

Chanukah: A Holiday of Renewal

Let's begin with a few questions. First, the main mitzvah of Chanukah is lighting the menorah (*Shabbat* 21b). We all know that the reason for this mitzvah is to remind us of the miracle that Hashem performed for the Jews of that time. Hashem made a single jug of oil supernaturally last eight nights instead of one. As we know, mitzvot are not solely to remind us of a historic event; what, then, is the depth of the mitzvah of lighting the menorah?

Second, on Chanukah we remember two miraculous acts of kindness that Hashem bestowed upon us: the miraculous victory of war by the Maccabees over a stronger and larger enemy, and the miracle of the oil supernaturally lasting eight days. What is the common theme that these miracles share?

Third, the Greeks decreed against the Jews fulfilling three mitzvot: Rosh Chodesh, Shabbat and Milah (*Megillat Antiochus* 7:11). Why did they choose these in particular?

To answer these questions, let us explore the unique role of the three mitzvot banned by the Greeks.

Rosh Chodesh

The midrash (*Shemot Rabbah*, Bo 15:26) compares the Jewish nation to the moon. As we know, the moon begins as a small sliver that barely provides light. As the days pass, however, the moon appears larger and larger until it reaches its peak on day 15. From this point on, the moon appears to gradually decrease



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in size until it reaches a small sliver once again. The midrash suggests that Am Yisrael follows the same pattern. The nation started out with a single individual providing spiritual light to the world (Avraham Avinu) and gradually grew in spiritual light for the next 15 generations, ultimately reaching its peak with King Shlomo at the time of the First Beit Hamikdash. From this point on, the nation's spiritual level began to deteriorate, eventually ending up with the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash 15 generations later. Just as the moon renews itself at its lowest point of light, so too the Jewish nation renews itself every time it reaches rock bottom.

We can learn from this midrash that “ups and downs,” — good years and bad years, poverty and prosperity — are part of our identity. We must understand that the same way the moon renews itself and eventually becomes great, so too our nation will always rebuild and reach spiritual heights just like the days of old. Hardships and suffering are only a sign of good times to come.

Throughout the centuries, our nation has endured countless tragedies and persecutions. Every period of persecution brings with it the energy to anticipate renewal and redemption. Am Yisrael has *hitchadshut* (renewal) engraved on our *neshamot*. Perhaps

that is why the first mitzvah we were given as a nation was *kiddush hachodesh* (consecrating the new moon). Hashem wanted to inform us from the start that we will have ups and downs but we must never give up hope.

Rabbi Hershel Schachter once told me in the name of Rav Soloveitchik that if you were to chart the history of the other nations it would look like a triangle. Once they reach their peak, they start descending until they reach their ultimate downfall. Jewish history looks like a zig-zag. When we reach our peak, we start descending until we reach a very low place, only to rise to glory once again.

Shabbat

In addition to the monthly *hitchadshut*, Hashem also handed us the gift of a weekly *hitchadshut*: Shabbat. Shabbat acts as a small island of respite in the middle of a stressful ocean called the workweek. Shabbat is a day that we can recharge our spiritual batteries for the coming week. R. Tzadok Hakohen of Lublin states:

השבת הניתן לישראל א' לו' ימים מעורר בלב האדם בכל שבת חשק חדש לקדושתו ית'. מצד שעברו עליו ו' הימים בטרדת מלאכה והתרשלות מד"ת לכן ביום המנוחה מתעורר החשק להתקרב לקדושה.

The day of Shabbat, which was given to the Jews, comes every seven days and arouses a renewed passion in a person's heart to learn Torah and do mitzvot. For after a person endures six days of hard labor that causes him to slack and neglect Torah, then the day of rest arrives and awakens a new inspiration to come close to Hashem.

Pri Tzaddik, Yitro

During the workweek, it is challenging to grow spiritually. Shabbat has the ability to give a Jew that needed sense of renewal. Rav Tzadok is telling us that Hashem understands this very well. That is why he gave us the gift of Shabbat. Perhaps this is why we refer to Shabbat in *Lecha Dodi* as the *mekor haberacha*, the source of blessing in the week.

A lawyer in a prestigious firm, let's call him Moshe, once told me that when a senior member of the firm was retiring, Moshe asked him for a small piece of advice. The man told Moshe as follows: "If you want to stay sane during your workweek, take one day out of your week, disconnect yourself from work, technology, sports, and only spend time with family." If he only knew that this was already part of Moshe's way of life.

Milah

The Gemara, *Menachot* 43b, says that one time David Hamelech was in the bath house and began to feel despondent that he was not able to perform any mitzvot at that time. He then noticed his milah and felt at ease. This is a feeling that many of us share. There are times that we feel empty

of mitzvot, we feel like we forfeited our connection with Hashem. The mitzvah of milah acts as a reminder that our connection to Hashem is everlasting. The milah acts as a feeling of renewal, which allows us to continue striving to spiritual heights despite our prior sins.

Milah is an acronym for מי יעלה לנו השמימה — who will take us up to the heavens (Devarim 30:12)? This phrase is a rhetorical response to those who say that the Torah is in the heavens. The Torah states *lo bashamayim hi* — it is not in the heavens. It was given to human beings on the earth. Human beings make mistakes and are accustomed to sin. Milah reminds us that the Torah was given to human beings in a world filled with trials and temptations.

Although the Greeks were one of many nations who sought to destroy us, they pursued the precious gift that Hashem gave us, the secret to our survival, *hitchadshut*. They knew that if they destroyed our sense of renewal, they would destroy our hope and without hope there is no life. Rosh Chodesh, Shabbat and Milah are the three mitzvot that symbolize renewal and hope. The Greeks wanted to nullify them, thereby nullifying Am Yisrael.

The first miracle that took place was that the outnumbered Maccabees defeated the mighty Greek army. As an army of few, the Maccabees could have easily given up hope and surrendered. Instead, they collectively said Perek 91 in Tehillim — *Yoshev B'seter Elyon* — which is infused with hope and confidence that Hashem will

always be there for every Jew in every circumstance. For this reason there is a custom to recite this chapter after candle lighting (*Ben Ish Hai*, Parashat Vayeshev). The Maccabees, they kept on pressing that refresh button and pushed harder and harder. Their hope and renewal was a core part of the miracle. They knew that they couldn't expect Hashem to save them without putting up a fight. They engaged the enemy and Hashem assisted them in miraculous ways.

The second miracle that occurred was that the flame that was supposed to last just one day ended up lasting eight days. A flame embodies *hitchadshut*, because it constantly renews itself. We know that we are forbidden to transfer an item from one domain to another on Shabbat. The Gemara, *Beitzah* 39a, states that if we transfer a flame from one domain to another we have not violated a Biblical restriction. The flame that we lifted was not the same flame that we placed because a flame constantly renews itself. We see from here that the nature of a flame is that it is always in a state of renewal. The miracle was that the flame kept on burning for eight days while constantly in a state of renewal. The message behind the miracle was one of renewal. The two miracles of Chanukah are one and the same. They both symbolize the gift of *hitchadshut* that we were granted.

As we know, Hashem promised that the light of Mashiach will never be extinguished (*Birkot Haftarah*). May we merit to see the final renewal and the arrival of Mashiach let it be tomorrow!



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