

# Not Just Another Winter Festival

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For many uninitiated observers, the holiday of Chanuka can be a disappointment. Aside from the complicated pronunciation of its name, it is viewed by some as just another winter festival of lights like those of other cultures. Despite known historical accounts of its origins, an internationally renowned newspaper published an opinion claiming that Chanuka is “doomed to be forever the poor relation of Christmas,”<sup>1</sup> a statement that offended many people in the Jewish community. There are many diverse factors that contribute to this phenomenon, but perhaps there is one central reason for the denigration and lack of understanding. To discover this reason, all one needs to do is open a Tanach. A thorough search of all its twenty-four books reveals a startling fact- the absence of Chanuka in Biblical literature. Unlike all other Jewish holidays, Biblical or rabbinic, no mention of this event is ever referenced in Tanach because it occurred after the close of the Biblical canon. How could we expect people to appreciate a holiday that has no mention anywhere in the Bible?

## Halacha and Rabbinic Judaism

Our sages were acutely aware of this fact and addressed it in their analysis of the nature of the mitzvah of lighting Chanuka candles:

*What blessing should one recite? "Who sanctified us in his commandments and commanded us to light the candle of Chanuka" Where did He command us? R. Aviya said from the commandment "do not stray" [from the words of the rabbis]. R. Nechemiah said "Ask you father and he will inform you, your elders and they will tell you."*

**Shabbat 23a**

מאי מברך מברך אשר קדשנו  
במצותיו וצונו להדליק נר של  
חנוכה והיכן צונו רב אויא  
אמר מלא תסור רב נחמיה  
אמר שאל אביך ויגדך זקניך  
ויאמרו לך.  
**שבת כג.**

This snapshot of the Talmud gives us insight into a crucial, fundamental aspect of Halacha and Jewish life: Rabbinic Judaism. Our Torah is comprised of two inseparable components: the written Torah- a Divine, static text- and the oral Torah- a dynamic system of interpretation and implementation of traditions and teachings. We recognize that Halacha, the framework which guides our life, is governed by that which appears explicitly in the sacred writings of Tanach, as well as the directives we receive from the oral tradition. This tradition includes Biblical

<sup>1</sup> "Hanukkah Rekindled" by Howard Jacobson was published by the New York Times on November 30, 2010.

mandates handed down verbally at Sinai, as well as rabbinic teachings, sanctioned and encouraged by the Torah.

The oral tradition has a specific set of principles and standard bearers. Rabbinic modes of interpretation and the mantle of rabbinic authority have been handed down from generation to generation in an unbroken chain since the revelation at Sinai. The Rambam dedicates the bulk of the introduction to his Magnum Opus, *Mishneh Torah*, to listing the names of the forty sages, the guardians of tradition that spanned the centuries from Moshe Rabbeinu at Sinai to Rav Ashi at the close of the Talmud. This tradition has continued through today, as the great sages of the generation apply our tradition, as Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik wrote in a 1954 newspaper article:

*The interpretation of halakha must be accomplished in accordance with the methods, principles and categorical forms of the halakhic logic, which were hammered out by the sages of Torah, rishonim [early rabbinic period] and aharonim [late rabbinic period], Rashi, the Tosafists, Ramban, the Shakh, Rav Akiva Eiger, Rav Hayyim Brisker, etc. The substance of halakha is tradition. Not only the content and the text, but also the formal instruments of halakhic thinking have been handed down from generation to generation.*

**Community, Covenant and Commitment, pp. 147- 148**

The holiday of Chanuka is a prime example of our full commitment to this description of halachic Judaism; we observe these days due to the instruction of our rabbinic leadership that is empowered by the Torah itself. The brief statement of the Talmud we cited is teaching us that while Chanuka does not appear in the written Torah, it is binding as part of the oral Torah- the tradition.

Perhaps we can now understand the miracle and holiday of Chanuka in its historical context as well. All of our Yamim Tovim appear in Tanach, during a period of open revelation and providential clarity. The events that these days commemorate took place under the watch of prophets, whose clarity of spiritual vision interpreted them like an open book. The period of prophecy is akin to the written Torah itself - readily apparent and clearly understood. With the demise of prophecy during the second Temple era, the Divine hand gave the Jewish community a new focus, a new emphasis in our service of Hashem. The absence of the clarity of the prophecy- symbolizing the written Torah- directed us to a greater focus on and investment in the oral Torah. What had been clear oral tradition in the days of the prophets soon became the subject of debate and, ultimately, rabbinic resolution through the creative process of exegesis and analysis. It was specifically in this period that we witnessed the miracle of Chanuka.

The drama of Chanuka took place while the Greeks dominated the Beit Hamikdash long after the death of the last prophets, who had built it. The Midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 2) refers to the exile of Greece as “darkness,” perhaps because it was the first exile without the sunny, clear vision of prophecy to guide us. The establishment of Chanuka as a significant holiday was the first to be undertaken in the post-prophetic era. It embodies the sublimation and achievement

of the post- canon period: a rabbinic holiday.<sup>2</sup> This explains the confusion by so many about this mysterious holiday; they are unaware of our unwritten rabbinic tradition. Without the context of traditional rabbinic Judaism it truly is difficult to appreciate the celebration of Chanuka.

## Rabbinic Judaism: A Divine Embrace

Halacha reflects this concept of Chanuka as a celebration of rabbinic Judaism, the oral tradition. The language of the *bracha* for candle lighting expresses this idea, as the aforementioned Gemara explained. This concept also explains a unique facet of the performance of the mitzvah itself. Many have wondered: why did the rabbis create a mitzvah that has multiple levels of fulfillment and enhancement, known as *mehadrin* and *mehadrin min hamehadrin*? Although we have a general principle of *hiddur mitzvah* that charges us to enhance all mitzvot, this is a limited obligation that is not an inherent aspect of any specific commandment.<sup>3</sup> On Chanuka, we transcend the general concept of *hiddur* with two tiers of fulfillment that are presented as part and parcel of the obligation. The *Shulchan Aruch* goes as far as to ignore the basic Talmudic level of fulfillment of one candle per night and only records the level of enhancement:

*How many candles should one light? On the first night, one lights one candle. From then on, one adds a candle each night until there are eight on the last day.*  
**Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 671:2**

כמה נרות מדליק, בלילה הראשון מדליק אחד, מכאן ואילך מוסיף והולך אחד בכל לילה עד שבלייל האחרון יהיו שמונה.  
שלחן ערוך אורח חיים תרעא:ב

This is understood in light of the idea that Chanuka expresses a rabbinic mode of Divine service. The Midrash teaches:

*The colleagues said in the name of R. Yochanan: the words of the rabbis are dearer than the words of Torah as it states "for your love is dearer than wine."*  
**Shir HaShirim Rabbah no. 1**

חברייא בשם רבי יוחנן חביבין דברי סופרים מדברי תורה שנאמר כי טובים דודיך מיין.  
שיר השירים רבה פרשה א

Our Rabbinic Judaism is an expression of our love of Hashem that is appreciated even more than our fulfillment of the basic requirements enumerated in the written Torah. It demonstrates our interest in going above and beyond in our relationship with Hashem, beyond that which is scripted in a text. Hence, Chanuka, as the paradigm of this Divine service and commitment, contains within it the mechanism of going above and beyond in its fulfillment.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Regarding the issue of the limitation of rabbinic Mitzvot and their innovation vis-a-vis the establishment of Chanuka and other Rabbinic holidays, see *B'Ikvei Hatzon* no. 19 by Rabbi Hershel Schachter, shlit" a.

<sup>3</sup> Although one may suggest that the *hiddur*- enhancement of the mitzvah- becomes a part of the mitzvah itself, the source of the obligation is not from each particular Mitzvah, rather from an overarching principle of enhancement. For further exploration of this question, see *Shabbat* 133b, Rambam, *Isurei Mizbeach* 7:11, *Chidushei HaGriz al haRambam, Hilchot Chanuka*.

<sup>4</sup> We find that in rabbinic matters, Halacha often calls upon us to go beyond what the written Torah would demand as the Gemara observes several times (e.g. *Zevachim* 101) "חכמים עשו חיזוק לדבריהם יותר משל תורה" the rabbis strengthened their words more than they strengthened words of Torah."

## Rabbinic Life: Spiritual Light

There is also a profound spiritual dimension of this analysis of Chanuka as well. We find a profound teaching of the mystical work, *Sefer Habahir*, cited in the writings of Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin (1823-1900):

*In reality, the original light was stored. But where did God store it? In the oral tradition as it states in Sefer HaBahir.*

*In each generation, the light of the oral tradition is revealed to the scholars as the rabbis have stated that God stored for those who toil in the oral tradition the "light that was planted for the righteous" and revealed it to the sages.*

**P'ri Tzadik, Shavuot**

שבאמת אור הראשון נגנז. אך היכן גנזו הקב"ה בתורה שבעל פה כמו שכתב בספר הבהיר. ובכל דור מתגלה האור תורה שבעל פה לחכמים וכמו שאמרו שגנזו הקב"ה לעמלי תורה שבעל פה אור זרוע לצדיק ונגלה לחכמים.  
**פרי צדיק, חג השבועות**

We know that encountering Torah- Divine wisdom- is a spiritually ennobling experience. Yet, this teaching educates us that involvement specifically in the oral tradition, the rabbinic engagement with Torah, provides a unique illumination. Those who toil in the challenging, dialectical Halachic discourse of the oral tradition are rewarded with a Divine light at the end of the tunnel, according to this teaching.

Rabbi Chaim Yaakov Goldvicht, founding Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Kerem B'Yavneh (*Asufat Maarachot*, p. 89), sheds light on this unique insight, based on a Midrash:

*R. Levi said in the name of R. Zeirah: The light shone for thirty six hours, twelve on Friday, twelve on the eve of Shabbos and twelve on Shabbos.*

**Bereishit Rabbah, Bereishit no. 11**

ר' לוי בשם רבי זעירא אמר ל"ו שעות שימשה אותה האורה, שנים עשר של ערב שבת, וי"ב של לילי שבת וי"ב של שבת.

**בראשית רבה, פרשת בראשית פרשה יא**

According to this tradition, the number of hours that the original supernal light shone before Hashem hid it was thirty-six. It is more than a coincidence, according to the Rokeach, the 12<sup>th</sup> century German pietist, that the sum of our candles of the eight nights of Chanuka is thirty-six:

*We light thirty six candles on Chanukah to correspond to the thirty six hours that the light shone on Friday and Shabbat (of creation).*

**Pirushei Siddur L'Rokeach, Chanuka**

הנה מדליקין בחנוכה ל"ו נרות, כנגד ל"ו שעות ששימשה האורה יום ו' וליל ז'.

**פירושי סידור לרוקה, חנוכה**

It is this spiritual, hidden light- the light of our oral Torah and our rabbinic tradition- which shines forth on Chanuka in our homes. While Chanuka is not a holiday that is mentioned in Tanach, we, the bearers of Halacha, are aglow with the spiritual light of our tradition that is expressed in these magnificent eight days. Our lives are enriched by our enhanced relationship with Hashem that is enabled by a full halachic life, one of the text and the tradition, which radiates through the light of Chanuka.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Rabbi Zvi Engel and Rabbi Menachem Rosenbaum for their helpful comments on this article.