

The Aspiring Lights of Chanukah & the Optimism of a Torat Chaim

Fire has always been a source of fascination for me. It thrills me to consider the dual qualities of fire as both a creative and a destructive force. With just small adjustments in temperature or duration, its warmth and heat can be equally deployed toward opposite purposes. Fire represents the power to give life and to cause death, and those who wield its force can only sometimes choose to what end. Just as the lighting of Shabbos candles helps us recognize the powerful creative force that man has been given and the peace that we are choosing to embrace each Shabbos, I wonder what lessons the lights of Chanukah are meant to impart.

The mitzvah of the lighting of the menorah on Chanukah is the only



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mitzvah that is unique to the chag, and its fulfillment represents much more than just the lights of the Menorah in the Beit Hamikdash and the miracle that occurred when the oil lasted longer than expected. According to Rav Kook, in *Olat Re'iyah* (pg. 435), the unique nature of the Chanukah lights is reflected in the language of the beracha, which refers to many lights and is strangely written in the singular.

אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו להדליק נר של חנוכה.

Who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to light the candle of Chanukah.

The suggestion here is that when making this blessing we are not only focused on the lights right before us. Instead, the lights of Chanukah are representative of another light, the inner sanctity of the lights of the Mikdash. In this way, the events of Chanukah, including the political developments, the military victories and the ensuing challenges of the Hasmonean Age, are simply the

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setting for us to appreciate the lessons of the “light” of the Menorah, the Mikdash and more.

What layered lessons can we learn from the Chanukah lights? How do we see their meaning in our sources?

Certainly, lighting our menorah on Chanukah commemorates the inauguration of a newly sanctified Temple, and is explicitly celebrating the end of the defilement of the Holy Temple by Greek conquerors. Still, the simple imagery and symbolism of the lights that banish the darkness of Greek subjugation just barely scratches the surface. Instead, the lights of Chanukah represent a more complete victory.

We can see the diverse aspects of Chanukah in the tefillah of *Al Hanissim*, where we read of the miraculous Jewish victory in a series of poetic dichotomies. In this list, we praise Hashem for the unlikely physical and military victories, which are noted in two of the five pairs of opposites.

Still, these obvious military miracles are overshadowed by a longer list of spiritual victories. A quick comparative count of the references made here between the military and political victories and the spiritual victory makes it obvious. What’s surprising is that the prominence of the spiritual threat and the resulting victory is somehow linked intrinsically to, and represented by, the purity of the lights of the Menorah. As we dig deeper into the meaning of the lights of Chanukah, we begin to see these lights as representing a more significant light in Torah, rather than just the actual light that was emitted from the oil that miraculously burned longer than it should have on Chanukah.

Political/ Military Terms

רבים ביד מעטים
(The many in the hands of the few)

גבורים ביד חלשים
(The mighty in the hands of the weak)

כשעמדה מלכות
יון הרשעה על עמך
(When the evil Greek empire stood over Your nation)

Spiritual Terms

טמאים ביד טהורים (The defiled in the hands of the pure)

ישראל (Israel)

רשעים ביד צדיקים (The evil in the hands of the righteous)

ודים ביד עוסקי תורתך (The wanton in the hands of those who toil in Your Torah)

להשכיחם תורתך ולהעבירם מחוקי רצונך (To cause them to forget Your Torah and to move them away from Your commandments)

ולך עשית שם גדול וקדוש בעולמך (And for You, You made a great and holy name in Your world)

While both the military and spiritual victories are mentioned, as we can see from numerous examples, the spiritual victory is clearly more prominent. It is commonly asserted that the political and military conflict was not just a question of our physical survival; it represented a cultural clash between Judaism and Greek Hellenism. While there are very real merits to this claim, we also must remember that Greek culture wasn’t uniformly vilified, and was indeed esteemed at times by the Jews (*Megillah* 9b). Therefore, it is especially important to see the lights of Chanukah as an intentional and specific feature that epitomizes the nature of the threat of the Greeks and the victory of the Chashmonaim.

Furthermore, the way Chanukah is recorded and celebrated in the rabbinic texts places a greater focus on the miracle of the oil that lasted eight days, rather than on the extraordinary military/political victory. This understanding is seen when the Gemara explains why we are forbidden to fast or offer eulogies on the 25th of Kislev. The text summarily explains that the holiness of these days

derives from the discovery of a pure flask of Temple oil and the miracle of that oil lasting eight days. As if that was the only moment of significance! In fact, according to the Gemara’s account, the holiday commemorating this miracle was only established a full year later — seemingly completely disregarding the actual military victory, which was clearly completed as the Greek forces were routed from Jerusalem.

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 ועשאו 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.

Shabbat 21b

According to the *Bnei Yissaschar*, Kislev no. 3, this reflects the fact that while the miracle of the oil lasting eight days was evident in the first year, it was assumed to be just a one-time event. Instead, a year later, the miracle was recognized as connected to revealing the kedusha of light from time immemorial. Perhaps this emphasis on the miracle of the oil directs us to explore the layers of meaning associated with the Chanukah menorah, since therein lies the core insights into the timeless nature of the celebration. Furthermore, we may uncover contemporary lessons from this enigmatic battle of a Diaspora Jewry confronting the temptations of a mass culture fighting valiantly to retain the purity of its holy light.

First, we must start at the beginning. The Menorah is first mentioned in the Torah in relation to the desert sanctuary, the Mishkan. There, the mitzvah of kindling the Menorah was entrusted to Aaron the High Priest.

דָּבַר אֶל אַהֲרֹן וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵלָיו בְּהֶעֱלִיתָ אֶת הַנֵּרוֹת אֶל מוֹל פְּנֵי הַמְּנוֹרָה וְאִירוּ שִׁבְעַת הַנֵּרוֹת.
 Speak to Aaron and say to him, "When you mount the lamps, let the seven lamps give light at the front of the lampstand".

Bamidbar 8:2

At the time of the dedication of the Mishkan, Moshe's brother Aharon was upset that at this original inauguration in the desert he wasn't included in the

tribes' sacrificial offerings. Instead, Rashi explains, quoting Midrash Tanchuma, Aharon was given the mitzvah of lighting the menorah — which was deemed "greater."

לָמָּה נִסְמְכָה פְּרִשְׁתַּת הַמְּנוֹרָה לְפָרֶשֶׁת הַנְּשִׂיאִים? לְפִי שֶׁקִּשְׂרָאָה אֶהְרֹן הִנְבֵּת הַנְּשִׂיאִים חֲלָשָׁה אִזּוּ דַעְתּוֹ, שֶׁלֹּא הָיָה עִמָּהֶם בְּחִנְכָּה לֹא הוּא וְלֹא שִׁבְטוֹ, אָמַר לוֹ הַקֹּבֵ"ה חַיִּיד שְׁלֶךְ גְּדוּלָּה מִשְׁלֵהֶם, שֶׁאֵתָּה מְדַלֵּק וּמְטִיב אֶת הַנֵּרוֹת.

Why is the section about the candelabrum juxtaposed with the section dealing with the offerings of the princes? Because when Aaron saw the dedication offerings of the princes, he felt distressed because neither he nor his tribe was with them in the dedication, whereupon the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, "By your life! Your part is of greater importance than theirs, for you will kindle and set in order the lamps."

Rashi, Bamidbar 8:2

Ramban further notes that Aharon was comforted specifically with the mitzvah of lighting the Menorah as compensation, since this would be a mitzvah that outlasted the institution of korbanot, which were dependent on the Temple. The lights of the Menorah, on the other hand, would last forever.

עֲנִין הַהֲגָדָה הַזֹּאת, לְדַרוֹשׁ רִמּוֹז מִן הַפְּרָשָׁה עַל חֲנוּכַּת שַׁל נְרוֹת שֶׁהִיָּתָה בְּבֵית שְׁנֵי עַל יְדֵי אַהֲרֹן וּבְנָיו, רְצוּנִי לומר חֲשׂוֹמֵנָאֵי כְּהֵן גְּדוֹל וּבְנָיו.

The purpose of this midrash is to offer a hint from the section [about the Menorah] relating to the "Chanukah of lights" that took place during the time of the Second Temple by Aharon and his children, meaning the Chashmonean high priest and his children.

Ramban, Bamidbar 8:2

The lights of the desert menorah are a foreshadowing of the Menorah of the future temples and of Chanukah

as well. Chanukah is one of the only *moadim* (festivals) that will be celebrated even after the coming of Moshiach (see *Gevurot Yitzchak*, Chanukah no. 36). Another proof of the quality of spiritual permanence in the Chanukah lights is the fact that Chanukah's permanence is referenced in the special affinity Hashem uses to declare his affection for Chanukah with the possessive "mo'adai," My holidays:

דָּבַר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם מוֹעֲדֵי ה' אֲשֶׁר תִּקְרְאוּ אֹתָם מִקְרָאֵי קֹדֶשׁ אֵלֶּה הֵם מוֹעֲדָי.

Speak to the Jewish people and say to them: These are the holidays of God, which you shall proclaim as sacred occasions, these are My holidays.

Vayikra 23:2

מוֹעֲדֵי ה' אֵלֶּיךָ אֵינוֹן חֲגֵי הַמִּצּוֹת חֲגֵי הַשְּׁבוּעוֹת וְחֲגֵי הַסּוּכוֹת הָרִי תֵּלֶת תֵּלֶת אוֹחַרְנִין רִאשׁוֹן הַשָּׁנָה חֲנוּכָּה פּוּרִים ... תֵּלֶת אַחֲרֵינֵיךְ אֵינוֹן אֵלֶּה הֵם מוֹעֲדֵי.

"These are the holidays of God," these are Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot. Behold there are three. There are three others, Rosh Hashanah, Chanukah and Purim ... The last three are called "these are My holidays."

Tikkunei Zohar Chadash

The Rambam also shows a special affection for the mitzvah of ner Chanukah by declaring its treasured status as an exceedingly cherished mitzvah.

מִצְוֹת גֵּר הִנְכָּה מִצְוָה חֲבִיבָה הִיא עַד מֵאֵד וְצָרִיךְ אָדָם לְהִזָּהֵר בָּהּ כְּדִי לְהוֹדִיעַ הַנֶּס וְלְהוֹסִיף בְּשִׁבְחָהּ הָאֵל וְהוֹדִיָּה לוֹ עַל הַנֶּסִים שֶׁעָשָׂה לָנוּ.

The precept of lighting the Chanukah lamp is exceedingly precious, and one should carefully observe it in order to acclaim the miracle, ever praising and thanking God for the miracles which he has performed for us.

Hilchot Chanukah 4:12

In fact, *Megillat Taanit* records many mini-holidays instituted during the Second Temple period, each marking various Hasmonean victories. These smaller victories and minor holidays were also accorded temporary halakhic status, which prevented people from eulogizing and fasting on those days. According to the Gemara, *Rosh Hashanah* 18b, after the destruction of the Second Temple “*batla Megillat Taanit*,” the holidays listed are no longer observed, and Chanukah only retains its status due to the mitzvah of ner Chanukah.

The focus on the miracle of the *pach hashemen*, the oil that lasted eight days, instead of the political autonomy, feels more worthy of celebration since we are all aware that the two hundred years of Hasmonean rule were marked by successive corruption and tragedy. The Chanukah lights offer us the opportunity to celebrate a different focus, one of significance to our national character. The miracle of the oil lasting was in fact quite an astounding miracle. Noting that there was enough oil for one day, the *Beit Yosef* (*Orach Chaim* 670) asks why we celebrate eight days and not seven? The *Pri Chadash* suggests that this reflects a minor focus on the first day celebrating the military victory, and a major focus on the remaining seven days for the miracle of the oil. Rav Michael Rosensweig notes¹ further that many Achronim wonder why the halakhic principle of “*tuma hutra b’tzibbur*,” the principle that laws of purity are suspended in order to fulfill public offerings (*Yoma* 6b),

wasn’t applied by the Kohanim when purifying the Temple. In this case, the Menorah could have been lit even using defiled oil, making the miracle of pure oil lasting eight days seemingly a superfluous miracle. Rav Rosensweig suggests that unlike other mitzvot, with regard to ner Chanukah, the Gemara, *Shabbat* 21b, discusses various levels of observance, and seems to encourage the highest level, *mehadrin min hamehadrin*, as the universal standard. Surprisingly, this has become the widely accepted norm in our current practice as well.

The *pach hashemen* is the focus of Chanukah because it was this miracle that returned this aspirational mode of mitzvah observance to the national scene. Lighting the Menorah with pure untainted oil was not necessary halakhically, but striving for holiness in our mitzvot restored our national character. It was precisely this aspirational approach to mitzvah observance that Antiochus’ Hellenization was designed to prevent. The persecutions that led up to the Hasmonian revolt emphasized public displays of fealty to the Greek Pantheon and to the prohibition of all public displays of distinct Jewish practice. Being a Jew in this age meant blending into the social norms as the Mityavanim did. The choice to make their Jewish practices mere private preferences while adopting the majority culture allowed a spirit of mediocrity to prevail. It was this that threatened Jewish continuity. Lighting the Menorah with oil that was pure represents a different type of kindling. Here we have the performance of

a mitzvah done in a manner that is reigniting the spark of *avodat Hashem*. Mitzvot that are done by rote, fulfilling only the minimal requirements, will ultimately be empty, and lacking in depth and meaning.

The lights of the Chanukah menorah remind us to aspire to perform mitzvot in their fullest sense. In lighting the ner Chanukah, we tackle the societal assumptions that challenge our distinctive *avodat Hashem* as “too different.” By embracing the practice of *mehadrin min hamehadrin* we reject mediocrity. In this way, the lights of Chanukah express the notion of “*ki ner mitzvah V’Torah or*” — because mitzvah observance is a candle and Torah is light (*Mishlei* 6:23) — by connecting the holiness from the lights in the Mishkan, through the service of the Kohanim, to all mitzvot with the capacity to shine through any darkness and pierce the prominent societal impurities. In this way, Chanukah inspires us to strive to ignite each mitzvah every day. Thus when we light the Chanukah menorah, we are evoking the spiritual durability of all mitzvot; the resilience of a faith that endures not because of our brute force — but rather, because we wield a *Torat Chaim*, a life-giving force that warms and continues to create, as we aspire toward an *avodat Hashem* that is always striving and never settling for less.

Endnotes

1 “Chanukah as a Holiday of Idealism and Maximalism,” available at www.torahweb.org/torah/2006/moadim/rros_chanukah.html.



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