



Chanukah: Theological Trauma and Recovery

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Our Rabbis taught: When Adam saw the day getting gradually shorter, he said, 'Woe is me, perhaps because I have sinned, the world around me is being darkened and returning to its state of chaos and confusion; this then is the kind of death to which I have been sentenced from Heaven!' So he began keeping an eight days' fast. But as he observed the winter solstice and noted the day getting increasingly longer, he said, 'This is the world's course', and he set forth to keep an eight days' festivity. In the following year he appointed both as festivals. (Avodah Zara 8a)



This quote from the Talmud is baffling. We have here a clear reference (an eight day festival around the winter solstice) to Chanukah which is lacking all the familiar aspects of the holiday. There is no mention of the Maccabees, the military victory or the miracle of the oil burning for eight days; only a mythical tale of Adam after his expulsion from Eden. This source begs us to employ a different (and broader) theological and historical perspective in order to understand Chanukah.

It goes without saying that the destruction of the first Temple was a national trauma. Aside from the loss of many lives as well as political independence, there was what could be called "theological shock".

Prior to the destruction of the Temple, such a calamity could not even be imagined. When Yirmiyahu, the prophet of doom, warned the children of Israel of the impending disaster, he was met with cries of, "The Holy Sanctuary, the Holy Sanctuary" (Jer. 7:4). The people's reaction reflects the idolatrous mindset of the ancient world, according to which the destruction of a religious shrine meant that the particular god had been defeated. Since our God is the Omnipotent, the flawed reasoning went, Yirmiyahu speaks heresy.

'How could our all-powerful God be vanquished?' This pride and false security resulted in total despair when the Destruction finally came. This is the "theological shock" which was still reverberating at the time of the first Chanukah.

The destruction was interpreted by some to mean that the covenant between God and Israel was irrevocably annulled. (This is in fact the claim of traditional Christianity after the destruction of the second Temple.)

This sentiment continued to grow when the Second Temple did not meet expectations (See Ezra 3:12). The growing sense of despair is evidenced by the phenomenon of the Hellenizers who wished to shed their Jewish identity and melt into the universalist culture of the Greeks. In a sense, the days of the Jews after the destruction of the First Temple were dark and getting darker. This is analogous to the state of Adam after his expulsion from Eden. His improper interpretation of reality led him to despair.

It is precisely at the darkest time, one could say the winter of despair, that God shined the light of hope upon Adam and the Children of Israel.

This could have been a good conclusion to this dvar Torah, but before that I wish to turn our attention to the end of the *beraita*. When the days begin to get longer, Adam says, "this is the world's course". If that is so, that the elongation of the daylight hours is merely natural phenomenon, why thank God and create a festival? His reaction should have been something like this, "How foolish have I been! I thought that God was punishing me and in actuality it was only the natural cycle of the year!"

Adam's reaction is very telling of how we understand Chanukah in particular and how we find God in the world in general. Strictly speaking there was a rational explanation for the lengthening of the days in mid-winter as well as the courageous victory of the few very motivated over the many. (The Greeks defeated the Trojans and the North Vietnamese defeated the Americans). It is a matter of interpretation and a function of refined sensibility to see the hand of heaven in the mythical (in the case of Adam) and historical events.

On Chanukah, then there is a two-fold celebration. We celebrate the ray of light with which God illuminated the darkness and we celebrate our ability and the ability of our ancestors to see that light and thus enable it to shine on for millennia.