

Chanukah Gifts: A Jewish Tradition?

Black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving in the United States, despite its dark connotation, is quite a joyous day for retailers and their customers. On that day, or sometime over that weekend, more people in the U.S. will purchase holiday gifts than people who voted in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.¹ During this time of year, retailers make it a point to make sure that those who celebrate Chanukah are buying gifts for family members and friends. While some might argue that gift giving seems to be based on Christian or pagan customs, in this essay, we will present a number of sources supporting the idea of giving children money or gifts on Chanukah.

Simchat Yom Tov

A compelling reason for the practice of gift giving emerges if we make the following assumption — that Chanukah, like yom tov, is a day of *simcha* (joy), and there is an obligation of *simchat yom tov*. The Gemara, *Pesachim* 109a, states that the obligation of *simchat yom tov* is partly fulfilled by providing gifts to members of the family.

Is *simchat yom tov* applicable on Chanukah? The Gemara, in describing the institution of Chanukah states:

לשנה אחרת קבעום ועשאום ימים טובים
בהלל והודאה.

In a later year, they established these days and made them a holiday through praise and thanksgiving.

Shabbat 21b

The Gemara does use the term “yom tov” to describe Chanukah.



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Nevertheless, the phrase “praise and thanksgiving” may come to modify the term “yom tov.” In other words, it is a yom tov of praise and thanksgiving and not an ordinary yom tov. Rambam clearly identifies Chanukah as “*yemei simcha v’hallel*” — days of joy and praise:

ומפני זה התקינו חכמים שבאותו הדור שיהיו
שמונת ימים האלו שתחלתן כ”ה בכסליו ימי
שמחה והלל.

For this reason, the rabbis of that generation instituted that these eight days, which begin on the 25th of Kislev, should be days of joy and praise.

Hilchot Chanukah 3:3

Does this mean that in practice, the concept of *simchat yom tov* applies to Chanukah? Although Rambam does use the term “simcha,” he presents Chanukah differently from his description of an ordinary yom tov. Rambam, *Hilchot Yom Tov*, 6:17, writes that on yom tov, a person must be *sam’eich v’tov lev*, happy and good-hearted. This may reflect that Chanukah represents a different type of *simcha*, and that the observance of Chanukah may be different than yom tov.

R. Yaakov ben Asher, *Tur, Orach Chaim* no. 670, quotes Maharam MiRutenburg’s opinion that there is no obligation to have festive meals on Chanukah:

והיה אומר הר”מ מרוטנבורק ז”ל שרבו

הסעודה שמרבים בהם הן סעודת הרשות שלא
קבעו אלא להלל ולהודות ולא משתה ושמחה.
R. Meir of Rutenburg would say that the additional meals that people eat are considered optional meals (i.e. there is no mitzvah to participate) because they only established [Chanukah] for praise and thanksgiving, not for feasting and rejoicing.

Tur contrasts Chanukah with Purim. Purim is a day of *mishteh v’simcha*, feasting and rejoicing, but Chanukah is a day of praise and thanksgiving. R. Mordechai Yoffe explains further:

לא קבעום אלא להלל ולהודות, ולא למשתה
ושמחה, כלומר כיון שהם רצו למנוע אותנו
מזה לכפור בדת ה’ו, ובעזרתו יתברך לא
הפיקו זממם וגברה ידינו, לכך קבעו אותם
לחזור ולשבח ולהודות לו על שהיה לנו
לאלקים ולא עזבנו מעבודתו, אבל בימי המן
שהיתה הגזירה להרוג ולהשמיד את הגופות
שהוא ביטול משתה ושמחה ... לכך כשנצלו
ממנו קבעו להללו ולשבחו יתברך גם כן על
ידי משתה ושמחה.

They were only established for praise and thanksgiving, not feasting and rejoicing. This is because they wanted to prevent us from [praise and thanksgiving] by having us give up religion, Heaven forbid. And through God’s help, they were not able to carry out their plan and we were successful. Therefore, they established a return to praise and thanksgiving to Him that He was our Lord and did not cause us to stray from His service. However, during the days of Haman, the decree was to kill and destroy the Jewish people, which negates

the possibility of feasting and rejoicing ... Therefore, when they were saved, they instituted praising God through feasting and rejoicing.

Levush, Orach Chaim no. 670

On Purim, there was a physical threat against the Jewish people. Therefore, the celebration is of a physical nature. On Chanukah, the threat against the Jewish people was a spiritual threat and therefore, the celebration is spiritual in nature. *Tur's* comments are codified in *Shulchan Aruch* 670:2.

R. Shlomo Luria, *Yam Shel Shlomo, Bava Kama* 7:37, disagrees and notes that Rambam specifically refers to Chanukah as days of *simcha*. Furthermore, the Gemara specifically refers to Chanukah as a *yom tov*. Therefore, he concludes that there is a mitzvah to be festive on Chanukah. Rama, *Orach Chaim* 670:2, writes that while not required, we should have meals that are festive.²

R. Yisrael Pesach Feinhandler, *Avnei Yashpei, Orach Chaim* 1:129, follows the approach that giving gifts on Chanukah is at least a partial fulfillment of *simchat yom tov*. He also writes that it cannot be considered a violation of *chukat akum*, the prohibition against adopting practices of idolaters or other religions, because there is a logical reason why we would have adopted this practice on our own.

Distribution of “Chanukah Gelt”

R. Avraham Gombiner, *Magen Avraham* 670, writes that it is customary for poor children to collect tzedakah on Chanukah. He quotes R. Shaul ben David's *Chanukat HaBayit* as the source for this custom. In *Chanukat HaBayit, s.v. L'Shimcha HaGadol*, he explains that children are compared to *pachim ketanim*, small vessels, and through their collection of tzedakah we

publicize the miracle, which occurred with a small vessel of oil. R. Yissachar Dov Rokeach, the third Belzer Rebbe, is quoted as saying (in *Chaim SheYesh BaHem, Moadei HaShanah* pg. 248) that the practice developed to give money to all children so as not to embarrass those who are poor.

R. Ya'akov Kamenetsky, *Emet L'Yaakov, Orach Chaim* 670, suggests that during Chanukah, parents sent money with their children to distribute to their teachers. The practice then developed that the children were given some money to keep for themselves.

R. Yisrael Spira, *Binat Yisrael* pg. 125, suggests that when we spend money to observe the Jewish holidays, it contributes to the love of the holiday. Since Chanukah doesn't have any major expenses, the custom developed to distribute tzedakah to teachers of Torah and to give money to children so that we have a greater appreciation of Chanukah.

Giving Gifts or Gelt for Educational Purpose

R. Chaim Friedlander, *Siftei Chaim, Moadim* Vol. II, pg. 134, quotes from R. Yosef Kahaneman that the basis for the practice of Chanukah gelt is that at the time of the story of Chanukah, there was a decree against learning Torah. After the war, they needed to “bribe” the children to resume learning Torah. Therefore, we also give Chanukah gelt as a means of encouraging children to learn Torah.

R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe, *Sha'arei HaMoadim*, Chanukah pg. 359, notes that the root of the word Chanukah is *chinuch*, (education and training). Therefore, we pay special attention to *chinuch* on this

holiday. Providing children with treats to encourage them to learn is an important aspect of *chinuch*, and as such, we put a special emphasis on this on Chanukah. For this reason, R. Schneerson suggests giving gelt every day of Chanukah.

R. Eliyahu Kitov, *Sefer HaToda'ah*, Chanukah pg. 172, also notes the connection between Chanukah and *chinuch*. He suggests that we distribute gifts to the children with an implicit message that they are receiving these gifts with the understanding that they will further commit themselves to the observance of Torah.

Conclusion

Chanukah is a very exciting time for children and the practice of giving gelt or gifts is a good opportunity to help nurture their spiritual growth. The gifts can be used as tools to start discussions about Jewish values. What is the Jewish concept of *simcha* and how does it differ from material pursuits? Why is it important to express appreciation to our teachers specifically on Chanukah? How much of what we do is motivated by external rewards or consequences and how much do we do because we want to do what is right? By giving context to the tradition of gift giving, the gift can be better appreciated both by the giver and the receiver.

Endnotes

1 “By the Numbers: The Biggest Shopping Weekend of the Year, available at: <https://www.cnn.com/2016/11/25/black-friday-sales-stats.html>.

2 Rama, both in *Darkei Moshe* 670 and in his glosses on *Shulchan Aruch*, is clear that the festive nature of the holiday is not a function of the miracles of Chanukah. Those miracles are celebrated through praise and thanksgiving. The reason why we should be festive is that during these days, the Mizbe'ach was dedicated.