

By the Light of Half-Stories

The closing chapter of *Masseches Sanhedrin* records the image sketched by Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi of two disabled individuals who could only act in tandem, for one was lame and the other blind. They could only pick fruit if the lame person rode upon the shoulders of the blind one, thereby harnessing the sight of the former and the mobility of the latter:

אמר [רבי], אמשול לך משל ... מלך בשר ודם שהיה לו פרדס נאה והיה בו בכורות נאות, והושיב בו שני שומרים אחד חיגר ואחד סומא. אמר לו חיגר לסומא, בכורות נאות אני רואה בפרדס, בא והרכיבני ונביאם לאכלם. רכב חיגר על גבי סומא והביאום ואכלום.

[Rebbe] said, I will offer a parable ... A king had a nice orchard and there were nice fruit in it. Two watchmen were placed in it, one was lame and one was blind. The lame one said to the blind one, "I see nice fruit in the orchard, come and place me on your shoulders and we can gather them and eat them." The lame one climbed on the blind one, they gathered them and ate them.

Sanhedrin 91a-b

At first glance, this image captures something of the story of Chanuka, for as we learn and study the most ancient texts in our tradition that address the narrative of Chanuka, we discover that — mysteriously — in any one given text, Chazal choose to tell us only one or the other of the two aspects of the story.

The Two Texts

Popularly, the most prominent retelling appears in *Al ha-Nissim* (referenced in *Masseches Shabbas* 24a and *Tosefta*



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Berachos 3:14), which we add to tefilla and *birkas ha-mazon* throughout the eight days of Chanuka:

בימי מתתיהו בן יוחנן כהן גדול חשמונאי ובניו פשעמדה מלכות יון הרשעה על עמך ישראל להשפיקם תורתך ולהעבירם מחגי רצונך ואתה, ברחמיך הרבים, עמדת להם בעת צרתם: רבת את ריבם דנת את דינם נקמת את נקמתם מסרת גבורים ביד חלשים ורבים ביד מעטים ויטמאים ביד טהורים ורשעים ביד צדיקים ויודים ביד עוסקי תורתך ולך עשית שם גדול וקדוש בעולמך ולעמך ישראל עשית תשועה גדולה ופרקן כהיום הזה. ואחר כן, באו בניך לדיבר ביתך ופנו את היכלך וטהרו את מקדשך והדליקו נרות בחצרות קדשך וקבעו שמונת ימי הנכה אלו להודות ולהלל לשמך הגדול.

In the days of Mattityahu, son of Yochanan the High Priest, the Chashmonai, and his sons, the wicked Greek kingdom rose up against Your people Israel to make them forget Your Torah and violate the decrees of Your will. But You in Your great compassion stood by them in time of their distress. You fought their battles, judged their claim, and avenged their wrong. You delivered the strong into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, the impure into the hands of the pure, the wicked into the hands of the righteous, and the arrogant into the hands of those who were engaged in the study of Your Torah. You made for Yourself a great and holy name in Your world, and for Your people Israel You performed a great salvation and redemption to this very day. Then Your children entered the holiest

part of Your House, cleansed Your Temple, purified Your Sanctuary, kindled lights in Your holy courts, and instituted these eight days of Chanuka for giving thanks and praise to your great name.

Al ha-Nissim details the overwhelming military odds stacked against the Chashmonaim and the miraculous victories that Hashem granted them despite those odds. It then briefly mentions in closing that the Chashmonaim subsequently returned to the Beis ha-Mikdash and renewed *hadlakas ha-Menora*, but the text of *Al ha-Nissim* gives no indication that lighting the Menora anew involved any miracle.

The miracle of the oil finds its home elsewhere, in *Masseches Shabbas* 21b:

מאי חנוכה? דתנו רבנן בכ"ה בכסליו יומי דחנוכה תמניא אינון דלא למספד בהון ודלא להתענות בהון, שכשנכנסו יוונים להיכל תמאו 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 [the reason for] Chanuka? For our Rabbis taught: On the twenty-fifth of Kislev [commence] the days of Chanuka, which are eight on which a lamentation for the dead and fasting are forbidden. For when the Greeks entered the Temple, they defiled all the oils, 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 oil for one day's lighting only; yet a miracle happened and they lit [the lamp] for eight days. The following year these [days] were appointed a Festival with [the recital of] Hallel and thanksgiving. **Shabbas 21b (adapted from Soncino Translation)**

This *baraisa* exactly inverts the pattern of *Al ha-Nissim*, focusing entirely on the miracle of the oil while omitting any reference to the miraculous nature of the preceding military victory of the Chashmonaim. That victory appears here only in passing, as backdrop to the miracle of the oil.

Why did Chazal bifurcate the narrative of the miracles of Chanuka into two half-stories? Why does *Al ha-Nissim* focus only on one miracle while the *baraisa* in *Shabbas 21b* only on the other?

His Kindness and His Wonders

Tehillim 107 showcases those who

express gratitude in response to Divine help in surviving various hazardous situations.¹ The central description of this human response is one verse that appears four times in this chapter. A careful look at this leitmotif verse may assist us in understanding the puzzle of the two partial narratives of Chanuka:

יָדוּר לֵהּ חֲסִדוֹ וְנִפְלְאוֹתָיו לְבָנֵי אָדָם:

Let them give thanks to Hashem for His kindness, and His wonders to people.

Radak 107:8 notes that this brief verse describes presentations to two different audiences: Divine and human. Moreover, Radak and Malbim both highlight that the content of each presentation is differentiated: one thanks Hashem for His *chesed*, His kindness, while to people one speaks of His *nifla'os*, His wonders.

In other words, this verse profiles two distinct verbal responses to Divine intervention in one's life:

Hoda'a — thanking Hashem for His *chesed*, for the help He has provided, whether evidently miraculous or not. The objective of *hoda'a* is gratitude.

Pirsumei nissa — publicizing and disseminating *nifla'os* — impressive, manifestly miraculous events — regardless of whether they were practically helpful or not. The objective of *pirsumei nissa* is demonstrating Hashem and His involvement to ourselves and to others.

Understanding the Two Miracles of Chanuka

From our belief in Hashem as Creator and Sustainer of the universe, it follows logically that any miracle is possible if He wills it.² Nevertheless, Ramban³ posits that Hashem chose to create a rhythmic universe usually governed by the scientific laws and patterns that He created, and therefore He typically chooses to minimize overt *nissim* and to perform them only as necessary to accomplish specific objectives that cannot be attained naturally. Ramban's axiom sets the stage for the question raised by *Penei Yehoshua*⁴ and others⁵: what was the purpose of the *neis ha-shemen*, of the single day's worth of pure oil burning for eight days, if (under emergency

Why Don't We Recite Al HaNissim in Al HaMichya?

When one eats foods (other than bread) that are derived from the seven species that the Land of Israel is praised for (see Devarim 8:8), one recites an abridged version of Birkat HaMazon titled *Beracha Mei'ain Shalosh* (known colloquially as "*Al HaMichya*"). On Shabbat, yom tov and Rosh Chodesh, there is one sentence that mentions the specific day that is being observed. Chanukah and Purim are noticeably absent from this list. Why don't we mention Chanukah or Purim in the *Beracha Mei'ain Shalosh*? R. Yosef D. Soloveitchik (cited in *Harerei Kedem* Vol. I, page 302), suggests that the additions of Shabbat, yom tov and Rosh Chodesh have a different status than the additions of Chanukah and Purim. On Shabbat, yom tov and Rosh Chodesh, the function of the additions is to mention the day. On Chanukah and Purim, the function of *Al HaNissim* is to provide a more detailed account of

G-d's providence in the *Hoda'ah* (thanksgiving) section of the Amidah and Birkat HaMazon. Therefore, the additions of Shabbat, yom tov and Rosh Chodesh are independent portions of Birkat HaMazon. *Al HaNissim* is not an independent portion of Birkat HaMazon, rather an extension of the *Hoda'ah* section. *Beracha Mei'ain Shalosh*, whose purpose is to provide an abridged version of Birkat HaMazon, abridges all portions of Birkat HaMazon by providing the main idea of each portion. The additions for Shabbat, yom tov, and Rosh Chodesh are independent portions of Birkat HaMazon and are therefore abridged and included in *Beracha Mei'ain Shalosh*. However, *Al HaNissim* is not an independent portion and it is not the main idea of the *Hoda'ah* section. Therefore, it is not mentioned in the *Beracha Mei'ain Shalosh*.

Torah To Go Editors

circumstances) halacha permits using the impure oil that was readily available? Unlike the military *neis ha-milchama*, not only did the *neis ha-shemen* not help us materially, militarily, or politically, strictly speaking it was not even a spiritual or halachic necessity!

Penei Yehoshua suggests that the objective of *neis ha-shemen* was to communicate⁶ His love for His people, amplifying the experience of the preceding *neis ha-milchama*:

נראה דעיקר הנס לא נעשה אלא להודיע להם חיבת המקום עליהם ... והואיל ואיתרחיש להו ניסא בעיקר הענין שנגאלו גאולה שלימה מיד מלכות יון הרשעה ... ועכשיו שנגאלו ונעשה להם נס גדול ששלטו בשונאיהם, לכך נעשה להם ג"כ נס זה בענין הנרות שהוא עדות לישראל שהשכינה שורה בהם.

It seems that the primary miracle was performed to communicate to them His love for them . . . since they experienced the primary miracle in that they were fully redeemed from the wicked Greek Empire . . . Now that they were redeemed and experienced a great miracle in the defeat of their enemies, for this reason, a miracle was also performed for them regarding the lights, which is a testimony to the Jewish people that the Divine presence rest among them.

Maharal⁷ further adds that the *neis ha-shemen* actually clarified and demonstrated Who was behind the preceding *neis ha-milchama*:

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

One might also suggest that the primary reason for the celebration of Chanuka is the defeat of the Greeks. However, the victory didn't appear to be a miracle

performed by Hashem rather than their own might and power. Therefore, the miracle of the lights of the Menora happened so that they would know that everything was a miracle from Hashem, including the Jewish military victory.

As in 1967, some might have chosen to insist that the Chashmonai victory was merely coincidental, not Divinely enabled. The purpose of the *neis ha-shemen* was to irrefutably show that He Who miraculously kept the oil burning is also He Who miraculously delivered the Chashmonai victory.

We can now use the language of Tehillim 107 above to reformulate and further refine this new understanding of the two miracles of Chanuka. Only the *neis ha-milchama* can be described as a *chesed*, whereas the *neis ha-shemen* did not actually save us or provide us with any practical assistance or rescue. The *neis ha-shemen* was, however, a *nifla* of the first order, an unmistakable manifestation of the power of Hashem in our world.⁸ It even shed light on our military victories, demonstrating and communicating the Divine Hand behind those victories as well.

Chazal's Two Narratives

With this perspective on the *nissei Chanuka* in mind, consider now the genre and context of Chazal's two narratives of those miracles. *Al ha-Nissim* is an adjunct to *Modim* and to *Node Lecha*, the thanksgiving segments of *tefilla* and of *birkas hamazon*, respectively. Its purpose is to augment these year-round, universally appropriate expressions of gratitude for ubiquitous Divine assistance with a seasonally-specific *hoda'a*. Accordingly, the focus in giving thanks is for Divine help and assistance, for His *chesed* that saved us on the battlefield.

By contrast, the *baraisa* recorded

in *Masseches Shabbas* 21b is an excerpt of *Megillas Taanis*, an ancient record of improvements to and restoration of the Beis ha-Mikdash or the *avoda* therein (and the *yamim tovim* observed during the period of the *Beis ha-Mikdash* to celebrate those occasions).⁹ *Al ha-Nissim* is our fulfillment of the *yodu la-Shem chasdo* imperative, expressing to Him our gratitude for His *chesed* in the military theater, the *neis ha-milchama*. The Mikdash-centric *Megillas Taanis* treatment of Chanuka, on the other hand, is understandably focused on the *neis ha-shemen*, whose venue was the Menora in the Beis ha-Mikdash.¹⁰

Combining the Two Stories

The personal impact and spiritual import of the Chanuka miracles are fully derived only from the combination of both. The two half-stories work in tandem, much as the two individuals in Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi's sketch accomplish far more collaboratively than either possibly could alone. This two-stage intellectual-spiritual dynamic is elegantly captured by Ramban's coda to his commentary on *parshas Bo* and *yetzias Mitzrayim*:

ומן הנסים הגדולים המפורסמים אדם מודה בנסים הנסתרים, שהם [= הנסים הנסתרים] יסוד התורה כלה. שאין לאדם חלק בתורת משה רבינו, עד שנאמין בכל דברינו ומקרינו שכלם נסים, אין בהם טבע ומנהגו של עולם, בין ברבים בין ביחיד.

Through the great open miracles, one comes to admit the hidden miracles that constitute the foundation of the whole Torah, for no one can have a part in the Torah of Moses our teacher unless he believes that all our words and our events are miraculous in scope, there being no natural or customary way of the world in them, whether affecting the public or the individual.

Adopting and adapting Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi's poetry in a positive sense, the "fruits" of Chanuka are effectively plucked only by contemplating both facets of its story, the *pirsumei nissa* of the miraculous Menora shedding her light and clarity upon the subtler yet profound Divine interventions behind the Chashmonai military successes.

May the lights of Chanuka and the recitation of Al ha-Nissim serve to endow us with the gift of the two half-stories of Chanuka, training us to notice and absorb the wonder of the subtle yet ubiquitous involvement of Hashem in our own everyday victories.

יָדוּ לָהּ חֶסֶדוֹ וְנִפְלְאוֹתָיו לְבָנֵי אָדָם:

Let them give thanks to Hashem for His kindness, and His wonders to people.

Endnotes

1 In fact, see *Berachos* 54b that the four situations described therein — sea travel, wilderness travel, illness and imprisonment — constitute the *arba'ah she-tzrichim le-hodos*, the four individuals who offer a *korban*

toda and/or recite *birkas ha-gomel*. The four iterations of *yodu la-Shem chasdo* correspond to the four scenarios, respectively.

2 See Rambam's development of this notion near the end of his *Iggeres Tchiyas ha-Meisim* (p. 367, ed. R. Sheilat), where he cites as well his discussion in *More ha-Nevuchim* 2:25.

3 *Devarim* 20:9, and see also 6:16 and *Bereishis* 6:19.

4 *Shabbas* 21b.

5 See *Chacham Tzvi* 87 quoted by R. Yosef Engel in his *Gilyonei ha-Shas* to *Shabbas* 21b.

6 In fact, Ramban himself already indicates that the objective of a miracle might be either practical or communicative (*Devarim* 20:9).

7 *Ner Mitzva* (in his comments to *Shabbas* 21b), quoted in *Sifsei Chayim* (p. 13).

8 In other terms, the *neis ha-shemen* was a *neis nigle* — an "open" miracle, an outright suspension of the principles and patterns of chemistry. The *neis ha-milchama*, though, was a *neis nistar*, a "concealed" miracle not in overt violation of scientific laws or principles.

9 See *Be-ikvei ha-Tzon* 19:2ff.

10 The duality is also expressed halachically in Rambam's formulation of the two primary mitzvos of Chanuka: reciting *Hallel*, lyrical praise upon our salvation (*vide Pesachim* 117a and *Griz Hilchos Chanuka* 3:6), and

lighting Chanuka lights. [See *Hilchos Chanuka* 3:3, in explication of the closing line of the *baraisa*, and consider as well the overall structure of the two *perakim* that comprise *Hilchos Chanuka*.] Chanuka lights are the paradigmatic *pirsumei nissa*.

This duality of *nissim* in the Chanuka narrative, the inception of our Second Commonwealth, might also inversely parallel the pair of sins which drive the tragic story of Gedalya, the very end of the final embers of the First Commonwealth. [The obvious sin, Yishmael's mass murder of Gedalya and many other victims — according to *Malbim* 41:1, driven by jealousy, narcissism, and a jilted sense of entitlement — is emphasized in *Rosh ha-Shana* 18b. *Nidda* 61a focusses on the second, subtler sin: Gedalya's fatally irresponsible refusal to attend to Yochanan's advance warning of Yishmael's murderous intent, in contravention of the rules of *leshon ha-ra le-toeles*.] Certainly, the clarity of *bitachon* taught by the *neis ha-shemen* is a powerful cure for the envy and sense of entitlement that underlay *cheit Yishmael* (per *Emuna u-Vitachon la-Chazon Ish* 2 based upon *Yoma* 38b). Perhaps the Divine restoration of the Jewish sovereignty via *neis ha-milchama* served to undo and invert the lack of communal responsibility and consequent *churban ha-tzibbur* for which Chazal fault Gedalya.

