

1000 Marbles v. 8 Candles

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There is a popular story called “1,000 Marbles – A Little Something about Precious Time,” that was written by Jeffrey Lewis in 1999. The story, written from the first person perspective of the narrator, was about a broadcaster on a ham radio who was telling a listener about how he calculated at the age of 55 that, according to his estimated life span, he had about 1,000 Saturdays remaining in his life. He then went to several toy stores in order to round up 1,000 marbles and every week took out one marble and threw it away. “I found,” he said, “that by watching the marbles diminish, I focused more on the really important things in life. There is nothing like watching your time here on this earth run out to help get your priorities straight.”

The broadcaster ended his story by noting that he had just taken out the last marble in the container. “I figure,” he concluded, “if I make it until next Saturday then I have a little more time. And the one thing we can all use is a little more time.” The narrator of the piece then notes that “[y]ou could have heard a pin drop on the band when this fellow signed off.” At the end of the article, he describes how he turned to his wife, told her he was taking her and the kids out for breakfast, and asked her if they could stop at a toy store because, well, he wanted to buy some marbles.

A rabbinic acquaintance of mine was moved by this beautiful story, and shared it with me. I pointed out that it was indeed a wonderful and inspirational tale, but that there was a very different approach to life indicated by the viewpoint of Beit Hillel in the talmudic passage relating to Chanukah candles (*Shabbat* 21a).

In their well known dispute, Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagree about the proper method of lighting the Chanukah candles. According to Beit Shammai, one should light eight candles on the first night of Chanukah, and then one less candle each night, until the last night when one lights only one Chanukah light. According to Beit Hillel, one should light one candle on the first night of Chanukah, and then be “*mosif v’holekh*,” adding one candle each night until the last night when one lights eight Chanuka candles. The halakha, of course, follows the opinion of Beit Hillel.

Accordingly, I observed that according to Beit Hillel, in the same way that we add more Chanukah candles each day, it would stand to reason that a person counting the weeks of his life should start with one marble and add more marbles as he went along. But in order to

understand this notion, it is important to explore the respective rationales for the opinions of Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai.

The Gemora presents two alternative explanations for the two variant opinions: (a) according to Beit Hillel, the candles correspond to the days that have passed (“*yamim ha’yotzin*”), while according to Beit Shammai the candles correspond to the days that are yet to come (“*yamim ha’nikhnasin*”); (b) according to Beit Hillel, the candles represent the principle of “*ma’alin b’kodesh v’ain mo’ridin*” – that one should ascend higher and higher in holiness and not descend, while according to Beit Shammai the candles correspond to the “*parei hachag*,” to the bullock offerings on Sukkot that decreased in number each day of the holiday.

The second explanation of the dispute between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai seems to have a clear basis based on Torah concepts, but the first explanation requires further elucidation. Of what significance is it whether one is focusing upon the days that have passed or the days that are yet to come?

Perhaps the answer is that the significance of the first explanation is illuminated by the second explanation. In the story of Chanukah, a small band of dedicated Jews defeated a large army of Syrian-Greeks who sought to undermine the spiritual and religious foundations of Judaism. The forces of the secular world had to be conquered in order to preserve the pristine tradition of the Jewish people. This conquest, it can be suggested, is symbolized in the diminution of the “*parei hachag*,” the seventy bulls offered during Sukkot that correspond to the seventy nations of the world (*Sukkah* 55b), and whose decreased number each day symbolizes the gradual conquest of the foreign influences of those nations (see *Maharsha* ad loc.). Beit Shammai, in celebrating the defeat of the enemy forces, prescribed a corresponding decrease of the number of candles each day. Beit Hillel, on the other hand, focused upon the ascendance of the spiritual character of the people, “*ma’alin b’kodesh*,” and therefore prescribed an increase in the number of candles each day.

This difference in attitude is also reflected in the first interpretation regarding whether the focus is on the “days that have passed” or the “days that are yet to come.” At first blush, the approach of Beit Shammai that focuses on the “days that are yet to come” seems more upbeat, and the approach of Beit Hillel that focuses on the “days that have departed” seems more depressing. However, this is where the story of the marbles becomes helpful. A focus upon remaining days causes one to notice what is gone and lost. For Beit Shammai, this diminishment is sensible, since their focus is upon the enemies who are gone and defeated. However, for Beit Hillel, their focus upon the “days that have passed” elicits an appreciation for the accomplishments of those who have weathered the battles and achieved higher levels of holiness, and actually creates a progression in the gradual number of candles.

If we carry over the attitude of Beit Hillel to life in general, then each day, we should be adding more marbles rather than gradually lessening our marbles. Each day is not a lost opportunity, but rather another day of accomplishment, another day of growing, of reaching higher plateaus of holiness in this world. When we look at our collection of days, at the mitzvot that we have been privileged to perform, of the Torah that we have been fortunate to learn, rather than despairing about time running out, we are fortified by how brightly our collection of lights illumines our path for the future.

I do not think that the author of the aforementioned article would disagree with this message, and believe that his important message of appreciating the boundaries of life is also consistent with the talmudic passage that one should always treat each day of life as his last in order to be inspired to do repentance every day (*Shabbat* 153a). However, as we see from the opinion of Beit Hillel, there is an equally critical side to the equation, one that requires a daily affirmation of life and appreciation of the days that have accumulated in order to enable the future to burn ever more brightly. Our practice of lighting Chanukah candles, based on the opinion of Beit Hillel, epitomizes this positive life message.

This message, interestingly, may have something to do with why the practice has developed in many quarters to celebrate birthdays. In Parshat Vayeshev, which consistently coincides with Chanukah, we are told about a great party that took place on the occasion of the birthday of Pharaoh (Bereishit 40:20). There is a question debated by many halakhic authorities as to whether birthday celebrations are a Jewish concept. Some are of the opinion that celebrating a birthday has no basis in Jewish law or lore (see, e.g., *Divrei Torah* of the Munkatcher Rebbe, 5:88), while others favorably record the practice (see, e.g., *Ben Yehoyada*, *Brachot* 28a, s.v. “*Hahu Yoma*”).

Apropos to this discussion, there is an important insight by Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz in his *Sichot Mussar* (Parshat Sh'mot, Ma'amar 29) that, I believe, provides support for those who endorse birthday celebrations, and also underscores the message of Beit Hillel. Rav Shmuelevitz quotes the talmudic passage in *Kiddushin* (80b) which cites the passage in Megillat Eichah (3:39), in which G-d declares, “*mah yitonen adam chai, gever al chata'av*” (literally, “why does a living man complain, a man regarding his sins”) and shares the commentary of Rashi in *Kiddushin* on that passage: “why should a person complain about all of the events that befall him after all of the kindness that I have done for him, that I have given him life and have not brought death upon him?” Rav Shmuelevitz explains that the gift of life is reason enough for man to celebrate and be happy with his lot – there is nothing more exhilarating than the opportunity provided by G-d to live life.

Along these lines, a birthday celebration can be understood as an appreciation for the accumulation of years in this world and the opportunity to continue to live life to the fullest. Celebrations of birthdays always focus on the number of years that have thus far passed, or the many “marbles” that have been accumulated. In accordance with the words of Rashi, this evokes an appreciation of all of the kindnesses that have been provided from above, and all of the hurdles that have been overcome, that have enabled the person to be alive for another birthday.

This, ultimately, is the message of the order of the Chanukah candles. Through all of the challenges and battles that we had to face as a people, we have grown stronger every day and celebrate the accumulation of the candles. This insight also underscores the meaning of the “*she'asah nissim*” blessing over the candles, in which we thank G-d for having performed miracles for our forefathers “both in the days of old and in current times.” By celebrating the days of old through accumulating the Chanukah candles as time marches along, we are able to appreciate the miracles in our time as well, and thereby adopt a more positive and upbeat attitude towards the future.