

Chanuka: The Unheralded Sacrifice

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The transcendence of the candle lights and the miraculous victory of the few over the many (רבים ביד מעטים) often dominate the thematic discussions of Chanuka. Yet lying just below the surface exists the oft-overlooked, but nonetheless powerful, altruism of the Maccabees. At a moment in history when Torah commitment was threatened and assimilation cast its shadow over the Jewish people, Matityahu, Judah, and a band of brave Jews risked their lives for our tradition. While the miraculous hand of God assisting the Hasmoneans in their victory and then the simple cruse of oil's ability to last a full eight days captivate us, it is the gumption of the Maccabean soldier that retains immense potential to inspire and offers a novel perspective on the Chanuka experience.

Tosafot in their commentary to the Talmud question the Talmudic dictum אף הן היו באותו הנס (women too were included in the miracle). The Talmud utilizes that rule to insist upon women's requirement to light the Chanuka candles even though it is a time-bound positive mitzvah. Tosafot wonder why this principle is not applied to the numerous other commandments that are inspired by miracles. While numerous answers are offered, Rashbam notes that the אף הן principle is applied only in cases where the miracle happened because of direct female involvement. Regarding Chanuka, Rashbam notes the *mesirut nefesh* of the women of that generation, noting Yehudit who, according to tradition, sacrificed her virtue in order to capture a Greek general and turned the tide of the war. Rashbam's solution highlights the central quality of altruism in the Chanuka holiday and leaves us to wonder what role the theme of sacrifice plays in our observance and celebration.

From Avraham to our present day, self-sacrifice represents an essential trait of the Jewish nation. Our success throughout the numerous challenges of our history stems in no small part from our willingness to risk our lives for the sake of our beliefs. Often going underreported in our historical discussions of sacrifice is the bravery of the three compatriots of Daniel: Chananya, Mishael, and Azaryah. This event preceded the miracle of Chanuka, but the experience of these three men represents a valuable model for comprehending the place of altruism in our Chanuka experience.

The Book of Daniel describes the experiences of Shadrech, Meshach, and Abed Nego, the aramaic pseudonyms for Daniel's three friends, as they confront the Babylonian king

Nebuchadnezzar responding to his decree demanding idol-worship:

Nebuchadnezzar the king made an image of gold, whose height was threescore cubits, and the breadth thereof six cubits; he set it up in the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon.

Daniel 3:1

נבוכדנצר מלכא עבד צלם די דהב
רומה אמין שתין פתיה אמין שת
אקימה בבקעת דורא במדינת בבל:
דניאל ג:א

A punishment was guaranteed to all those who refused the Babylonian King's edict:

And whoso falleth not down and worshipping shall the same hour be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace. Therefore at that time, when all the peoples heard the sound of the horn, pipe, harp, trigon, psaltery, and all kinds of music, all the peoples, the nations, and the languages, fell down and worshipped the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king had set up.

Daniel 3:6-7

ומן די לא יפל ויסגד בה שעתא
יתרמא לגוא אתון נורא יקדתא: כל
קבל דנה בה זמנא כדי שמעין כל
עממיא קל קרנא משרוקיתא קתרוס
שבכא פסנטרין וכל זני זמרא נפלין
כל עממיא אמיא ולשניא סגדין לצלם
דהבא די הקים נבוכדנצר מלכא:
דניאל ג:ו-ז

Chananyah, Mishael, and Azaryah refuse to bow:

There are certain Jews whom thou hast appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego; these men, O king, have not regarded thee: they serve not thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up. Then Nebuchadnezzar in his rage and fury commanded to bring Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego. Then were these men brought before the king. Nebuchadnezzar spoke and said unto them: 'Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, that ye serve not my gods, nor worship the golden image which I have set up? Now if ye be ready that at what time ye hear the sound of the horn, pipe, harp, trigon, psaltery, and bagpipe, and all kinds of music, ye fall down and worship the image which I have made, [well]; but if ye worship not, ye shall be cast the same hour into the midst of a burning fiery furnace; and who is the god that shall deliver you out of my hands? 'Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, answered and said to the king: 'O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer thee in this matter. If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us, He will deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and out of thy hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up.' Then was Nebuchadnezzar filled with fury, and the form of his visage was changed, against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego; he spoke, and commanded that they should heat the furnace seven times more than it was wont to be heated.

איתי גברין יהודאין די מנית יתהון על
עבדת מדינת בבל שדרך מישך ועבד
נגו גבריא אלך לא שמו עלך מלכא
טעם לאלהך לא פלחין ולצלם דהבא
די הקימת לא סגדין: באדין נבוכדנצר
ברגו וחמה אמר להייתה לשרך מישך
ועבד נגו באדין גבריא אלך היתיו קדם
מלכא: ענה נבוכדנצר ואמר להון הצדא
שרך מישך ועבד נגו לאלהי לא
איתיכון פלחין ולצלם דהבא די הקימת
לא סגדין: כען הן איתיכון עתידין די
בעדנא די תשמעון קל קרנא
משרוקיתא קתרוס שבכא פסנטרין
וסומפניה וכל זני זמרא תפלון ותסגדון
לצלמא די עבדת והן לא תסגדון בה
שעתה תתרמון לגוא אתון נורא יקדתא
ומן הוא אלה די ישיזבנכון מן ידי: ענו
שרך מישך ועבד נגו ואמרין למלכא
נבוכדנצר לא השחין אנחנה על דנה
פתגם להתבותך: הן איתי אלהנא די
אנחנא פלחין יכל לשיזבותנא מן אתון
נורא יקדתא ומן ידך מלכא ישיזב: והן
לא ידיע להוא לך מלכא די לאלהך
לא איתנא פלחין ולצלם דהבא די
הקימת לא נסגד: באדין נבוכדנצר
התמלי חמא וצלם אנפוהי אשתני על
שרך מישך ועבד נגו ענה ואמר למזא
לאתונא חד שבעה על די חזה למזיה:

And he commanded certain mighty men that were in his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace. Then these men were bound in their cloaks, their tunics, and their robes, and their other garments, and were cast into the midst of the burning fiery furnace. Therefore, because the king's commandment was peremptory, and the furnace exceeding hot, the flame of the fire slew those men that took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego. And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, fell down bound into the midst of the burning fiery furnace.

Daniel 3:12-23

It is only through a miracle of God that they are spared:

Then Nebuchadnezzar the king was alarmed, and rose up in haste; he spoke and said unto his ministers: 'Did not we cast three men bound into the midst of the fire?' They answered and said unto the king: 'True, O king.' He answered and said: 'Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods.' Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the mouth of the burning fiery furnace; he spoke and said: 'Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, ye servants of God Most High, come forth, and come hither.' Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, came forth out of the midst of the fire. And the satraps, the prefects, and the governors, and the king's ministers, being gathered together, saw these men, that the fire had no power upon their bodies, nor was the hair of their head singed, neither were their cloaks changed, nor had the smell of fire passed on them.

Daniel 3:24-27

This miracle inspires the king of Babylon:

Nebuchadnezzar spoke and said: 'Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, who hath sent His angel, and delivered His servants that trusted in Him, and have changed the king's word, and have yielded their bodies, that they might not serve nor worship any god, except their own God.

Daniel 3:28

The Talmud in the final chapter of Sanhedrin notes the inherent power of this event yet wonders what ultimately happened to these men. Following this miracle, Chananya, Mishael, and Azaryah disappear from Tanach, never to be heard from again. The Talmud continues to

ולגברין גברי חיל די בחילה אמר
לכפתה לשדרך מישך ועבד נגו
למרמא לאתון נורא יקדתא: באדין
גבריא אלך כפתו בסרבליהון פטשיהון
וכרבלתהון ולבשיהון ורמיו לגוא אתון
נורא יקדתא: כל קבל דנה מן די מלת
מלכא מחצפה ואתונא אזה יתירא
גבריא אלך די הסקו לשדרך מישך
ועבד נגו קטל המון שביבא די נורא:
וגבריא אלך תלתהון שדרך מישך
ועבד נגו נפלו לגוא אתון נורא יקדתא
מכפתין:

דניאל ג:יב-כג

אדין נבוכדנצר מלכא תוה וקם
בהתבילה ענה ואמר להדברוהי הלא
גברין תלתא רמינא לגוא נורא מכפתין
ענין ואמרין למלכא יציבא מלכא: ענה
ואמר הא אנה חזה גברין ארבעה שרין
מהלכין בגוא נורא וחבל לא איתי בהון
ורוה די רביעאה דמה לבר אלהין:
באדין קרב נבוכדנצר לתרע אתון
נורא יקדתא ענה ואמר שדרך מישך
ועבד נגו עבדוהי די אלהא עלאה פקו
ואתו באדין נפקין שדרך מישך ועבד
נגו מן גוא נורא: ומתכנשין
אחשדרפניא סגניא ופחותא והדברי
מלכא חזין לגבריא אלך די לא שלט
נורא בגשמהון ושער ראשהון לא
התחרך וסרבליהון לא שנו וריח נור
לא עדת בהון:

דניאל ג:כד-כז

ענה נבוכדנצר ואמר בריך אלההון די
שדרך מישך ועבד נגו די שלח מלאכה
ושיזב לעבדוהי די התרחצו עלוהי
ומלת מלכא שניו ויהבו גשמהון די לא
יפלחון ולא יסגדון לכל אלה להן
לאלההון:

דניאל ג:כח

offer three answers:

What happened to those Rabbis [Chananyah, Mishael, and Azaryah]? Rav said they died from the evil eye. Shmuel said they drowned in spittle. R. Yochanan said they went up to the Land of Israel married women and begat boys and girls.

Sanhedrin 93a

ורבנן להיכא אזלו? אמר רב בעין הרע
מתו ושמואל אמר ברוק טבעו ור'
יוחנן אמר עלו לארץ ישראל ונשאו
נשים והולידו בנים ובנות
סנהדרין צג.

Each answer offers a perspective on the lurking dangers of and a potential response to altruism and miracle. For Rav, they perished because of “the evil eye.” Others envied the success and passion of Chananyah, Mishael, and Azaryah. Rather than exacting succor and inspiration from the sacrifice and salvation of their leaders, the Israelites cast aspersions toward these recipients of God's miracle. The willing sacrifice of these three men highlighted the failures of a generation that could not achieve that commitment. The “ayin hara” is merely a projection of the misgiving of the contemporary Israelites about their own commitment.

Rashi explains Shmuel's opinion - “they drowned in spittle” - as a reference to the derision of the Babylonians. They looked askance upon the Jews who continued to sin even in the wake of this immense miracle. The surrounding gentiles declared: “you have such a God. Yet you continue to worship idols?” The miraculous salvation of Chananyah, Mishael, and Azaryah thus became not a badge of pride, but a source of shame. The status of the Israelites sank in the eyes of the Babylonians who saw Chananyah, Mishael, and Azaryah as exceptions rather than the rule of the nation of Israel.

Finally, the opinion of the Chachamim offers a subtle happy ending to the story of Chananyah, Mishael, and Azaryah. They went up to the land of Israel. The Maharal explains that following their miracle, they could not live just anywhere, but needed to embrace the holiness of the Land of Israel. Similarly, he posits, the women they married and the children they bore achieved a unique holiness and transcendence. In this case, the miracle of their salvation became not an albatross around their necks, as suggested by the two preceding opinions, but an inspiration. Chananyah, Mishael, and Azaryah achieved greater sanctity and similarly inspired sanctity in those who surrounded them.

The similar altruism and salvation of the Maccabees created perhaps even broader challenges to the Jews of that generation. Matityahu's commitment might have shamed the Jews of his generation that so voraciously embraced Hellenism, leading them to project and to deride the Maccabees with *ayin ha-ra*. Further, the miraculous victory of the many in the hands of the few might have struck a blow to the pride and status of the Jewish people who assimilated and failed to uphold the traditions of their forefathers. The other nations might spit and look down upon the Jewish people when comparing this singular victory to the many other spiritual defeats.

The forethought and inspiration of Judah Maccabee and Chazal, however, preempted the potential failures. In the wake of victory, the Hasmoneans insisted upon lighting a Menorah of unadulterated purity, though Halacha may have allowed them to compromise, *טומאה הותרה* בקביור. They declared a holiday for future generations – *ולהלל* – lest this salvation go to waste. Each year Hallel is recited to embrace the miracle of

our past that it should resonate in the future. Further, though our mitzvah is fulfilled with a mere single candle, we insist upon adding a light each night, מִהַדְרִין מִן הַמַּהְדְרִין, to take everlasting hold of a miracle as a source of inspiration. Finally, the essence of this mitzvah is פְּרִסוּמֵי נִסָּא, the publication of the miracle. The mitzvah must expand beyond the limits of simple fulfillment and inspire commitment of others and future generations. It is not for the performed alone, but for the commitment of all the people of Israel.

Chanuka rejects the potential deleterious ramifications of its altruism and demands spiritual growth and progression, the aliyah and not the spittle and evil eye that may have plagued the destinies of Chananyah, Mishael, and Azaryah. Upon witnessing the Chanuka lights, we declare שְׁעֵשָׂה נִסִּים לְאַבוֹתֵינוּ בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם בְּזִמְנָן הַזֶּה. The altruism of our forefathers and the miracles that brought about their salvation are not to our detriment, but inspire us to new heights.

Each year our homes are blessed with the glowing lights of our mitzvah. We commemorate the miracle with songs and prayers. As we sit with our families in celebration, recalling the miracles of victory and light, yet at the same time recognizing the altruism of our Maccabean ancestors who risked their lives for the principles of Torah and Mitzvot. Moreover, it was those very risks that were co-opted as inspiration; our candle lights declare that the sacrifice and salvation of the past will propel us to the heights of the future.