

Bayamim Hahem Bazman Hazeh

Illuminating the Light of Chanukah

As we light our menorahs each night of Chanukah, we recite the following bracha:

ברוך אתה ה' אלוקינו מלך העולם שעשה נסים לאבותינו בימים ההם בזמן הזה.

Blessed are You, Hashem, our G-d, King of the Universe, Who performed miracles for our forefathers, in those days, at/in this time.

The wording of this bracha raises a question — how are the miracles of Chanukah relevant to our times? We don't live under Greek rule, we are not engaged in military revolts led by the Chashmona'im, and we currently have no Beis Hamikdash (may we see it rebuilt speedily in our days). Which Chanukah miracles are we still yearning for today?

The Defining Miracle of Chanukah

Every day of Chanukah, we insert the paragraph of Al Hanissim in bentsching and Shemoneh Esrei. The paragraph nicely summarizes the story of Chanukah — the Chashmona'i military victory over the Greek forces, the subsequent purification of the Beis Hamikdash, and lighting of the Menorah. The victory of *rabbim b'yad me'atim* (the many Greeks were defeated by the few Chashmona'im) is a focus of the paragraph, as it was a miraculous deliverance that was clearly orchestrated by G-d.

However, the Gemara in *Shabbos 21b*, highlights an entirely different event as

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the central miracle of our Chanukah commemoration celebration:

מאי חנוכה דתנו רבנן... שכשנכנסו יוונים להיכל טמאו כל השמנים שבהיכל וכשגברה מלכות בית חשמונאי ונצחום בדקו ולא מצאו אלא פך אחד של שמן שהיה מונח בחותמו של כהן גדול ולא היה בו אלא להדליק יום אחד נעשה בו נס והדליקו ממנו שמונה ימים שבת כא:

What is [the reason of] Chanukah?... For when the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oils therein, and when the Hasmonean dynasty prevailed against and defeated them, they made search and found only one cruse of oil which lay with the seal of the High Priest, but which contained sufficient for one day's lighting only; yet a miracle was wrought therein and they lit [the lamp] therewith for eight days.

Shabbos 21b

According to this Gemara, the miracle of the long-lasting oil is the defining miracle of Chanukah, the essence of the holiday. If so, when we seek to understand the relevance of the Chanukah miracle in our current times, we must delve into the messages of the long-lasting oil of the Beis Hamikdash. Through appreciating the miracle of the long-lasting oil, we can then search for connections to modern-day Jewish life.

Greek Exile is Darkness

In Rabbinic literature, the Chanukah imagery of light and darkness extends far beyond the miracle of the Menorah lights. According to Rav Shimon ben Lakish in *Breishis Rabbah 2:4*, the defining characteristic of the period of Greek influence and persecution is *choshech*, darkness. Rav Shimon ben Lakish discusses the following passuk:

וְהָאָרֶץ, הָיְתָה תְהוֹ וְבָהוּ, וְחֹשֶׁךְ, עַל-פְּנֵי תְהוֹם; וְרוּחַ אֱלֹקִים, מְרַחֶפֶת עַל-פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם.
בראשית א:ב

Now the earth was unformed and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters.

Breishis 1:2

He explains that the phrase alludes to the four *galuyos*, exiles, of Jewish history.

ר"ש בן לקיש פתר קריא בגליות... "וְחֹשֶׁךְ" זה גלות יון שהחשיכה עיניהם של ישראל בגזירותיהן שהיתה אומרת להם כתבו על קרן השור שאין לכם חלק באלקי ישראל.
בראשית רבה ב:ד

Rav Simeon ben Lakish applied the passage to the [foreign] powers... Choshech symbolizes Greece, which darkened the eyes of Israel with its decrees, ordering Israel, "Write on the

horn of an ox that you have no portion in the God of Israel.”

Breishis Rabbah 2:4

The *Nesivos Shalom* questions why the medrash specifically highlights the decree of the *keren ha'shor*, the horn of an ox, as the source of the darkness brought about by the Greeks.¹ The Greeks imposed many strict decrees during their persecution of the Jews, banning mitzvos such as bris milah, Torah learning, and sacrifices in the Beis Hamikdash.² Why does the decree of the *keren ha'shor* represent the quintessence of *choshech* that defines the Greek galus? To answer this question, we must understand the concept of darkness versus light, as it exists within Torah.

The Motif of Light and Darkness

Throughout Tanach, *or*, light, is conceptually used in association with spirituality and/or Torah.³ In Mishlei 6:23, Torah is compared to light and mitzvos are compared to candles:

כִּי נֵר מִצְוָה וְתוֹרָה אֹרֶךְ.

For mitzvos are candles and Torah is a light.

In Mishlei 20:27, man's *neshama* is called the candle of G-d:

נֵר ה' נְשַׁמַּת אָדָם.

The candle of G-d is the soul of man.

The prophet Micha (7:8) conjures up the image of light shining within darkness to describe Hashem's presence in his life:

כִּי אֵשֶׁב בְּחֹשֶׁךְ ה' אֹרֶךְ לִי.

When I sit in darkness, G-d is my light.

The imagery of candles and light recurs in many other instances, overtly and exegetically referring to spirituality.⁴

Choshech, conversely, symbolizes the absence of spirituality. Darkness is often invoked as a punishment or threat of distance from Hashem, as is evidenced in Yechezkel 32:8:

וְנָתַתִּי חֹשֶׁךְ עַל אֶרְצָךְ נְאֻם ה' אֱלֹהִים.

I will place darkness on your land, the word of G-d, the Lord.

In Amos 5:20, it similarly states:⁵

הֲלֹא חֹשֶׁךְ יוֹם ה' וְלֹא אֹרֶךְ וְאֶפְסֵל וְלֹא נֶגְהָ לּוֹ.

Behold, darkness, not light, is the day of G-d and blackness not brightness in it.

Choshech exists as a direct contrast to *or*; light and darkness represent opposing forces within the realm of spirituality.

Or and Choshech within the Chanukah Story

With the above understanding of *or* and *choshech* in mind, we can now see how light against darkness is a central theme of the original story of Chanukah, both literally and conceptually. The Greeks recognized that the survival of the Jewish community is not predicated upon our physical existence, but rather upon our spiritual existence. With this knowledge, they sought to separate Jews from religious practices such as bris milah and sacrifices. However, the Greeks understood that taking away these individual mitzvos was not enough to truly overtake the Jews spiritually.

The image of *ner mitzvah v'Torah or*⁶ — mitzvos are candles and Torah is a light/torch — reveals the foundation of Jewish spiritual life. Imagine a room that contains a fiery torch and many individual candles that were lit from that torch. When a few candles are extinguished, the room is still full of light. If one would want to submerge

Rabbi Sholom Noach Berezovsky

Rabbi Sholom Noach Berezovsky (August 8, 1911 – August 8, 2000) is widely known for his teachings which he published as a series of books entitled *Nesivos Shalom*. He studied in the Slonimer yeshiva Toras Chessed in Baranovitsh, and in 1940 was appointed rosh yeshiva of Achei Temimim, the Lubavitcher yeshiva in Tel Aviv. In 1941 he opened the Slonimer yeshiva in Jerusalem with just five students. The Slonim Hasidic dynasty was virtually wiped out in the Holocaust; the yeshiva in Jerusalem served as the focus for its revival. Rabbi Berezovsky served as the Slonimer Rebbe from 1981 until his death.

Adapted from Wikipedia

the entire room in darkness, one must eliminate the source of the light and extinguish the torch.

This image can help us understand the meaning of Rav Shimon ben Lakish's difficult statement in *Breishis Rabbah*, regarding the decree of the *keren ha'shor*. The Greeks instituted many harsh decrees, with the intention of eliminating Bnei Yisrael's spiritual existence. However, the decrees against individual mitzvos impacted Jewish spirituality in the same way that the extinguishing of individual candles impacts the overall brightness of a room that contains a fiery torch. Only once the Greeks attacked the very essence of the Jewish *or* by inculcating the ideology of “אין חלק באלוקי ישראל” — You have no portion with the G-d of Israel,” was the source of the Jewish religious light, the torch of our

relationship with Hashem, in danger of being extinguished.⁷ It is for this reason that the medrash focuses on the *keren ha'shor* as the decree which “darkened the eyes of Israel,” for it was this decree, specifically, that brought about the spiritual darkness of the Greek exile.

Thankfully, the story of Chanukah does not end with the Greek decrees and takeover. While many Jews were swallowed up by the spiritual void created by Antiochus and the Greeks, a small group of Jews, the Makabim, refused to believe that their connection with G-d was severed, and thereby resisted the darkness that was spreading throughout the Jewish people. The Makabim's call of “*mi laHashem eilai* — whoever is for G-d should follow me,” reflects their insistence and commitment to their relationship with Hashem. Despite the Greeks' efforts to sever the connection between the Jewish people and G-d, the Makabim remained steadfast in their fight for spiritual existence. The Makabim protected the torch of Torah and G-dliness from being fully extinguished by the Greek onslaught, and in doing so, saved the light of the Jewish people from being extinguished.

The Gemara's answer to the question “What is Chanukah?” fits perfectly with this understanding. The rampages and desecrations of the Greeks threatened to extinguish all light from Bnei Yisrael. The lighting of the Menorah using the single remaining pure jug of oil represents the triumph of the light of Torah in the face of nearly-subsuming darkness. The miracle of the small jug of oil that lasted for eight days alludes to the equivalent spiritual miracle, the survival of Bnei Yisrael's connection to Hashem and the perseverance of the light of Torah. Chanukah reminds us that despite tremendous darkness, as

long as there is one small “jug of oil” remaining, as long as the torch has not been extinguished, flames can be relit and light will prevail.

Bayamim Hahem Bizman Haze

Today, our world is threatened by the darkness of a society in which morality is subjective and religious observance is dwindling. Our children and students are enmeshed in a culture in which deviation and exploration is “in,” and tradition is “out.” The statistics of intermarriage, as well as the rate of attrition of Jews who have become less observant or feel less connected to their Judaism, are a frightening reflection of the darkness that has seeped into the larger Jewish community.⁸

It is true that there is darkness in our world, and we must not underestimate the effects and far-reaching effects of the messages of society that encourage us to believe *שאין לנו חלק באלוקי ישראל*, that we have no relationship with G-d. Yet as we celebrate Chanukah once again, and light our menorahs each night, we must remember the message of the long-lasting oil. Darkness exists, but the light of Torah cannot be extinguished.

Just as the Makabim called for a return to G-d and Torah values, we must loudly proclaim our allegiance and commitment to our relationship with Hashem. In the face of darkness, we must champion the beauty of a relationship with G-d. We must nurture the flickering flames that exist within every Jew. If we want our neighbors, children, and students to appreciate the light of mitzvos, perhaps we must first start by rekindling our commitment to Torah and connection with Hashem. Then, just as a small jug of pure oil was

able to miraculously extend the light of Menorah, we will be able to extend the light of Torah and mitzvos throughout our homes and communities.

The true miracle of the Chanukah story was the triumph of light over darkness, of closeness over distance, of spirituality over apathy. As we light our menorahs this year, let us daven for the same triumphs, renewed connection and reinvigorated commitment in our times — *bayamim hahem bizman haze*.

Notes

1. See *Nesivos Shalom, Ma'marei Chanukah, Ner Chanukah, Hemshech Or Hamenorah*, chapter 1, paragraph 2.
2. See Rambam, *Hilchos Chanukah* 3:1.
3. The similarities between Torah and light exist even beyond the conceptual; in numerologically, *Ba'al Ha'Turim* (Bereishis 1:4) points out that the gematria of *אור האור* is 613, the same numerical value as the word *בתורה* and equivalent to the number of mitzvos contained within the Torah.
4. For additional examples of the motif of light, see *Tehillim* 4:7, *Tehillim* 36:10, *Tehillim* 97:11, *Iyov* 26:10, *Iyov* 28:11, and *Eichah* 3:2.
5. For additional examples of the motif of darkness, see *Yoel* 2:2, *Tehillim* 35:6, *Iyov* 3:4, and *Iyov* 29:3.
6. *Mishlei* 6:23.
7. See the *Nesivos Shalom, Ma'marei Chanukah, Ner Chanukah, Hemshech Or Hamenorah* chapter 3, paragraph 1, for an in-depth explanation of the Greek tactics and logic.
8. The Pew Research Center's 2013 survey of U.S. Jews, colloquially referred to as the “Pew Report,” is one example of statistic-based evidence of the increasing distance from halachic Judaism and the Jewish faith that is reported by many American Jews. According to the report, only 48% of Jews raised as Orthodox still consider themselves to be Orthodox, and 58% of U.S. Jews have a non-Jewish spouse.