

Chanuka: Faith vs. Fate

A. The Faithful Maccabees

The defeat of the Syrian-Greeks at the hands of the Maccabees was a function of faith. Based on political, military and social considerations this was not a fair match. The Greeks had thousands more soldiers than the small ragtag Jewish army. But the faith of the Maccabees powered their army and their victory. Common wisdom dictated that the larger and more trained army would win. The victory of Chanuka was, therefore, a victory of faith over reason.

We have a tradition, recorded in *Megillas Antiyochus*, that there were three mitzvos that the ancient Greeks despised and outlawed: bris mila, Shabbos and Rosh Chodesh. The Greeks may have liked the interpersonal ethics of the Torah, but they didn't like the mitzvos that focused on the relationship between man with God, specifically Shabbos, mila and Rosh Chodesh. We understand why they would be opposed to mila, changing the human body by cutting off a piece of skin. They thought the human body was perfect, since they idolized the form of the human body in their culture and in their sculptures. Therefore, they didn't like cutting off a piece of skin. For us Jews though, bris mila is a matter of faith. Why do we cut off this piece of skin instead of any other piece of skin? We have faith in the mitzva of Hashem.

There have been many non-Jews who have had a circumcision throughout the ages. They did so for health reasons. However, when a Jew



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performs a circumcision as a bris mila, he receives an extra spiritual quality. This is something physically intangible that we cannot see. It is an added spiritual factor that comes into our souls and becomes part of our lives. This holiness is beyond nature. Since this is a mitzva that goes against the natural order, the Greeks opposed it. We, though, believe that God is above nature and so is His mitzva and, therefore, so are we.

Shabbos is also against the natural social order. Human beings must work to support themselves, Why make one day into a day of rest? Shabbos is so strict that even some minor forms of work are prohibited. One can't even carry a small object from his house to the outside. A person can't write two letters of the alphabet. These laws are against the natural way for people to live. The Greeks were against Shabbos because they couldn't understand it. Hashem told us that Shabbos is a spiritual day. Our spirituality connects us to it. Even if our physical and biological systems don't need Shabbos, this spiritual day has unique spiritual benefits. Shabbos is *me'ein Olam Haba*, a taste of the future spiritual world. We understand why the Greeks would oppose Shabbos and why the Jews — who are connected to the dimension of spirituality — eagerly observed this

mitzva.

Why, though, did the Greeks oppose the mitzva of *kiddush hachodesh*? What could be wrong with declaring a new month every thirty days or so? This is a calendar system that follows the natural order. The moon goes through a cycle, waning until it disappears, and then it comes back. The beginning of each new month is based on a simple naturally recurring phenomenon. Why did the Greeks oppose the performance of this mitzva, which is based on nature?

B. Rosh Chodesh and its Irrational Implications

The Yerushalmi, in *Ksubos* 1:2, says that the Jewish calendar is controlled by the Jewish beis din. It decides when to start the new month, sometimes in 29 days or sometimes in 30 days. In addition to declaring the beginning of each month, it also institutes a leap year when appropriate. Since there is a discrepancy of 11 days between the solar and lunar years, we add an extra month of 30 days every two to three years to keep the lunar and solar years in sync.

The Yerushalmi teaches us an amazing halacha. At the age of 12, a girl becomes an adult. If her birthday is in the month of Adar, say on the 16th of

the month, her bas mitzva would then be in the month of Adar. But then, if after her 12th birthday, the beis din declares a leap year, she suddenly would become younger again. She would only become an adult on the 16th of Adar Sheini. Physically, she is not considered mature anymore for another month! This is strange. One day she was considered physically mature, and the next she is not. In the mitzva of *kiddush hachodesh* we see that physical reality depends on the Jewish courts. This changes the status of a person, whether a physically immature child or a physically mature adult.

This was a rule that the Greeks thought was irrational. They opposed it, while we, in our faith, accepted it.

Shem Mishmuel, Chanukah 5674, Rosh Chodesh Teves, explains further. The word *chodesh*, month, is related to the word for newness, *chadash*. There is newness within the human being. The Jew on Rosh Chodesh gains a new spiritual injection of life, as if he or she has been recreated anew. It is not just a repetition of the previous 30-day cycle. Every time a new month arrives, a Jew receives fresh spiritual energy. The Jew who is sensitive gets a spiritual arousal on Rosh Chodesh. This is also beyond nature; it is a

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matter of faith.

The *Ohr HaChayim*, Bereishis 2:3, says that this happens on Shabbos too. Shabbos is a holy day that brings holiness with it. A Jew who is sensitive can become energized for more holiness for the rest of the ensuing week. In the same way that the Shabbos day produces kedusha for the week, on Rosh Chodesh, a Jew can access new spiritual energies to grow in holiness and religious experience for the whole month.

In this way, the Jew is like the moon. The moon disappears but subsequently reappears. It comes back with energy, growing and getting larger. The Jew can advance spiritually as he or she goes through each month.

Even time itself has this characteristic. It appears that every second is the same, the clock ticks in the same way every second. However, time is really a dynamic entity that brings with it a different character for each different time. This is a spiritual concept unique to Judaism, and was beyond the understanding of the ancient Greeks.

C. The Greek Jealousy of Am Yisrael

This is the source of ancient Greek jealousy of the Jews. In their system of thought, the natural order is powerful and immutable. It creates a tremendous barrier to human creativity. We are bound by our fate. Fate is an idea often found in Greek literature. Fate, according to the Greeks, binds a person and he cannot break free of it. The Torah, however, teaches us to believe in faith. Thus, faith replaces fate. Man and woman can change their fate. The idea of teshuva is that a person who has done horrible things can still change his

ways and make himself into a better person. I have seen boys who come from places very far from Torah, and after coming to yeshiva they undergo a drastic change. This is the power of teshuva. We have faith in Hashem, who tells us to have faith in people. People can dramatically change themselves. This is the power of Rosh Chodesh, of renewal.

Our existence is not determined by fate. Neither physical nor social orders bind us. They have limited power to control us. Hashem can take us outside of the natural order and make unnatural things happen.

This is the power of bris mila, of Shabbos and of Rosh Chodesh.

Rosh Chodesh is the day of Dovid Hamelech, who was the baal teshuva par excellence. He changed his ways to become a totally different person. Faith that goes beyond nature was at the root of the Maccabees' revolt against the Greeks. The Jews believed with faith and were able to go beyond nature, and they won a war against the odds that physical reality dictated.

D. Faith Even Against Reason

This concept is at the root of the Jewish return to the Land of Israel in modern times. Many nations had written off a Jewish return to Israel as impossible. They were right — dealing with only natural circumstances. No one would have ever entertained such a foolish thought that a small and weak nation would return to its land after nearly 1,900 years. It is way beyond nature, but it is a matter of faith. The impossible dream can happen. This is one aspect of the faith of Chanuka, the creative dream to go beyond what we think is naturally possible.

E. The Month of Teves and Shevet Dan

There are twelve months in the year, and Yaakov Avinu had twelve sons. The commentators have aligned them in different ways. Teves (which is the Rosh Chodesh that occurs on Chanuka) is connected to the *shevet* of Dan. He is the personality of the month of Teves. There is a concept in chassidus called י"שפ. It is the acronym of *olam shana nefesh*. This refers to recurring spiritual characteristics that take corresponding form in place, in time and in the human soul. According to this theory, the soul of the month of Teves is *Shevet Dan*. Shimshon, the great Jewish hero and prophet, comes from Dan. His soul had within it the same spiritual energy as contained in the time of Chodesh Teves. What is the nature of this energy?

The midrash, *Bereishis Rabbah*, *Vayeitzei* no. 71, comments on the

meaning of the word *dan*, which literally means judgment. Rachel Imeinu, stepmother of Dan, named him and explained, "*danani Elokim*." The midrash explains this word in two different directions. *Danani v'chivyani, danani v'zikani*. She said God judged me and found me guilty, and He judged me and found me meritorious. This is why she called her son by the name Dan. This is a strange midrash. What does it mean?

F. Rachel's Desperation

Rachel, the beloved wife of Yaakov, was childless. Meanwhile, Leah had given birth to four sons. Rachel was upset beyond reason. She went to Yaakov and said (Bereishis 30), "You must do what you can to get me children. Pray to Hashem and promise whatever needs to be done in order for me to have a child. If not, I will die." Perhaps she even threatened to commit suicide. Yaakov angrily

retorted, "God is the one who is preventing you from having a child, it is not my fault." In desperation, Rachel gave her maidservant Bilha to Yaakov, and Bilha gave birth to Dan. Eventually Rachel herself gave birth to Yosef.

Yaakov, paragon of virtue, loved Rachel. He wanted her to have a child. How could he be so cruel and say to her, "It's not my fault, take care of it yourself!" *Shem Mishmuel* (in the aforementioned derasha) explains that Yaakov put on a show of cruelty towards his wife because he wanted her to pray. He wanted her to think she was really helpless and hopeless. All along she knew her husband Yaakov was a tzadik and had a strong power of prayer. Yaakov had survived Lavan and Eisav with the help of angels. In her agony, Rachel was relying on Yaakov to convince Hashem to perform a miracle and give her a child. He could probably get the angels to do it, she thought.

The Jews in the Bergen Belsen concentration camp managed to put together the materials to light Chanukah lights on the first night of Chanukah. R. Yisrael Spira, the Bluzhover Rebbe, was chosen to do the lighting. As a crowd gathered around him, he recited the first two blessings. When he reached the third blessing, he stopped, turned his head, and then immediately recited the Shehchianu blessing. After the lighting, a fellow named Mr. Zamietchkowski challenged R. Spira: I understand how you can recite the first two blessings, but how could you possibly bless G-d "that you have kept us alive, have preserved us and brought us to this season" in these dreadful conditions? R. Spira responded that he too wondered whether it was appropriate to recite Shehechianu, and turned to ask one of the rabbis. But when he saw the large crowd of living Jews listening with faith and fervor to the blessings while they stared death in the eye, he knew the answer to the question and recited Shehchianu in a strong and comforting voice.

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When she desperately came to Yaakov and said, “If you don’t get me this child I’m going to die or commit suicide,” Yaakov knew that this was wrong. She had somehow transferred her faith in Hashem to him. She had faith in Yaakov, and that was wrong. Yaakov destroyed this faith when he screamed at her. “I can’t help you!” he exclaimed. “This is your issue.” When he walked away from her then she was completely broken and helpless. She knew there was only one thing for her to do, to pour her heart out to the Almighty. Even Yaakov had seemed to have given up hope for her. Then she prayed like she had never prayed before. This is why she was answered and had the step-child Dan for her to raise.

This same story was repeated centuries later. Chana’s husband suggests that they stop talking about children. “I am your loyal husband. I am better to you than ten children would be,” he said (Shmuel I 1:8). She saw that he had given up hope. This motivated her to pray and she too was answered. When a person finds himself facing a cruel fate and pours his heart out to Hashem, Hashem destroys the decree and creates a miracle for the person to receive a blessing. This is what Yaakov wanted Rachel to discover. There is no such thing as helplessness and hopelessness. Pray sincerely and passionately and you will be answered.

These were the two judgments of Rachel, which the midrash associates with the name Dan. When Yaakov rebuffed her when she had no

children, she felt the first judgment. The later judgment came when she received her wish and Dan was born.

This has happened many times throughout our history. Hashem can always help us.

גַּם כִּי אֶלֶף בְּגִיָּא צְלָמֹת לֹא אִירָא רַע כִּי אֶתָּה
 עֲמֻדֵי שְׂבִטָה וּמִשְׁעֲנֵנָהּ הַמָּה יִנְחַמְנִי
 תהלים כג:ד

Even when I walk in a place of death, I will not fear evil because You Hashem are with me. Your staff and Your rod will comfort me.

Tehillim 23:4

The Maccabees had reached this point of helplessness and hopelessness. They were subjects of the most powerful army in the world, with the most technologically advanced weaponry. Many Jews had joined the Greeks culturally, abandoning their Judaism. Only a small group maintained their loyalty to Torah. They couldn’t observe mila, Rosh Chodesh or Shabbos. They started with less than a hundred soldiers, mostly kohanim, who were not trained soldiers, and they fought a well-trained and experienced army. But Hashem helped them win, proving that faith is greater than fate. The power of *mesirus nefesh* (dedication and sacrifice) for our holy mission always enables us to succeed.

This is the same spiritual energy that Shimshon had. He single-handedly defeated thousands of enemy Plishtim. This is the energy of Chodesh Teves, to believe in the

impossible dream, to believe Hashem will help us when things seem naturally hopeless. We will never lose our faith in Him!

G. Don’t Always Follow Your Yetzer Tov

Shem Mishmuel mentions an unusual idea that his father, the Avnei Nezer, once said. In Krias Shma, we say “*v’lo sasuru acharei l’vavchem v’acharei eineichem*, Do not follow your hearts and your eyes.” We know people have two eyes, so it makes sense to say *eineichem* in plural form. But each person only has one heart. Why does the verse state it in the plural form? One may say that it means the many hearts of many Jews. But the Avnei Nezer proves that in this case, *acharei l’vavchem* actually means one person having two hearts. Spiritually and emotionally, we all have two hearts: a good heart and a bad heart, a *yetzer tov* and a *yetzer hara*. He insists that the Torah means not to follow both hearts, the *yetzer hara* and the *yetzer tov*. What does this mean?

We understand that we are not supposed to follow our bad instincts, such as anger and jealousy. Why not follow the good heart, the *yetzer tov*? *Shem Mishmuel* says that when the Jews were at Har Sinai and Hashem offered them the Torah, Bnei Yisrael said *na’ase v’nishma*, “We will observe the Torah’s mitzvos and we will understand them.” They placed doing before understanding. Of course we are supposed to understand. But before understanding we must make



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the commitment to do God's will. The second step is that He allows us to study Torah and, with His help, to understand it. But we do the mitzvos even without understanding them. If my good heart says let me understand God's dictates, if I feel I must understand before I perform mitzva actions, I am wrong. First one must make a commitment to listen to Hashem's words, and then begin to understand them. If my good side puts reason before faith saying, "I want to understand the Torah," then I should not listen to my good-hearted intentions. Reason does not replace or precede faith.

This was the crux of the philosophical clash between the Greek value system and the Torah. The Greeks adored the human mind. The ancient Greek appreciation for the beauty of life began and ended with reason. Reason is part of human nature. The Greeks would say, "If it's natural this is what we have to do. We must follow the dictates of our reason." The philosopher was the ultimate accomplishment in ancient Greek culture. They couldn't accept certain *bein adam laMakom* mitzvos. Tfilin, Shabbos, kashrus, Rosh Chodesh

and others didn't seem reasonable to them. They saw the Jews following the dictates of Hashem, even though these mitzvos did not have an apparent rationale.

The Jewish thinkers disagreed. Of course human logic is important. But it's the second step. The first step is faith. We must listen to Hashem since He is the source of our being. He has control of us whether we understand it or not. We first accept our responsibility to Him. The second step is *nishma*, we will understand.

H. Today's Faith

This relationship between faith and reason has been at the core of Judaism throughout the centuries. If we didn't have the commitment of *na'ase* before *nishma* how could we have survived all of those pogroms, persecutions, wanderings, and the horrific Holocaust? How could we go on after that? It would not make any sense to continue after all that. It is simply not rational. The Arab foes of Israel say that there is no rational reason for Jews to continue in Eretz Yisrael. We are different, however, because

we proceed with faith. We know that this is right even if we can't explain why. Hashem has said to us, "You have to continue after the Holocaust, you must return to Tzion."

The power of *kabalas ol malchus shamayim* (accepting the yoke of Heaven) has made Judaism and the Jewish people an eternal nation. We are beyond logic, and therefore nobody can explain the secret of Jewish survival; we can't even explain it ourselves. It is a secret that only Hashem knows. He took His people and placed them above the natural laws of nations and of physics, biology, sociology and history. We in turn make the commitment of faith. This is why Judaism continues today with freshness and power in the Holy Land. With God's help we will have a new Temple, one that will be holier even than the Temple of the Chashmonaim because it is rooted in the power of the eternal faith in God.

Questions and Exercises for Family Discussion

Questions:

- 1) What is the common denominator among the mitzvos that the Greeks outlawed?
- 2) What was the core argument between ancient Greek philosophy and Judaism?
- 3) Why were the Greeks opposed to the mitzva of *kiddush hachodesh*?
- 4) What is the difference between faith and fate?
- 5) Why didn't Yaakov help Rachel in her quest for a child?
- 6) What is the Jewish attitude towards understanding the mitzvos?
- 7) When does reason enter Judaism?

Exercises:

- 8) List five good things you do based on reason.
- 9) List five good things you do based on faith and not on reason.
- 10) Do you experience spirituality when you perform faith based mitzvos?
- 11) Do you experience spirituality when you perform reason based mitzvos?
- 12) Does the existence of the State of Israel and the millions of Jews living there strengthen your faith in Hashem and in his Torah? How?