

# My Chanukah

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The Gemora in Masechet Shabbos (21b) famously asks the question מאי חנוכה (“*Mai Chanukah*”) - what is Chanukah all about – and answers as follows:

*For our Rabbis taught: on the twenty-fifth day of Kislev [commence the] eight days of Chanukah, on which it is not permitted to eulogize or fast during these days. Because when the Yevanim [Syrian-Greeks] entered into the holy sanctuary they defiled all of the oils therein, and when the Royal Hasmonean House emerged triumphant over them, [the Chashmonaim] examined [the area] and found only one flask of oil that was stored with the seal of the High Priest, which only had sufficient oil to kindle [the menorah] for one day. [However,] a miracle occurred with it and they were able to light from the oil for eight days. In the following year they established and made these days into festival days with the recital of Hallel and thanksgiving.*

(translation adapted in part from the Schottenstein Talmud and Soncino Talmud)

דתנו רבנן: בכ"ה בכסליו יומי  
דחנוכה תמניא אינון, דלא  
למספד בהון ודלא להתענות  
בהון. שכשנכנסו יוונים להיכל  
טמאו כל השמנים שבהיכל,  
וכשגברה מלכות בית  
חשמונאי ונצחום, בדקו ולא  
מצאו אלא פך אחד של שמן  
שהיה מונה בחותמו של כהן  
גדול, ולא היה בו אלא להדליק  
יום אחד, נעשה בו נס והדליקו  
ממנו שמונה ימים. לשנה  
אחרת קבעום ועשאום ימים  
טובים בהלל והודאה.

This passage appears to underscore the miracle of the flask of oil as the centerpiece of the celebration of the holiday of Chanukah. By contrast, the “*Al HaNissim*” prayer that is recited during the prayer service on Chanukah appears to focus more on the miracle of the military victory over the *Yevanim*:

*You in your great compassion stood by them in their time of distress. You championed their cause, took up their grievance, judged their claim and avenged their wrong. You delivered the strong into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, the impure into the hands of the pure, the wicked into the hands of the righteous and the arrogant into the hands of the diligent students of your Torah.*

(Translation adapted from the Koren Siddur and the Art Scroll Siddur).

ואתה ברחמיך הרבים עמדת  
להם בעת צרתם רבת את  
ריבם דנת את דינם נקמת את  
נקמתם מסרת גבורים ביד  
חלשים ורבים ביד מעטים  
וטמאים ביד טהורים ורשעים  
ביד צדיקים וזדים ביד עוסקי  
תורתך

There are three questions that immediately come to mind:

(1) Why does the passage in the Talmud brush aside the miracle of the military victory and focus primarily on the miracle of the oil that burned for eight days? Wasn't the military victory was much more critical for the continuing survival of the nation and therefore a much more compelling reason for the celebration of the holiday?

(2) Within the “*Al HaNissim*” prayer, there is clearly a miraculous quality to the fact that the “strong” were delivered into the hands of the “weak” or that the “many” were delivered into the hands of the “few.” However, what is particularly miraculous about the fact that the “wicked” were delivered into the hands of the “righteous” or that the “impure” were delivered into the hands of the “pure?” Couldn’t there have been certain “impure” warriors who were sluggish in battle and certain “pure” warriors who were comparatively mighty?

(3) Why did it take until “the following year” (literally, “another year”) for the days of Chanukah to become established as a permanent holiday?

To answer these questions, it may be helpful to analyze an obscure and fascinating *midrash* to a verse in *Shir HaShirim* (7:14) which is cited by the *Chassam Sofer* in his commentary to the Talmud (*Shabbos* 22a, s.v. “*BaTefach*”):

“*The mandrakes emitted a fragrance*” – this is [a reference to] *Reuven* (see *Bereishis* 30:14) ... “*And on our doorways are all delicacies [precious fruits]*” – this is [a reference to] the *Mezuzah* and the *Chanukah candle[s]*.

הדודאים נתנו ריח זה ראובן  
שנקרא דודאים ועל פתחינו כל  
מגדים זה מזוזה ונ"ח

The *Pardes Yosef* (*Bereishis* 37:21), commenting on this *Midrash*, ponders the contrast between *Reuven* and *Chanukah*. He explains that *Reuven* is associated with fragrance but not taste because while *Reuven* attempted to rescue his brother *Yosef* from the hands of *Yosef*'s other brothers, he was not truly successful as the result of his suggestion that *Yosef* be tossed in a pit was that his brothers tossed *Yosef* into a pit full of snakes and scorpions (see *Rashi*, *Bereishis* 37:24) who could have killed him as well. Thus, while *Reuven* had the sweet fragrance of one who desires to do the right thing, he did not possess the delicious taste of one who actually succeeds in accomplishing his goal. By contrast, the *Chashmonaim*, who precipitated the miracle and observance of the *Chanukah* candles, had both the righteous intention and ultimate success in vanquishing their enemies who sought to destroy the Jewish religion and defile the Holy Temple. Thus, they had both the fragrance and the delicious taste associated with the “delicacies” described in the *Midrash*.

Interestingly, this explanation of the *midrash* seems to underscore a deficiency in the efforts of *Reuven* on behalf of his brother *Yosef*. Indeed, this understanding is reinforced by the following passage in the *Midrash Rabbah* on *Megilat Ruth* (*Parsha* 5):

*Rabbi Yitzchak son of Meryon said that the Torah comes to teach us that is a person does a Mitzvah he should do it “Be’levav Shalem” – with all of his heart, for if Reuven had known that HaKadosh Barukh Hu would write about him (Bereishis 37) that “Reuven heard (his brothers’ plans to kill Yosef) and rescued [Yosef] from their hands” he would have taken Yosef on his shoulder to his father.* (translation adapted in part from Soncino edition of *Midrash Rabbah*)

א"ר יצחק בר מריון בא הכתוב  
ללמדך שאם אדם עושה מצוה  
יעשנה בלבב שלם שאלו היה  
ראובן יודע שהקב"ה מכתוב  
עליו (בראשית ל"ז) וישמע  
ראובן ויצילהו מידם, בכתפו היה  
מוליכו אצל אביו

This passage at first glance seems troubling because it appears to suggest that *Reuven* was not sufficiently sincere in his efforts to rescue *Yosef*, and that he would have been motivated more

had he known how much praise would be heaped upon him for his efforts. Can it be that Reuven was essentially a headline-seeker who would only perform *mitzvot* based on the honor that he would be accorded for them?

The commentary *Siach Yitzchok* on the *Siddur* (published in the *Siddur HaGra*), in his comments to the phrase “*U’Le’avdo Be’levav Shalem*” (in the prayer *U’Va L’Tzion*) - “that we should merit to worship Hashem with a perfect heart” – explains that Reuven unquestionably was sincerely motivated in his efforts to rescue his brother. However, it is possible that Reuven did not sufficiently appreciate the cosmic significance related to the rescue of his brother Yosef. Had he realized the true significance and Divine approbation of this heroic deed, as reflected by its recordation in the Torah, he would have performed his actions on a higher level of לב שלם – of full energy and excitement, which would have enabled the fulfillment of the mitzvah to reach its fullest potential.

Based on this insight we can appreciate the contrast between Reuven and the miracle of the Chanukah candles. Unlike Reuven, the *Chashmonaim*, exemplifying the “delicacies at the doorways,” performed the mitzvah of the lighting of the candles of the Menorah with a full appreciation of the epic significance of their actions. Therefore, they acted with ardent passion and unadulterated zeal. Had they only focused on the narrow needs of the moment, they would have been content to celebrate their military conquest over the *Yevanim*. However, the military victory did not require special zeal. Of course the Jewish people would be saved from their prospective conquerors based on the principle of רוח והצלח יעמוד ליהודים ממקום אחר – if not through the *Chashmonaim*, Hashem would have employed other means to save His people from annihilation. However, the miracle of the flask of oil was only made possible because of the zeal of the *Chashmonaim* in ensuring that, even in the aftermath of their victory, they performed the mitzvah of the lighting of the menorah in the optimal fashion.

In truth, as the *Pe’nei Yehoshua* (*Shabbos* 21b, s.v. “*Mai Chanukah*”) famously points out, טומאה הותרה בצבור – “ritual impurity is permitted when dealing with the entire congregation” – according to the *halakha*, impure oil can be used when pure oil is not available for the lighting of the menorah. Why then, asks the *Pe’nei Yehoshua*, was there such a necessity to require a miracle for the pure oil to last eight days when impure oil would have sufficed?

The *Chochmat Shlomo* (*Orach Chaim* 670:1), in response to the question of the *Pe’nei Yehoshua*, explains that the dispensation of הותרה בצבור טומאה only applies once the Holy Temple has been put into operation. In the inauguration of the Temple, everything must be absolutely perfect and impeccably pure. Accordingly, since the *Chashmonaim* were re-dedicating the Temple (the very name “Chanukah” – “dedication” is predicated upon this fact) they could not rely upon the utilization of impure oil even when there was an insufficient quantity of pure oil, and therefore needed the Divine intervention of a miracle to sustain the burning of the menorah with the limited quantity of pure oil for eight days.

This answer of the *Chochmat Shlomo* reinforces the message regarding the mindset of the *Chashmonaim* in the performance of the mitzvah. The lighting of the menorah was not just a regular mitzvah to be treated within the framework of typical *halakhic* rules; the *Chashmonaim*

understood that the proper performance of this mitzvah was of immense historic significance. They were re-consecrating the Temple grounds and laying the groundwork for the future spiritual existence of their people. Their recognition of the significance of the moment and of their actions is what led them to have the zeal – the *לב שלם* – that triggered the miracle of the oil. Their zeal enabled the mitzvah to be performed *בהידורה* – to reach its greatest heights. It was this *מצוה בהידורה* – this mitzvah performed in the optimal fashion – that defined the magnitude of the military victory as well and ensured the lasting effect of their efforts. They recognized that at this moment in time when the Temple had become defiled – *ובאו בה פריצים וחללוה* – the only way to overcome the spiritual desecration in a lasting and meaningful fashion was to light the sacred menorah with oil of pristine purity, sealed with the signet of the High Priest.

We therefore understand why the essence of Chanukah, as described by the *Gemora*, was not the military victory but rather the miracle of the pure oil that burned for eight days. The military conquest alone would not have ensured a lasting imprint of holiness to overcome the defilement wrought by the *Yevanim*. It was only the realization of the *Chashmonaim* that they needed to “finish the job” by zealously and uncompromisingly re-dedicating the Temple in accordance with the utmost sanctity, that their actions led to an enduring victory.

In this vein, we can better appreciate the terminology of the “*Al HaNissim*” prayer. Had the *Chashmonaim* not appreciated the significance of their task, and therefore not have achieved the same enduring victory, it would indeed have been inconceivable that the “impure” would have been vanquished by the “pure” or the “wicked” by the “righteous.” The exposure to a culture of defilement would have had a detrimental effect even upon those who waged battle with it, unless the warriors recognized that their job was not yet done, that even after the military victory had to come a rejuvenated spiritual dedication to the performance of *mitzvot*. Therefore, we celebrate the miracle that even after exposure to the “impure” the pure remained pure and the righteous remained righteous.

It is hence not merely as an afterthought that the “*Al HaNissim*” prayer mentions in its conclusion:

*And afterwards your children entered the holiest part of your house, cleansed your Sanctuary and purified your Temple, kindled candles in your holy courtyards, and established these eight days of Chanukah to express thanks and praise to your great Name*  
(Translation adapted from the Koren Siddur and Art Scroll Siddur)

ואחר כך באו בניך לדביר ביתך  
ופנו את היכלך וטיהרו את מקדשך  
והדליקו נרות בחצרות קדשך  
וקבעו שמונת ימי חנוכה אלו  
להודות ולהלל לשמך הגדול

This passage represents the climax of the *Al HaNissim* prayer, clarifying that the reason we “established” the holiday of Chanukah for future generations was because the *Chashmonaim* did not stop with the military victory but rather “afterwards” recognized that they still needed to purify the Temple and ensure that the mitzvah of lighting the candles was fulfilled in the optimal fashion. Only then could a true spiritual re-birth take place and only then could their efforts have had an enduring effect sufficient to warrant the establishment of a permanent holiday.

Based on this insight, we can resolve our final question. Why was it necessary to wait for “the following year” before establishing a permanent holiday? The answer is that it is not always clear

when a miracle occurs whether there will be a lasting and enduring effect that truly creates a spiritual elevation for *Klal Yisroel*. If an effort, even when resulting in a miracle, is not performed with the requisite *לב שלם* – with all of one’s heart, it may yield a fine smell but not a lasting taste. It was only after another year had elapsed and it became clear that the efforts of the *Chashmonaim* were indeed enduring (just as the mitzvah of *Mezuzah* described in the *Midrash* is perennially affixed to the doorpost), that their zeal had transformed the environment of the Temple from defilement to sanctity, that it was deemed appropriate to establish the days of Chanukah as festive days for future generations.

However, it is important to note that the *Gemora* states *קבעום ועשאום* – the festive days were not merely “established,” they were “made” to be days of praise and thanksgiving. Future generations were given the task to “make” Chanukah in its original image - to perform the mitzvah of the lighting of the candles with the same zeal as the *Chashmonaim* so that the victory of Chanukah continue to endure in modern times, so that the forces of purity continue to overwhelm the forces of defilement and contamination in the surrounding universe. Every generation must do battle with values antithetical to those of the Torah and settle for nothing less than the pristine holiness of perfect Torah observance. This explains why there is a special emphasis on Chanukah of performing the mitzvah of lighting the Chanukah candles in the manner of *מהדרין מן המהדרין* – in the most superlative possible fashion. When faced with the constant challenges of shifting moral values that threaten to unravel the fiber of Torah observance, we cannot settle for mediocrity in our religious and ethical conduct.

The *מהדרין מן המהדרין* standard, as commonly observed, requires all members of the household to participate in the lighting of the Chanukah candles (see *Rema* 671:2). In this sense, for each of us, *מאי חנוכה* must become “my Chanukah” – all of us must internalize the message of Chanukah and utilize the holiday to re-energize our batteries to engage the universe as proud bearers of our holy heritage. Through this re-dedication every Chanukah, we strive to fulfill the level of *ועל פתחינו כל מגדים* – to provide illumination to all of mankind, in a manner that is fragrant and tasty, meaningful and enduring, and which inspires us to appreciate the significance of each mitzvah opportunity that presents itself throughout the entire year.