

# Introduction: The Essence of Miracles

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Ask any child to tell you about the miracle of Chanukah and guaranteed, there's mention of a little jug of oil and a menorah that stayed lit for an eight night run. Conduct a search across Talmudic texts and rabbinic literature about the Holiday of Chanukah, and the matter of oil and candles dominate. And yet, look at the one special prayer of *Al Hanissim* that we recite three times daily in prayer on Chanukah (as well as during our Grace after Meals), and the Menorah theme might be described by some as an after-thought. Why is this the case, and more importantly, what can we learn from it?

Let's look at the two different types of miracles connected with the Holiday of Chanukah. The devastation wrought by the Syrian-Greeks in the Beit Hamikdash and the subsequent discovery of a small jug of oil to keep the Menorah in the Temple lit for the next eight days was nothing short of a miracle. And it's inspiring to think of this miracle of "renewal" that the small jug represented- light in the face of darkness and renewal in the face of destruction.

On the other hand, the military victory that the Jews enjoyed at the hands of their much larger and mightier Greek adversary might be seen as simply a military victory. That, however, would entirely miss the point. While the victory the Jews enjoyed against the Hellenists was about their physical survival, it really represented at its core, nothing less than their spiritual survival.

Rav Shlomo Yosef Zevin in *Hamo'adim B'Halacha*, pg. 159, cites the Levush as explaining that the Syrian-Greeks were not interested in persecuting and destroying the Jewish people. They were simply interested in obliterating our religion:

*The enemy ... did not decree death and annihilation upon them, but only oppression and measures to convert them from their religion... And if Israel had submitted to the Greeks, behaving as a conquered people and paying tribute, and had converted to the conqueror's faith, the Greeks would have made no further demands.*

**Levush, Orach Chaim 670:2**

מפני שלא נמסרו ישראל באותו זמן ביד מושל אחד שהיה מושל עליהם להריגה כמו שהיה בימי המן, אלא שבאו האויבים עליהם למלחמה ולא בקשו מהם אלא ההכנעה, ולהיות ידם תקיפה על ישראל ולהעבירם על דתם ... ואם היו ישראל מכניעים להם להיות כבושים תחת ידם ולהעלות להם מס וחוזרים לאמונתם חלילה, לא היו מבקשים יותר.  
**לבוש, אורח חיים תרע"ב**

As we say in *Al Hanissim*: "להשכיחם תורתך ולהעבירם מחוקי רצונך" - to make them forget Your Torah and forsake the statutes of Your will." They wanted nothing but our assimilation; our

loss of identity. Since our hearts and souls were what the Syrian-Greeks were after, while the victory that we experienced on the battlefield was technically a military one, it represented so much more than just our physical survival.

According to Rav Zevin, the ability to give praise and thanks to Hashem is exactly that which the Syrian-Greeks wanted to take from us:

*It was precisely praise and thanksgiving that the Syrian-Greeks wanted us to refrain from, and they wanted us to deny the Blessed One, and since we overcame the enemy with His help and their schemes failed, therefore the Sages established these days for us to reaffirm our praise and thanksgiving to Him.*

**Hamoadim Bahalacha, pg. 159**

כיון שהם רצו למנוע אותנו מזה  
ולכפור בו יתברך ח"ו ובעזרתו  
יתברך לא הפיקו זממם וגברה  
ידינו, לכך קבעו אותם לחזור  
ולשבח ולהודות לו.  
**המועדים בהלכה עמ' קנט**

Maybe that is why it is the military victory which we primarily reference in our daily davening (during *Modim*), since we are essentially thanking Hashem for our spiritual survival.

Coming through this period in Jewish History with our identity sustained and strong was the first part of the Chanukah miracle. We mark it by offering praise and thanksgiving to Hashem through our daily prayers. Lighting the Chanukah menorah was our Sages way of incorporating a symbolic practice into our observance for remembering, acknowledging and thanking Hashem for the second part of the Chanukah miracle -- our spiritual renewal. And referring to these two miracles as Part I and Part II is simply a way of noting that before we as a nation could renew and recharge our sacred spirit, we had to be whole and physically intact- strong and firm in our beliefs and committed to our Jewish destiny.

We can also look at these two miracles of Chanukah, the one of military victory and the one of spiritual survival, as reflecting two classes of miracles, daily miracles and once in a lifetime miracles. We grow up learning that miracles are supernatural, out of the ordinary occurrences, and yet in the prayer of *Modim* recited three times daily, we say “ על נסיד שבכל ... יום עמנו” we give thanks to You ... for Your miracles which are with us every day.”

How then should we define daily miracles? Perhaps they're the common ones that we're used to seeing all the time but require a constant reminder that while normal occurrences, they are still seen as extraordinary. We might recall this type of miracle when discussing the birth of a baby or a recovery from illness, but even more mundane activities such as breathing and digesting food are also miraculous.

Out-of-the-ordinary miracles might be seen as more dramatic, simply because they occur less often and thereby have a greater impact. The Chashmonaim were at a great disadvantage militarily, and there's no question that their victory was profound, but at the end of the day, it was still a military victory. Discovering a jug of pure olive oil in the ruins of the Temple and that oil's ability to keep a menorah lit for a period seven times longer than it should have was undoubtedly seen as a “special” miracle, defined so, by its uniqueness.

The Ramban discusses the concept of miracles in his *Commentary* on the last *pasuk* of Parshat Bo that states:

*And it shall be a sign upon your arm and totafot (tefillin) between your eyes, for with a strong arm Hashem removed us from Egypt.*

**Shemot 13:16**

וְהָיָה לְאוֹת עַל יָדְכָה וּלְטוֹטְפֹת בֵּין  
עֵינֶיךָ כִּי בְחֹזֶק יָד הוֹצִיאָנוּ ה'  
מִמִּצְרָיִם.

שמות יג:טז

The Ramban explains that because G-d does not perform miracles in every generation, He commanded us that we should constantly have a reminder and a sign for what our eyes saw in Egypt and transmit that to our children and all the future generations. He then explains that through remembering and acknowledging miracles such as *yetziat Mitzraim*, a person comes to acknowledge the hidden miracles of everyday life for he realizes that all our experiences in this world are miracles and there's no element of nature in them, nor can they be defined as part of the ordinary course of the world.

At the Center for the Jewish Future (CJF) at Yeshiva University, we are engaged in a myriad of activities and initiatives throughout the year that stand out for their immediate impact. Some of these initiatives include the service learning and humanitarian missions that we take our students on to communities all around the world, the inspiring Yarchei Kallah and continuing education programs that we run for rabbis, and the well-regarded educational and inspirational programs that we run for the greater Jewish community. But we believe that the true success of our programming is in the day-to-day impact that we hope these efforts are having. If community leaders, rabbinic leaders and student leaders can harness the power of these select programs and events and use it to impact and improve our world, we know that we will follow the lead of the Chashmonaim. We will look to the future with our souls and identity intact, embark on a journey of spiritual discovery, and identity and appreciate the miracles that are all around us.