

Appreciation

Two easily missed words in the Talmud's brief discussion of Chanuka may transmit a message of critical importance. As with so many messages of this sort, however, we have to be sensitive enough to notice it.

After briefly describing the Hasmonean victory over the Syrian Greeks and the miraculous longevity of the single cruse of oil, the Talmud states: "*L'shana acheret*, to another year, [the rabbis] established and rendered [these eight days] permanent Festival Days with praise and thanksgiving."¹

The Talmudic record is clear; Chanuka is not established immediately as a festival, but only in conjunction with "another year."



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Faced with this statement, many commentaries adopt a straightforward approach, rendering the phrase "*l'shana acheret*" as "to the next year."

This possibility allows us to easily understand the establishment of Chanuka as a holiday that comes into existence the very next year, once the rabbinic authorities recognize the full significance of the events that have transpired.

If this is the case, however, why doesn't the Talmud use the specific language "*l'shana ha'ba'a*," literally, "to the coming year?" Even if Chanuka is

established only a year later, might the rabbis be teaching us a lesson through their use of the broader phrase "*l'shana acheret*"?

An answer might be gleaned from the powerful observations of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik concerning a totally different holiday event, the Pesach seder. In discussing the structure of the seder, the Rav identifies three dimensions of "time-awareness" that are essential to the life of each Jew: *retrospection*, *anticipation* and *appreciation*:

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Retrospection refers to man's ability to re-experience the past, to feel deeply that which is only a memory, to transport an event of the distant past into a "creative living experience" of the present... Memory is more than a storehouse; it can become a present-day experience, a part of the "I" awareness.

Anticipation is man's projection of visions and aspirations into the future... In **anticipation**, man moves from reminiscing to expectation, from memories to visions. To live fulfillingly in time requires both a worthy past and a promising future. Time awareness is not only for dreaming... We derive from retrospection the moral imperative to act now in order to realize our visions for the future. The Haggada opens with "Avadim hayinu, we were once slaves (retrospection)" and it concludes with "Nishmat kol Chai, the soul of every living thing," which is an anticipatory vision of the future, moving from hindsight to foresight.

The third time-awareness dimension is **appreciation**, which means valuing the present and prizing each moment as a precious gift. **Retrospection and anticipation are significant only insofar as they transform the present. In every fraction of a second, visions can be realized or destroyed.**² (emphasis added)

Of the three dimensions of time awareness identified by the Rav, he singles out *appreciation* as central, the one dimension that the others are meant to shape. To go one step

further, I would argue that *appreciation* is not only the most central, it is also the most difficult to attain. Within this dimension, we are challenged to view our lives through the lens of history. One hundred, two hundred, five hundred years from now, how will our story, our challenges and our contributions to Jewish life be judged?

To truly appreciate the times in which we live, we must regularly stop to consider, not only the gifts that are uniquely ours, but also the challenges that these gifts carry.

To name a few:

- *Living in a land of unparalleled religious freedom and tolerance, can the committed American Jewish community do more to stem the rising tide of assimilation beyond its walls?*
- *How will the Diaspora community be ultimately judged for continuing to live in a "Diaspora of choice," at a time when our nation has miraculously returned to its homeland after centuries of forced exile?*
- *Exceptional as day school education is, is it enough? Are we inspiring the next generation toward meaningful observance? Can families and communities do more to prepare their children for the challenges of a "free society" on the college campuses and beyond?*
- *Armed with access to political power rarely experienced by our people before, are we using that access wisely? Are we responding aggressively enough to the*

rising anti-Semitism sweeping across Europe and across the globe? Are we adequately attuned to the shifting political winds in America and beyond?

- *In the face of the Jewish community's unparalleled affluence, how can it be that Jewish education has not been made more affordable for all? What more can we do?*

These questions and others reflect the unique nature of our times. Rarely, if ever, has enormous opportunity and overwhelming challenge faced our people, hand in hand, as it does today.

Centuries ago, the Hasmonean revolt saved Judaism, only to ultimately fall victim to its own excesses and lost perspective. Could the Talmud be hinting at one of the reasons? Perhaps if we would have recognized the importance of the Chanuka victories immediately and not "*l'shana acheret*," we would have retained our footing in a turbulent world. Perhaps if we truly learn in our day to appreciate the gifts Divinely granted to us, this time, we will also successfully rise to appreciate and meet the challenges they bear.

Endnotes

1 Talmud Bavli, *Shabbat* 21b.

2 Besdin, Abraham, *Reflections of the Rav*, vol. 1, *Lessons in Jewish Thought – Adapted from the Lectures of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Jerusalem: Jewish Agency, Alpha Press, 1979), pp. 200-201.