

# The Nature of Miracles

Imagine the following scene: It is a cold and windy winter evening. There is snow on the ground, and the world outside is quiet and dreary. But inside, there is warmth and light. The smell of crispy latkes sizzling in the frying pan wafts gently through the air. The atmosphere is filled with anticipation as an entire family gathers together, perhaps by a doorway, or perhaps by a window, to kindle the lights of the menorah. As the brachos are recited, followed by the first wick bursting into flame, everyone stares with awe and wonder, recalling the miracles of long ago. After reciting the passage of “*HaNeiros Halalu*,” the voices of the entire family come together to sing the moving and poignant words of “*Maoz Tzur...*”

We don’t know much about the background of *Maoz Tzur*. What we do know is that it was written in the 13th century, and that the author’s name was Mordechai (as seen from taking the first letter of each paragraph and putting them together to spell the name “Mordechai”). Rav Eliyahu Munk, zt”l, in his sefer, *Olam HaTefillos* pg. 332, says that the author’s name was Mordechai ben Yitzchak. He lived during the time of the Ramban, and he also wrote the *zemer* “*Mah Yafis*,” which is one of the *zemiros* for the Friday night meal. *Moaz Tzur* is broken into six paragraphs, each one discussing a time of persecution and exile during our history, and thanking Hashem for our salvation. The *Kitzur Shlah*, *Hilchos Chanuka*, says that the last paragraph, about *galus Edom*, the Roman exile, was added later, by a different author.



## Rabbi Yosef Bronfeld

YUHSB Class of 1997

Maggid Shiur, Yeshivat Reishit Yerushalayim, Israel

The fifth paragraph of *Maoz Tzur* is the stanza that briefly discusses the story of Chanuka. When reading through this paragraph, there are many cryptic messages, and many questions that arise. One such question can be asked about the words at the end of the passage, “*bnei binah ymei shmonah kavu shir urinanim*,” meaning that the eight days of celebration of Chanuka were established for all future generations by “*bnei binah*” — men of understanding. The question is: why is it specifically emphasized that they were *bnei binah*? Why not people with a different type of wisdom, such as *bnei chochma* or *bnei daas*? Or, why not simply *bnei Torah*, or rabbanim? And what exactly is *binah*, as compared to other types of wisdom?

There are three classic terms used to describe different types of wisdom: *chochma*, *binah*, and *daas*. The Malbim, Mishlei 1:2-4, explains that these three types of wisdom are connected to one another, and build off each other. He explains that *chochma* is pure informational knowledge that is taught to you by others. *Binah* involves taking that knowledge and learning important lessons by contrast and comparison. Rashi describes someone with *binah* as someone who is “*mevin davar*

*mitoch davar*” — someone who has the ability to look at one thing and use that as a springboard to understand something else. *Daas* is the highest and deepest level of understanding.

In order to answer our question about why Chanuka was established by *bnei binah*, it helps to take a look at the story of Chanuka. In short, the Greeks persecuted us for years and defiled the Beis HaMikdash. Finally, the Chashmonaim, led by Matisyahu, led a revolt against the Greeks and were victorious. After the battle, when we entered the Beis HaMikdash, we were shocked and heartbroken at the disarray. When we wanted to light the Menorah, we couldn’t find any oil that had not been contaminated by the Greeks. Finally, we found one jug that had enough oil to last for only one day. To get new oil would have taken eight days. [The Ran in *Shabbos* 21b, explains that this is because it was a four day journey to get the oil and four days to return.] Bnei Yisroel had no choice, and so they lit the oil that they had, and sent messengers off to obtain more pure oil. In the meantime, a miracle occurred, and the small amount of oil lasted and continued burning for eight days, enough time to obtain new, *tahor* oil. And the rest is history — each year, we celebrate eight days of Chanuka in

commemoration of this miracle.

There is a famous question raised by the *Beis Yosef, Orach Chaim* no. 670. Indeed, it is probably the most famous question asked about anything pertaining to Chanuka. The *Beis Yosef* asks: If this is what happened, why is Chanuka celebrated for eight days? It seems as though the holiday should really be only seven days long. After all, there was enough oil for the first day. Only the following seven days were miraculous and our celebration and thanks to Hashem should only be for seven days. The miracle only began on day number two!

There are many, many answers given to this question. [In fact, there is even a sefer, called *Ner LeMeah*, that gives 100 answers just to this question of the *Beis Yosef*!] One answer can be found based in a famous comment of the Ramban at the end of Parshas Bo. The Ramban, while discussing the significance of remembering all the miracles that occurred when leaving Egypt, says that Hashem performs two different types of miracles: *nissim nistarim* (hidden miracles), and *nissim gluyim* (open miracles). It is not very often that Hashem performs open, obvious miracles. When He does perform an open miracle, what is the purpose of it? The Ramban explains that the purpose of open miracles is to inspire and teach us that the same way that Hashem is able to control and even change nature in such an obvious way, so too He is the One Who makes nature function in the first place. For example, what was the purpose of Hashem performing all of the great miracles during the ten plagues? He could have freed us in an instant without all the drama! However, through the unique miracles of the ten plagues, in which Hashem

constantly changed nature in order to punish the Egyptians, Hashem showed us that not only can He change nature, but that He is the One Who controls nature on a daily basis. The Ramban goes on to say that since Hashem doesn't perform these types of open miracles in every generation, it is incumbent upon us to constantly remember the Exodus, as a proof that Hashem also controls the hidden miracles of everyday life. This belief is one of the foundations of the entire Torah.

Throughout our extraordinary history, there have been many more times that Hashem has performed open miracles, and although they weren't all on the same level as the Exodus from Egypt, they were still open miracles that helped us recognize Hashem's dominion over nature. Truly, whenever there is an open miracle, it is incumbent upon us to look for the message Hashem is trying to send us, and to recognize that He is in control of every aspect of our lives. The miracle of the Chanuka oil is one of those open miracles that we merited to experience. Any conscious person should obviously recognize the clear miracle that Hashem performed in that situation. However, based on the Ramban, we can't just stop there. We have to take this supernatural event and use it to learn a broader lesson. We should see that the same way Hashem performed this unbelievable miracle by making the oil last an extra seven days, it is also a miracle that oil burns at all. Does vinegar burn, or wine, or water? No, under normal circumstances, they don't. So why does oil burn? Because this is what Hashem has decreed. This is one of His many hidden miracles that we experience daily. The reason we have eight days of Chanuka is because there

was a miracle that one day's worth of oil lasted for an extra seven days. Once we witnessed this open miracle, it made us realize that even the first day, when there was enough oil to burn, was also a miracle from Hashem, because He controls everything.

Now that we know why we have eight days of Chanuka and not seven, we can answer our original question of why it was specifically *bnei binah* who established the holiday of Chanuka for eight days. The awareness that the Ramban speaks about, of recognizing hidden miracles only through contemplating the open miracles, is *binah*; it is the attribute of "*mevin davar mitoch davar*" — understanding one thing from something else. It took *binah* to look at the seven "extra" days that were clearly miraculous and to discern from them that the first day was also a miracle. If we would have used other forms of knowledge, we would have only had seven days of Chanuka. But the *bnei binah* were able to discern the deeper lesson of the miracle of the oil. It's not just about the seven days of open miracles, it's also about the extra day in which we thank Hashem for making oil burn in the first place, rather than taking this for granted. Having eight days of Chanuka expresses the essence of the miracle of the oil. Had we only celebrated Chanuka for seven days, we would have missed the point. Hashem doesn't want us to only see His open miracles; He wants us to search and find Him everywhere in nature. As the Ramban says, this idea is a foundation of the entire Torah.

In order to understand this concept even further, there is another aspect of the story that we should look into. Rav Shlomo Kluger, *Sefer Hachaim* 670:1, asks: How was it permissible

to fulfill the mitzvah of lighting the Menorah in the Beis HaMikdash with the miraculous oil that lasted an extra seven days? After all, the Gemara in *Taanis* 24b, says that it is forbidden to get benefit from something created by a miracle.

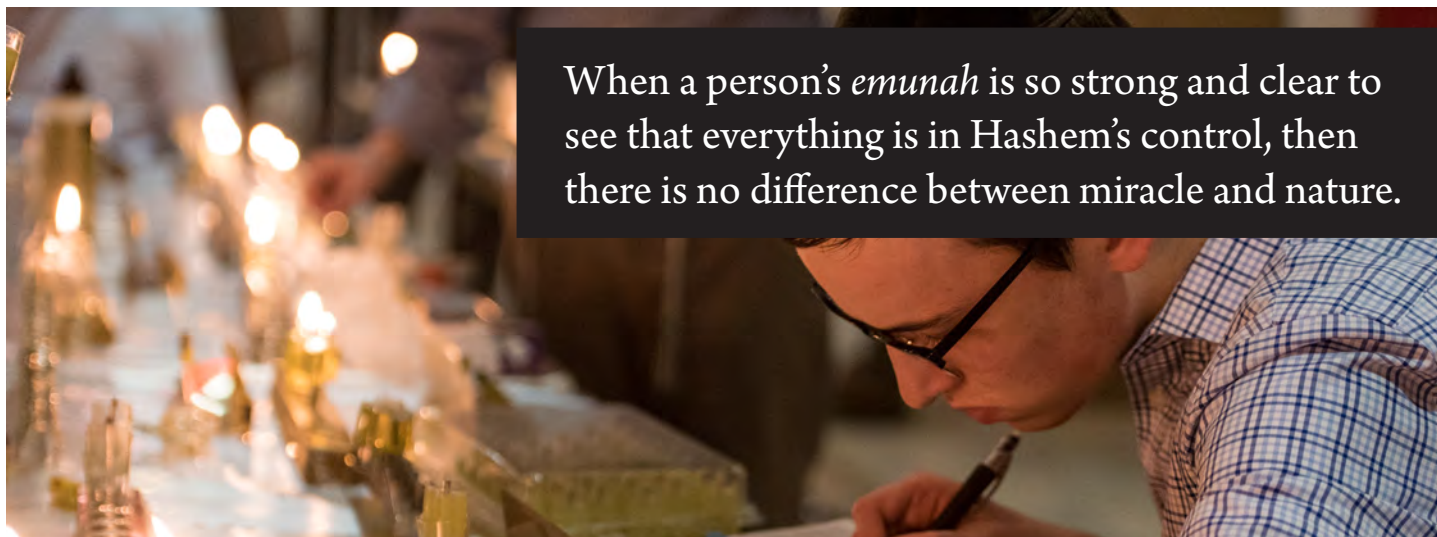
Rav Avraham Schorr, in *HaLekach v'HaLibuv*, Chanuka pg. 29, provides us with an answer to this question that teaches us a very important lesson about the essence of Chanuka and life in general. He notes the story found in the Gemara in *Taanis* 25a, in which Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa sees his daughter looking very sad. When he inquires, she responds that she is distraught because she accidentally lit the Shabbos candles with vinegar instead of oil. He consoles her, saying not to worry, because it makes no difference — Hashem can command the vinegar to burn the same way He commands the oil to burn. The *Ben Yehoyada*, ad loc., asks a crucial question: What was she worried about? After all, she had already lit the candles, and she saw that they were burning from the vinegar! The *Ben Yehoyada* explains that her concern was not about whether or not they will have Shabbos candles burning in their house — she already saw that the candles were burning. Her concern

was about whether or not those candles actually fulfilled the mitzvah to light Shabbos candles. After all, the Gemara in *Shabbos* 25b, says that the purpose of Shabbos candles is to get benefit from the lights, which enhance the *shalom bayis* in the house. She was concerned that since the burning vinegar was miraculous in nature, perhaps they were forbidden to get benefit from these candles. She was worried that maybe she did not fulfill the mitzvah with these miraculous Shabbos candles! However, Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa answered her that there's no difference. The fact that oil burns is also a miracle. What we perceive as nature is, indeed, a miracle as well. The law forbidding us to benefit from a miracle only applies where the miracle is perceived as something out of the ordinary and supernatural. However, when a person's *emunah* is so strong and clear to see that everything is in Hashem's control, then there is no difference between miracle and nature.

Rav Schorr writes that this provides insight into the *Beis Yosef's* question. We celebrate one day simply for the fact that oil burns, which is miraculous in its own right. Why do we celebrate this specifically on Chanuka? After all, we can celebrate the fact that oil

burns on any day of the year. However, says Rav Schorr, this recognition and appreciation was actually the very idea that made the whole remainder of the miracle of the Menorah permissible and possible! Really they should not have fulfilled the mitzvah of lighting the Menorah with the miraculous oil, because it would have constituted deriving benefit from a miracle, which is forbidden. It was only because they believed so strongly that this seemingly natural phenomenon of oil burning is, in fact, a miracle that needs to be appreciated and celebrated, and that there was no difference between miracle and nature, that they were then able to derive benefit from the “miraculous” oil and experience the more obvious miracle of the oil burning for all eight days.

Chanuka is a holiday that is all about thanksgiving, praise, and appreciation. May we merit to learn from and give praise for the obvious miracles in the story of Chanuka, as well as the more “natural” parts of the miracle. Let us appreciate the myriad of miracles and gifts that Hashem bestows upon us on a daily basis, and thus, merit even more miracles.



When a person's *emunah* is so strong and clear to see that everything is in Hashem's control, then there is no difference between miracle and nature.