and make a fence for the Torah" (*Avot* 1:1). The spiritual foundations of the Oral Law, which enabled Jewry to safeguard its beliefs and its Torah for 2,000 years of harsh exile, were laid in those days.

This is why the miracle of the oil-flask symbolizes the days of Chanukah more than anything

3693, 76-67 BCE). After her death, a bitter civil war broke out between her two sons, Hyrcanus and Aristobulus (who were educated by their father, Yannai the Sadducee). In the year 3695 (65 BCE), the two brothers turned to Pompeius, the Roman delegate, to mediate between them. Two years later, Pompeius and his army invaded Judea, abolished the Hasmonean dynasty, and diminished the boundaries of the Land. He allowed Hyrcanus to retain his position of High Priest and leader of the Jews in Judea, giving over the rest of *Eretz Yisrael* to autonomous gentile rule, subordinate to agents of Rome. In the course of time, Antipater the Idumean (from Edom), who was one of Hyrcanus's adherents, established ties with the Romans and became their trusted ally, eventually taking control of Judea. After he died, his son Herod continued in his ways. Since Herod helped Hyrcanus defeat his nephew, Hyrcanus gave him his granddaughter Miriam's hand in marriage. This enabled Herod to eventually claim the Hasmonean throne. In the year 3720 (40 BCE), the Parthians conquered *Eretz Yisrael* and Aristobulus's son seized control of Judea, all the while taking revenge on his uncle Hyrcanus. Herod fled to Rome, where he was [officially] appointed King of Judea. Armed with Roman troops, he returned to the Holy Land and re-conquered it. This began his 36-year reign. He murdered his opponents and anyone else who might be a threat to his authority, including the members of the Hasmonean family, and even some of his own sons. When Herod died, in 3757 (4 BCE), the Sages established the day of his death – the seventh of Kislev – as a holiday. Nevertheless, the Rambam considered his kingdom to be [genuine] Jewish sovereignty, as he writes in *Hilchot Chanukah* (3:1): In the merit of the Hasmonean victory, "sovereignty returned to the Jewish people for over two hundred years." The Rambam teaches us here that even Herod's reign was better than the oppression that preceded the rebellion and the subjugation that followed the destruction of the Second Temple.

else. Even though the Second Temple was destroyed and all the political achievements of the Hasmoneans were lost, the study of the Oral Law, which developed and intensified in those days, remained forever. The miracle of the oil-flask revealed the eternal quality of the Torah, its ability to illuminate the darkness in a supernatural way. By virtue of the Torah, we managed to survive the long and dark exile. The miracle of the oil-flask also revealed the Jewish nation's unique character. It showed that we are different from all other nations and that it is impossible to subdue us or extinguish our faith.

In the merit of their self-sacrifice, Matityahu and his sons were privileged to bring to light the deep foundations of the Torah and the uniqueness of the Jewish people. The Hasmonean dynasty, however, with all its problems and complexities, was a short-lived kingdom, and we do not commemorate it in a particularly celebratory manner.

This explains *Chazal's* statement (*Rosh HaShanah* 18b) that the holiday of Chanukah is everlasting because of the miracle of the oil-flask and the Rabbinic *mitzvah* of lighting the candles. The oil-flask miracle showed that the military victory over the Greeks did not benefit that generation alone, but all generations. Therefore, the Rabbis determined that we continue observing the days of Chanukah, even though the other holidays mentioned in *Megillat Ta'anit* were abolished after the Temple was destroyed. Thus, in addition to the *mitzvah* of lighting the Candles all eight nights of Chanukah, we say *Al HaNissim* and *Hallel*, to thank and praise HaShem for saving us and allowing us to defeat our enemies.¹⁸

¹⁸ We express our thanks by saying *Al HaNissim* in *Shemoneh Esrei* and *Birkat HaMazone* (Grace After Meals). This prayer emphasizes the victory over the Greeks, who wanted to make us forget the Torah and its commandments. HaShem came to our aid and delivered the strong and wicked into the hands of the few and righteous. Afterwards, we purified the Temple and lit the lamps. No mention is made of the miracle of the oil-flask.

The Rambam (3:1) further emphasizes the national-political victory: "During the Second Temple [era], the Greek kings enacted [evil] decrees against the Jews. They abolished their religion, prevented them from engaging in [the study of] Torah and [the performance of] *mitzvot*, stole their money and daughters, entered the Sanctuary, made breaches in it, defiled that which was pure, caused the Jews great distress, and pressured them sorely; until the God of their forefathers had mercy on them, delivered them from the hands [of the Greeks], and saved them. The Hasmonean High Priests overpowered [the Greeks], killed them, and delivered the Jews from their hands. They then appointed a king from among the priests, and sovereignty returned to the Jews for over two hundred years, until the second destruction."

That is, the miracle of the oil-flask symbolizes the triumph of faith and Torah [over Hellenism]. It is the basis for the fact that Chanukah is a perpetual holiday. However, we would not have been privileged to receive the everlasting [*mitzvah* of] lighting the candles or the triumph of faith if not for the miracle of the [military] victory – the righteous defeating the wicked – and the [other] national achievements, as described in *Al HaNissim*. This is why we praise God [specifically] through the recitation of *Hallel*. After all, [the Rabbis] prescribed the saying of *Hallel* mainly to commemorate times when the Jews were delivered from bondage or saved from death. Hence, the Rambam emphasizes the nationalistic aspects [of Chanukah]. This also explains why the Rambam emphasizes the joy of Chanukah, as he writes in *Halachah* 3: "Because of [these events], the Sages of that generation decreed that these eight days, beginning with the 25th of Kislev, be days of joy and praise (*hallel*); and we light the candles on them..." (It is possible to say that the Rambam considers the [military] victory to be the primary miracle, contrary to what I wrote in the first *halachah* [of this chapter] based on [the opinion of] several *Rishonim*.)

For more on this issue and the following discussion, see *Orot*, essay *LeMahalach HaIdi'ot*, where [Rav Kook] explains that the Second Temple era prepared the Jews for the [subsequent] exile, by absorbing sacred vitality

Over the years, it became clear that the miracle was even greater [than we originally thought it was]. Not only did we manage to survive in the ocean of Hellenism that inundated the world, but Judaism shattered – through a long and complicated process – most of the pagan foundations of Hellenism. The abstract belief in one God, ethical values, the aspiration to fix the world – all fundamentals of the Torah – increasingly spread among the nations of the world, eventually becoming, through both straight and crooked (Christianity, Islam) means, the foundations of all that is good and pleasant in human culture.

The longer the exile lasts, the longer and brighter the light of Israel and its Torah shines. And it will continue to illuminate [the world] until we are privileged to bring new and pure oil from the olives of *Eretz Yisrael*, from which we will light the *Menorah* of the *Beit HaMikdash*, and the world will be filled with the knowledge of God, speedily in our days. Amen.

The Oral Law: The Light that Illuminates the Darkness

It is no coincidence that the holiday of Chanukah falls out at a time when the darkness of night reaches its peak. This period of the year is when the nights are longest and the cold of winter permeates the land. Moreover, the moon barely shines, since Chanukah coincides with the days immediately before *Rosh Chodesh*, when the moon wanes.

When the sun sets and darkness begins to envelop the land, and the long night casts its ominous, icy shadow upon the world, Jews go out with candles in their hands and light the Chanukah lamps. This symbolizes the mighty Jewish faith, which breaks through all forms of darkness. Even in the darkest times, when the mightiest empires ruled the world ruthlessly, we did not despair of the light of Torah and faith, and we continued learning and teaching. A small ray of our light repels a great deal of their darkness.

Chanukah is the time to rejoice over the Oral Law; firstly, because it was established [as a holiday] by the Sages [the expounders of the Oral Law], and also because the *mitzvah* of lighting the candles was one of the first *mitzvot* the Sages enacted. Moreover, it symbolizes, generally speaking, the essence of the Oral Law. During the First Temple era, prophecy abounded among the Jewish people, and they studied primarily the Written Law. After the Temple was destroyed and prophecy ceased, however, the time came for the Oral Law [to take precedence]. The Oral Law displays the high stature of the Jewish people, who share in the revelation of the Torah's light. The principles are set in the Written Law, but the Sages of the Oral Law pave the way for the realization of these principles. Granted, the light of the Written Law shines brighter, like the midday sun, while the light of the Oral Law resembles that of the moon and the stars. However, the Oral Law has the ability to descend to the hidden recesses of man's soul and illuminate all the dark corners of the world. The foundations for the study of the Oral Law were laid during the Second Temple era – including all the edicts, [protective] “fences,” and customs. The unique light of the Oral Law, which is like the Chanukah candles that illuminate the darkness, helped us cope with all the tribulations of exile.

Apparently, these ideas hidden in the holiday of Chanukah are the deep-seated reason why Jews

[from the Temple and integrating it] into the Oral Law [which accompanied the Jews into exile]. See also the essay entitled *Chacham Adif MiNavi*, and *Orot HaTorah*, chap. 1.

love and cherish it so much, to the point that almost every Jew, no matter how far he is from Torah observance, lights Chanukah candles. Moreover, everyone follows the custom of fulfilling this *mitzvah* in the best possible way – *Mehadrin min ha'mehadrin*.

A New Candle Every Day, Culminating with Eight

Everything in the world is fleeting and eventually withers away. This is true of ideas and memories, as well; they lose their strength and vitality over time. But behold, when it comes to lighting the Chanukah candles, we discover that faith in HaShem never wanes. On the contrary, it continues to exist and even thrive, despite the troubles and darkness all around. The pure spirituality that is manifest in the Torah is eternal; therefore, it constantly increases. Other ideas which are transient, however, fade away and expire. Because of this wondrous idea, all of Israel follows the custom of *Mehadrin min ha'mehadrin*, in which one adds a new candle every night, eventually lighting eight candles on the final night.

As is well-known, the number eight alludes to what is beyond physical nature. After all, the world was created in seven days, and there are seven days in a week. The number eight, on the other hand, hints to the supernatural, like *brit milah* (ritual circumcision), whose purpose is to rectify and elevate nature to a higher level, which is why it is performed on the eighth day. The Torah, as well, belongs to the eighth dimension, for it comes to elevate nature to a divine level. This is why the Torah was given after the seven-week [*Sefirah*] count, which represents the wholeness of nature. After [the seven weeks of *Sefirah*], we rise to a level above nature – the holiday of *Shavu'ot*, when the Torah was given. Similarly, we complete the reading of the Torah on *Shemini Atzeret* (the eighth day from the beginning of *Sukkot*), which is *Simchat Torah*.

Chanukah, as well, belongs to the realm of the supernatural, for it reveals the lofty stature of the Oral Law. Therefore, we light candles for eight nights, adding a new one each night.¹⁹

Laws of Al HaNissim and Hallel

The Sages instituted the holiday of Chanukah in order to thank and praise HaShem for delivering Israel [from oppression]. For this purpose, they formulated the *Al HaNissim* prayer, which we insert in the blessing of thanksgiving in *Shemoneh Esrei*. We also say it in *Birkat HaMazone* (Grace After Meals), in the blessing of *Nodeh Lecha*. We do not, however, mention Chanukah in the abridged *Birkat HaMazone* [called *Al MaMichya*, which is said after eating the seven special fruits of *Eretz Yisrael*, food made from the five grains, or wine]. If one forgot to say *Al HaNissim*, in *Shemoneh Esrei* or *Birkat HaMazone*, he need not pray again. If one remembers before concluding the blessing in which *Al HaNissim* is inserted, he should go back and say it,

¹⁹ See the Maharal's *Tiferet Yisrael*, chap. 2 and 25 (end), and *Ner Mitzvah* p. 23. The Greeks' worldview stemmed from nature, and since nature has different forces, they believed in multiple gods. In addition, since nature has no values, just strength, beauty, and external wisdom, they yearned for these things. In contrast, Judaism is based on the belief in one God, Who created and transcends nature. The goal is to discover God's oneness in the world, to reveal the image of God within man by way of morals, Torah, and *mitzvot*. The Greeks cannot coexist with us, because our belief in one God and our ethical values undermine the foundation of their worldview. Judaism, however, can coexist with Greek culture and use it as a tool for research, classification, and the revelation of Jewish concepts. For more on this, see *Binah LeItim*, vol. 1, chap. 25-27.

unless he has already said God's name at the end of the blessing (*Shulchan Aruch* 682:1). In such a case, though, it is proper to say *Al HaNissim* at the end of *Shemoneh Esrei*, after all the blessings, because one may add there supplications and expressions of thanks to his heart's desire. Similarly, one who forgot to say *Al HaNissim* in *Birkat HaMazone* should say it after concluding the blessings, together with the *HaRachaman* paragraphs, where one may add as many prayers as he wants (*Rama* 682:1, *Mishnah Berurah* 4).²⁰

It is a *mitzvah* to recite the full *Hallel*, with a blessing, on all eight days of Chanukah (*Arachin* 10a). For the *halachah* states that whenever the Jews are in dire straits, such as bondage or the threat of death, they must say *Hallel* when they are delivered from distress (*Pesachim* 117a, *Megillat Ta'anit* 9:2). The *mitzvah* to say the full *Hallel*, with a blessing, on all eight days of Chanukah attests to Chanukah's prominence. After all, we say the full *Hallel* on Pesach only on the first day, while we say it every day of Chanukah.²¹

Women are exempt from saying *Hallel*, since it is a time-bound *mitzvah*. Nonetheless, a woman who would like to say *Hallel* on Chanukah is worthy of blessing. According to Sefardic custom, however, she should not recite a blessing over it, while according to Ashkenazi tradition, she should (see *Peninei Halachah, Tefillat Nashim* 2:9).

²⁰ Actually, Rabbeinu Tam holds that if one did not yet dislodge his feet [at the end of *Shemoneh Esrei*], he returns to the blessing of *Modim* in order to say *Al HaNissim*. The *halachah*, however, does not follow his opinion. Rather, once a person says God's name at the end of the blessing, he no longer goes back, and he should not even conclude the blessing with the words *lamdeini chukecha* (*Mishnah Berurah* 294:7; see also *Torat HaMo'adim* 10:3).

Regarding *Birkat HaMazone*: the *Gemara* (*Shabbat* 24) implies that the recitation of *Al HaNissim* is merely a custom, not an obligation. The Rashba and Ritva agree. The Rambam, on the other hand, seems to hold that one must say it, and the Or Zaru'a writes that the masses have accepted it as an obligation. The Ra'avyah believes that one is obligated to eat a meal with bread on Chanukah and, therefore, must repeat *Birkat HaMazone* upon forgetting *Al HaNissim*. However, the *halachah* follows those who say that one need not repeat the prayer if *Al HaNissim* was omitted. See *Yemei Hallel VeHoda'ah* 40:2-3.

²¹ We say *Hallel* on two different types of occasions: on an appointed festival (*mo'ed*) and [in commemoration of] a miraculous salvation. *Sukkot* is a *mo'ed*, and according to the *Gemara* (*Arachin* 10b), we say a full *Hallel* all seven days of the holiday because each day has a different set of sacrifices, making it unique... On Pesach, however, we offer the same sacrifices every day. The reason we say *Hallel* on Chanukah is [to commemorate] the miraculous salvation, and we recite the full *Hallel* all eight days because the miracle intensified every day. This is also why we light an additional candle every night (*Shibolei HaLeket* 174, *Beit Yosef* 483). It is clear that the primary basis for saying *Hallel* on Chanukah is the [military] victory, as the *Gemara* states in *Arachin* and *Pesachim*, and as Rabbeinu Gershom posits. Nevertheless, the miracle of the oil-flask, which accompanied the [military] victory, revealed the greatness of the victory. See also *Yemei Hallel VeHoda'ah* 41:3 with notes 22-25. See above, 4:6, [where we discussed] whether the recitation of *Hallel* is biblically or rabbinically ordained.