

Mikdash, Mitzvot and Menorah: Chanukah Themes from Chamisha Chumshei Torah

While Chanukah is unique in our calendar of celebration in that it commemorates a story that takes place long after the closing of Tanach, its themes resonate throughout *Chamisha Chumshei Torah*. We know that in halacha, whenever Chazal create a new rule (i.e. a *din drabanan*) they pattern it after the Torah law — *kol d'tikkun rabanan kein d'oraysa tikkun*. Examples of this abound throughout Shas.¹ Rav Hershel Schachter,² quoting Rav Solovetchik in the name of his grandfather Reb Chaim, describes this as an essential feature of the way Chazal establish rules throughout Shas while balancing the risk of inappropriately adding onto the Torah (*bal tosif*). In this way, every established rabbinic law is both something new, and at the same time a reflection of ancient archetypal themes of Torah.

The way Chazal establish rules applies not just to halacha, but is reflected in the fabric of our narratives, stories and celebrations as well. The celebration of Chanukah echoes the themes and messages of the Torah. Both as *Maaseh avos siman l'banim* (events of the forefathers are a sign for their descendants),³ or even more fundamentally, as the expression that all celebrations in the Jewish calendar are rooted in the ethos and history of Torah, we find Chanukah presciently



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foreshadowed in the stories of the Mikdash, Menorah and battles of Bnei Yisrael. As such, we can find the themes of Chanukah and answers to some of the more puzzling aspects of this Bayis Sheni (Second Temple) holiday in the text of *Chamisha Chumshei Torah*.

Mai Chanuka?

The most well-known question of Chanukah is: What is the nature of its celebration? *Mai Chanukah?* Chazal answer in *Shabbos* 21b:

מאי חנוכה דתנו רבנן בכ"ה בכסליו יומי
דחנוכה תמניא אינון דלא למספד בהון ודלא
להתענות בהון 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 לשנה אחרת
קבעום ועשאוים ימים טובים בהלל והודאה.

What is Chanukah? Our rabbis taught that [starting] on the 25th of Kislev [begin] the eight days of Chanukah. They are days of celebration of not eulogizing and fasting, since when the Yevanim went into the sanctuary they defiled all the oils in the Temple and when the rule of the house of Chashmonaim was mighty and victorious over them they searched and didn't find one flask of oil that was left intact with the seal of the Kohain Gadol, and they only had enough to light [the Menorah] for one day. A miracle occurred and they lit from it for eight days. In the following year they established and made it days of holiday with hallel and thanksgiving.

The focus of the Gemara's explanation for the celebration of Chanukah is

not that of the military victory and of the few vanquishing the many, but on the miracle that happens subsequent to the victory, the miracle of the small flask of oil lasting longer than it naturally should have lasted. The question that many discuss is: Why is the miracle of the oil so central that it is the primary focus of our actions? Isn't the salvation of the Jewish people through an impossible military victory against a world power not the greater of the miracles, especially since they didn't even need the oil; they could have used the oil they found given the general principle of *tumah* (ritual impurity) being permissible for public use if needed (*tumah hutrah btzibur*)?

The Mahral in *Ner Mitzvah* answers

ועוד יש לומר שעיקר מה שקבעו ימי חנוכה בשביל שהיו מנצחים את היונים, רק שלא היה נראה שהיה כאן ניצחון הזה על ידי נס שעשה זה השם יתברך ולא היה זה מכוחם וגבורתם. ולפיכך נעשה הנס על ידי נרות המנורה, שידעו שהכל היה בנס מן השם יתברך. וכך המלחמה שהיו מנצחין ישראל היה מן השם יתברך.

The military victory certainly was a great miracle, but it was not obvious or immediately recognizable as such, since after all, perhaps good military strategy can lead to unexpected results. Therefore, the flask of oil, which is unequivocally a miracle from God, is the stamp of Hashem on the victory of the Chashmonaim as well. Do not assume that it is your power and strength that led you to victory, but that both the military victory and long-lasting oil are miracles from God.

R. Meir Simcha HaKohen of Dvinsk in *Meshech Chochma* further elaborates on this point in reference to the celebration of *yetzias Mitzrayim*⁴ in Shmot 12:16. Jews do not celebrate such an event the same way other nations do. We do not celebrate the downfall of our enemy — *binfol oyevech*

al tismach — rather we celebrate our redemption and salvation by the act and victory of God. Pesach is not referenced as the day of the destruction of Egyptian civilization. It is the day of the deliverance of Bnei Yisroel. He then explains the miracle of Chanukah:

ולכך על נס חנוכה, אין היום מורה רק על הדלקת שמן זית, וחינוך בית ה' וטהרתו, והשגחת אלקים על עמו בית ישראל בזמן שלא היה נביא וחווה בישראל. ולכן נעשה ההדלקה על ענין בלתי מפורסם, ההדלקה שמונה ימים בהיכל, משום שהמנהיגים והשרי צבאות היו הכהנים הגדולים החשמונאים, והיתה חוששת ההשגחה שמא יאמרו 'כוחם ועוצם ידם', ובתחבולות מלחמה נצחו, הראתה להם ההשגחה אות ומופת בהיכל, אשר אינו ידוע רק לכוהנים, למען ידעו כי יד אלקים עשה זאת והם מושגחים דרך נס למעלה מן הטבע.

And therefore regarding the miracle of Chanukah, the day indicates only the lighting of the pure oil and the consecration of the House of God and its purity and the providence of God over His nation, the house of Israel, at a time when there was no prophet or seer in Israel.⁵ And therefore the lighting was done about something that was not so well known as the lighting of the candles for eight days was in the heichal because the leaders of the military revolt were the kohanim and the Kohain Gadol, and the Divine Providence was concerned that they should not become arrogant or conceited that it was their strategy and brilliance, but rather it was important for them to see the miracle and know that it was from Hashem.

The celebration of the military victory is inextricably connected to the miracle of the oil, to ensure that we do not forget that victory was not simply a result of a skilled and strategic army, but that it was a miracle, directly emanating from Hashem.

The conclusion of the battle, therefore, is secondary to the resurgence of *avoda* and observance of mitzvos that was able to take place after the war. That continuation of Torah life and worship in the Mikdash began when the Jews reentered the Beis Hamikdash and rededicated it.

The other key question of Chanukah is, Why eight days?

The earliest source for Chanukah in Chazal is in *Megillas Taanis*, an ancient text of the celebratory days for which eulogy and fasting is prohibited; an ancient shul *luach* as it were, to which the Gemara refers to in quasi-biblical terms — *dichtiv* — as it is written. There we find a surprising answer, different from all the more familiar answers to this question.⁶

ומה ראו לעשות חנוכה שמונה ימים, והלא חנוכה שעשה משה במדבר לא עשה אלא שבעה ימים, נאמר (ויקרא ח, לג): "וּמִפְּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד לֹא תִצְאוּ שְׁבַעַת יָמִים וְגו'", ואומר: (במדבר ז, יב): "וַיְהִי הַמִּקְרִיב בַּיּוֹם הָרִאשׁוֹן אֶת קָרְבָּנוֹ וְגו'", ובשביעי הקריב פרים. וכן מצינו בחנוכה שעשה שלמה, שלא עשה אלא שבעת ימים, שנאמר: (דה"ב ז, ט): "כִּי חֲנֻכַּת הַמִּזְבֵּחַ עָשׂוּ שְׁבַעַת יָמִים, וְהִחַג שְׁבַעַת יָמִים". מה ראו לעשות חנוכה זו שמונה ימים? אלא – בימי מלכות יון נכנסו בני חשמונאי להיכל, ובנו את המזבח, ושדוהו בשדית ותקנו בו כלי שרת והיו מתעסקין בו שמונה ימים.

And why did they (Chazal) see fit to make Chanukah eight days? And is not the chanukah that Moshe made in the desert only seven days, "and it was the sacrifice on the first day," and it says, "and from the door of the ohel moed do not leave for seven days," and it says on the seventh [day] he sacrificed cows. And so too we find in the chanukah that Shlomo made, that he did it for only seven days as it says, "and his sacrifices, etc., because the chanukah [dedication] of the Mizbayach [altar] they made for seven days and the holiday was

seven days.” So why did they see that this Chanukah should be eight days? Rather, in the days of the kingdom of the Yevanim the sons of Chashmonaim entered the sanctuary and built the Mizbayach [altar] and plastered it and fixed the tools of service and were involved with it for eight days.

The answer of why the celebration was eight days is not a function of the long-lasting oil, but rather the time it took to rebuild the stones and service of the Mizbayach. Most important, the ancient text of *Megillas Taanis* clearly sees this Chanukah and dedication as linked to its predecessors, the *chanukas Hamishkan* and Mikdash — the dedications of both the Mishkan and of the Temple.

In both accounts, the one of the candles and the *chanukas hamizbayach*, the point is very clearly, as the *Meshech Chochma* explains, that the celebration is the result of Hashem’s intervention and our return to His service. These themes are critical in our celebration and the values it imparts, and resonate powerfully with the larger themes we find through Chumash around the Mikdash, Mizbayach and Menorah.

The Chanukah Message “by the Book”

The Ramban, in his introduction to Sefer Shemos, explains that the sefer is called *sefer hageula*, the book of redemption, because of the redemption of the Jews that takes place in the book. He points out that the redemption that is celebrated is not simply a physical one marked by the physical victory over the Egyptians. If that was the case, then the book would conclude after the victory over the Egyptian enemy is complete, in Parshas Beshalach, after

the Egyptians are drowned. Instead, the book continues and does not conclude until the Mishkan is built and the Shechina is dwelling within it, at the conclusion of Parshas Pekudei. That is why the book is called *sefer hageula* according to the Ramban. The book is in fact a book of redemption, but that redemption is not complete until the relationship between Bnei Yisrael and Hashem is complete and marked by G-d’s Shechina dwelling in the Mishkan. Once again, the military victory over our enemies, in this case the annihilation of the great Egyptian empire, is not the main focus, but rather it is G-d’s presence among his people.

Bnei Yisrael experience this idea during their first encounter with an enemy after their miraculous salvation from the Egyptians, in their war with Amalek at the end of Parshas Beshalach. This was the first time they had to actually fight a battle. The Egyptian salvation was supernatural and they were passive players, as Moshe says before the splitting of the Sea, “*Hisyatzvu ure’u es yeshuas Hashem,*” — stand by and watch the salvation of Hashem (Shemos 14:13). During this very first military operation, the model is clear:

וְהָיָה כַּאֲשֶׁר יָרִים מֹשֶׁה יָדוֹ וְגָבַר יִשְׂרָאֵל
וְכַאֲשֶׁר יַנִּיחַ יָדוֹ וְגָבַר עַמְלֵק.

When Moshe raised his hand, Israel was stronger and when he lowered his hand, Amalek was stronger.

Shemot 17:11

Rashi, quoting the Mishna in *Rosh Hashana* 3:8, asks: Was it Moshe’s arms that won the battle or lost the battle? Rather, the Torah is teaching that as long as Israel looked heavenward and subjected their hearts to Hashem and recognized that He is in their midst, they would prevail. But

when they did not, they would fail. This notion is further demonstrated through the fact that the Aron went out to battle with them throughout the conquest of the land, again reminding Bnei Yisrael that they will only achieve military victory because Hashem is in their midst. Just as it was the center of the camp, the Aron was also the center of their military operations.

Similarly, at the beginning of Sefer Bamidbar, Bnei Yisrael are at the threshold of entering the Land of Israel and are preparing to leave Har Sinai to begin the conquest of the land. The book begins with Bnei Yisrael being counted and then organized into a cohesive group, with three tribes grouped together on all four sides of the camp. Among the discussion of the commentaries explaining the purpose of the census at the beginning of this sefer, the general consensus is that one main reason for the counting was for military purposes (Ramban in Bamidbar 1:2). However, the focus of the text is not the military strategy but the placement of the Mishkan in the center of the camp. In his introduction to Sefer Bamidbar, the Ramban explains that the reason the sefer begins with detailed instructions regarding the setting up of the camp and placement of the Mishkan is to enhance the glory of the Mishkan, and highlight the fact that Hashem is in the midst of his people, reminding them that He is ever-present and with them even as they leave the spiritual haven of Har Sinai:

וְהוֹסֵפֶר הַזֶּה כּוֹלּוֹ בְּמִצּוֹת שְׁעָה שֶׁנִּצְטוּ בָהֶם
בְּעַמְדָם בְּמַדְבַּר וּבְנִסִּים הַנְּעֻשִׂים לָהֶם לְסַפֵּר
כֹּל מַעֲשֵׂה ה’ אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה עִמָּהֶם לְהַפְלִיא וּסְפֹר
כִּי חָלַל לְתַת אֹיְבֵיהֶם לְפָנֵיהֶם לְחָרֵב וְצוּה אִיךָ
תַּחֲלַק הָאָרֶץ לָהֶם.

This whole book is concerned with temporary precepts commanded them for their stay in the wilderness and the miracles performed for them, to relate all the wondrous deeds of God. It relates that he began to deliver their enemies to them by sword and contains instructions how to divide the land.

Ramban, Introduction to Sefer Bamidbar

According to Ramban, the Mishkan that moved in the midst of the camp was a mini movable Har Sinai, accompanying the Jews on all of their journeys, reminding them that they will succeed in their military conquest of the land because G-d is in their midst.

Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi explains in the *Kuzari* (2:26) that the camp and its divisions are to be compared to the body and its limbs, the Mishkan being to the camp what the heart is to the body.⁷ Ramban explains further in his introduction that there were boundaries separating the parts of the camp to the Mishkan just as there were boundaries separating the people camping around the mountain to Har Sinai. Furthermore, when Bnei Yisrael are about to leave Har Sinai in Parshas Behaaloscha, after G-d says, *Rav lachem sheves behar hazeh,* — You've been at this mountain long enough, it's time to go — among the last instructions they are given is Hashem telling Aharon to light the Menorah, a constant, daily reminder of God's presence. This is yet another circumstance in which the focus could have been the physical preparation for military victory, and yet it was instead on the reminder of G-d's presence.

Sefer Devarim is the culmination of Bnei Yisrael's travels in the desert and entering into the land. It takes place in the last 40 days of Moshe's life and is his "last lecture" to his beloved people.

This final speech may be expected to be a pep rally for their imminent entrance into the land, or a rally for the upcoming battles that lay ahead. Instead, it was Moshe's *mussar* and guidance to the people, exhorting them to follow the ways of Torah and mitzvos, since that is most important factor to their ownership of and right to the land. **It is mitzvos and middos, not military might** that gives them ownership of the land. Moshe reminds them of this connection to Hashem that will be had, lost and regained because that is the key.

Moshe presses Bnei Yisrael in Sefer Devarim that the destiny of the Jewish people is inextricably tied to their lived relationship with Hashem. If they lose that relationship, they lose the land. He warns them:

וְאָמַרְתָּ בְּלִבְבְּךָ בְּחַי וְעַצְמֹךָ דָּי עָשָׂה לִי אֵת
הַחַיִּיל הַזֶּה. יוֹ וְזָכַרְתָּ אֵת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ כִּי הוּא
הִנְתִּיךָ לָדָבָר לַעֲשׂוֹת חַיִּיל לְמַעַן הִקְיִים אֵת
בְּרִיתוֹ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לְאַבְרָהָם כִּי־וְהָאֵלֹהִים.

You will say in your heart it is my strength and the strength of my arm that brought me this strength. And you will remember Hashem your G-d that He is the one who gives you strength to succeed...

Devarim 8:17-18

This is exactly the meaning and vision of the Menorah in the prophecy of Yehoshua Kohain Gadol in the haftarah of Chanukah. When seeing and not understanding the vision of the Menorah, the Angel tells Yehoshua that you do indeed know what it means (Zecharya 4:4-6) — these are the words of Hashem to Zerubavel, echoing the words of Moshe in Devarim, saying "*lo bchayil vlo bekoach ke im bruchi*" — Not by might and not by strength, but rather through My spirit.

It is not your strength and military

might, the same message of Moshe's, which is the message of the Menorah and the message of Chanukah. That is why the military victory is transformed to a symbol of the Menorah.

Duality of the Menorah

But why is it that the Menorah specifically represents this message of *lo bkoach*?

The answer may be intimately connected to the duality of the Menorah in its construction and daily *avodah*. The Menorah is both of our human *avodah* and personal efforts, but at the same time, it represents the basking in the passive role we take in God's handiwork.

Moshe is commanded to create a Menorah — *v'asisa menoras zahav tahor, mikshe teaseh hamenorah* — And you should make a golden Menorah pure, pulled, the Menorah should be made (Shemos 25:31). The first commandment is active — *veasisa* — but the latter verb is *teaseh* — it should be made — is passive. Rashi quoting the Midrash Tanchuma says:

מאליה לפי שהיה משה מתקשה בה אמר לו הקב"ה השלך את הככר לאור והיא נעשית מאליה לכך לא נכתב תעשה.

Teaseh [it should be made] on its own; Moshe was having difficulty with it, so God said to him: Throw the block [of gold] into the fire and it will be made on its own. Therefore, it says teaseh (passive).

The Menorah is formed by us and on its own, a combination of Hashem's action and our enlightened passivity. An expression of this whole notion of the Mikdash is *v'asu li mikdash veShachanti besocham* — make me a Mikdash (active) — and I will dwell (passive) in it (Shemos 25:8).

The same duality of active and passive



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is found in Aaron's lighting of the Menorah, "*Behaalosecha es haneros*" — when you raise up the candles, an active act, and "*el mul pnei hamenorah yairo shivas haneros*" — parallel to the Menorah, the seven candles will shine (Bamidbar 8:2), demonstrating a passive action on our part.

Similarly, in the halachos of the service of the Menorah, every morning the one who would get the lottery to clean and set up the Menorah would come in and do the *dishun* (clearing and preparing). They would clean and set up each of the candles except for the two Western ones, which were always lit (*Tamid* 33a). When there were open miracles in the Mikdash, these two candles were always lit even though they got the same measure of oil as all the rest (Rosh, *ibid*). They were not cleaned and set, but it was from those two candles that the Kohain lit all the rest, as the Rosh says, they served as, "a witness that G-d rests His presence in the Jewish people."

This *hashraas haShechina* is the *ner*

tamid, consistent and always, and reflects both the service of man and the sign from God that everything is only from Him.

Chanukah was a military victory that we recall and give thanks for. But as an *avoda*, it is transformed to the lighting of the candles, a reminder of the *ner tamid* and Moshe's recurring theme throughout the Torah that it is not our strength that allows us to succeed — a rejection of the *kochi veotzem yadi* model; instead, we succeed by embracing the Mikdash and the spiritual as the source of our strength, "*Vezacharta es hashem Elokecha ki Hu hanosen lecha koach Laasos chayil.*" (Devarim 8:18). The constant and consistent relationship through Torah and mitzvos is clearly the lasting legacy and destiny of the Jewish people.

Chanukah is not a commemoration of a victory in battle, but the celebration of what the Jews were fighting for and their rallying cry "*mi laHashem eli*" — Whoever is for Hashem, come with me.

Endnotes

- 1 Yoma 31a, Yevamos 11, Pesachim 30b, 39a; 116b, Gittin 64b, Bechoros 54a.
- 2 Introduction to *MiPninei HaRav*.
- 3 Usually quoted from the Ramban (Bereshis 12:6); The earlier source of this is *Bereishis Rabbah, Lech Lecha* no. 9, "Rabbi Yehoshua of Sichnin said God gave Avraham a *siman/sign* that all that happened to him happens to his sons."
- 4 *Meshech Chochma* Parshas Bo 12:16.
- 5 Similarly on Purim we don't celebrate the hanging of Haman but the reprieve the Jews received when they were saved from the decree.
- 6 Most famously, the *Bais Yosef* (*Orach Chaim*, 670). The many answers to this question before and after the *Bais Yosef* of why Chanukah is eight days if the miracle was that it lasted the extra day, is summarized in the book *Ner Le'meah* with over 100 answers to that question.
- 7 Rav Shamshon Refael Hirsch echoes this idea and points out the parallel between the Mishkan and Har Sinai, explaining that the same way the Shechina rested upon Har Sinai, now it is resting upon the Mishkan (Shemot 40:33)