



# EIGHT PERSPECTIVES ON CHANUKAH

## Coming Back from the Brink

**Rabbi Ely Bacon**

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The period leading up to the miracle of Chanukah was a nadir of religious life for the Jewish people. Hellenism had made such significant inroads into the Jewish community that many felt the demise of traditional religious life was imminent. But the Chashmonaim and a handful of Jews did not share that skepticism. What was the source of their courage and optimism?

The pasuk in Netzavim (30:4) states:

אִם יִהְיֶה נְדַחְךָ בְּקִצֵּה הַשָּׁמַיִם מִשָּׁם יִקְבְּצֶךָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ וּמִשָּׁם יִקְחֶךָ.

*If your dispersed will be at the ends of the heaven, from there Hashem, your G-d, will gather you in and from there He will take you.*

The *Zera Shimshon*, Rav Shimshon Nachmani zt”l, wonders why the

pasuk needs to say the word “*misham*,” from there, when describing Hashem collecting the Jewish people. The word seems superfluous.

Based on the Gemara in Megillah (16a), the *Zera Shimshon* offers the following explanation. Bnei Yisroel are compared both to the dust of the earth and to the stars of the heaven: When we fall as a nation we fall to the lowest levels and we are nothing more than dirt; but when we rise, we soar to the heights of the stars. The *Zera Shimshon* interprets the Gemara to mean that exactly the moment when we fall to our lowest level and it seems there is no hope for salvation, in that moment and in that place we are able to rise.

From where do the Jewish people draw this tremendous power to come back from the brink, from the place of their lowest depths? I would suggest the answer is hinted in the word we began with — “*misham*” — which is reminiscent of a famous Gemara in Shabbos (88a) about *kabbolas HaTorah*:

ואמר להם אם אתם מקבלים התורה מוטב ואם לאו שם תהא קבורתכם.

*Hashem said if you accept the Torah, good. If not, there will be your burial place.*

Prima facie, the Gemara should have said *poh* (פה), **here** will be your grave. So why does it say *sham* (שם), **there**? What does it come to teach us? Perhaps it is a companion message to the *Zera Shimshon*. Hashem was saying that if we do not accept the Torah, then when we reach the brink, the moments of *sham*, that will truly be our end: *sham tehe kevuraschem*. But by accepting the Torah and clinging to it steadfastly, then even when we are “there,” we can and will always come back!

Chanukah is a celebration of our unwavering commitment to the Torah and a Torah way of life. The Chashmonaim merited the tremendous salvation specifically because of that commitment. The Lubliner Rav, Rav Meir Shapiro, had a homiletic interpretation on the

opening comment of the Gemara, *Shabbos* 21b, about the Chanukah story — *Mai Chanukah d'tanu rabbanan* ... which literally translates as “what is [the story of] Chanukah as the rabbis taught.” Rav Shapiro read it as “if you want to know what gave the Chashmonaim the power to stand resolutely against our enemies, it is *d'tanu rabbanan* — the teachings of our Torah.” May we all be *zocheh* to continue to learn and spread the light of Torah and thereby merit the ultimate salvation speedily in our days.

## Tzadikim and Tehorim: Military Disadvantage?

**Rabbi Menachem Genack**  
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*Al Hanissim* lists a series of disadvantages that we had against the Syrian-Greek army and the miracle that Hashem provided for us in helping us defeat them. The list starts with *giborim b'yad chalashim*, the mighty in the hands of the weak, and then *rabim b'yad me'atim*, many in the hands of the few. These disadvantages are clearly understandable from a military perspective. However, the next three are more difficult to understand: *reshaim b'yad tzadikim*, the evil in the hands of the righteous, *temei'im b'yad tehorim*, the defiled in the hands of the pure, *v'zeidim b'yad oskei Torasecha*, and the wanton in the hands of those who study Your Torah. Why are we listing these disadvantages? Why were they less equipped to fight because they were righteous, pure people who studied Torah?

Perhaps the idea is that even in war,

there are certain moral and ethical standards. A military without ethics will destroy everything in its path including its own civilians. A military fighting an ethical war will go out of its way to avoid unnecessary casualties. This put the army of righteous, pure people who studied Torah at a military disadvantage. Therefore, in *Al Hanissim*, we thank Hashem for that aspect of the miracle of the war.

## Chanukah and the Search for Inner Beauty

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Why are today's dating challenges so difficult? I blame the ancient Greeks. While we won the Chanukah war of spirituality over materialism and holiness over Hellenism, in some respects we are still fighting that war. It was the Greeks who first taught the world to emphasize physical beauty above all else. Descending from Noah's son, Yefet (root of “*yofei*,” meaning “pretty”), our Syrian/Greek adversaries worshipped pagan gods and pagan values. Jewish tradition, on the other hand, cherishes inner beauty, that which stems from within us.

The Hellenistic attitude pervades modern culture. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks quotes Matthew Arnold, a Victorian poet and social critic, who distinguished between Hellenism and Hebraism. Hellenism focuses on art and beauty. Hebraism (i.e. Jewish culture) is about ethics and righteousness. Lord Sacks notes that our ancient Jewish values are constantly being attacked by our

secular experience and its deviant norms. Indeed, he says, “Ours is the most Hellenistic age since the conversion of Constantine to Christianity in the 4th century.” [Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, “Candles in memory of a clash of civilisations,” December 16, 2006 available at [http://rs.hopedev.agency/candles-in-memory-of-a-clash-of-civilisations/.](http://rs.hopedev.agency/candles-in-memory-of-a-clash-of-civilisations/)]

Of course, as Jews, we can enjoy beauty — it is even praiseworthy in the proper setting. The vessels of the Beis Hamikdash were covered in gold. Yerushalayim received nine-tenths of the beauty of the world (*Kiddushin* 49a-b). Our saintly *imahot* (matriarchs) are often portrayed as “*yifat toar*” (beautiful in appearance). The Vilna Gaon (commentary to *Mishlei* 31:30) comments that when outer physical beauty exists alone, then it is “*sheker hachayn v'hevel hayofi*” — simply vanity. But true beauty is *yirat Hashem*, expressed as inner personality and *middos*. That type of beauty is worthy of praise and it is this beauty that is recognized in Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel and Leah.

There are dating apps today based solely on looking at a photo and then swiping right/left. Due to the ease of searching online, “blind dates” simply don't exist anymore and even matchmakers recommend a flattering photo to complement a dating profile. It is incumbent upon Jewish educators, Orthodox organizations, and yes, Jewish parents, to impress upon our young adults the essential values that matter in marriage, or indeed, any relationship. Kindness, consideration, responsibility, and religious sincerity are crucial characteristics that sustain a marriage. We are blessed to have that as part of our heritage.

Our Maccabee heroes recognized their spiritual war. Their fight was to preserve our Torah without contamination. Chanukah's celebration is the miracle of finding the pure, unadulterated olive oil. Interestingly, the Menorah that was lit by the Chashmonaim wasn't the beautiful golden menorah; after all, the Beis Hamikdash had been ransacked and vessels destroyed. The early rededication occurred with a simple menorah made of iron and tin (*Menachot* 28b). The light emanating from within was what mattered. Married or single, each of us can use our own spiritual light, fight the Hellenistic forces surrounding us, and continue the battle for authentic Torah Judaism.

## Pirumei Nisa Starts in the Home

### Rabbi Joshua Goller

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We ordinarily associate the mitzvah of lighting ner Chanukah with the concept of *pirumei nisa*: a chance to publicize the great miracle that Hashem performed for us in those days. It would therefore be logical to assume that the more public we can make this mitzvah, the better. So perhaps the lighting should be outside. However, the Gemara qualifies this notion of *pirumei nisa* with the following statement:

תנו רבנן: נר חנוכה מצוה להניחה על פתח ביתו מבחוץ. אם היה דר בעלייה - מניחה בחלון הסמוכה לרשות הרבים. ובשעת הסכנה - מניחה על שלחן, ודין

*Our rabbis taught: The candle of Chanukah should be lit at the entrance*

*of one's home on the outside. If one lives on a higher floor, one places it in the window closest to the public thoroughfare. In times of danger, one may place it on the table and that is sufficient.*

### Shabbat 21b

During times of danger, we can fulfill the mitzvah by lighting inside the home on our table. While the parameters and applications of this ruling are subject to halachic debate, there is a subtle message in this halachic ruling as well.

In the classic work of *Chassidus*, the *Bnei Yisaschar* (Kislev 3:38), Rabbi Tzvi Elimelech Spira of Dinov (c. 1783–1841), writes that the word *v'dayo* — and that is sufficient — seems superfluous. The Gemara could have just ended by saying “place it on the table.” Rather, the word *v'dayo* tells us that those outside cannot properly understand or appreciate the message of the Menorah and the miracle it represents. They will deride it. It is sufficient to light for those people in your home. The message of Hashem's great miracles and omnipotence is only needed to be understood by those in the home; those who will appreciate it and use it to further the message of Hashem and His Torah in the world.

The challenge of living in a world full of people who don't understand the values of Torah or see G-d's hand in daily living is great. But recognize that it is up to those around the table, who are in the house, to be the ambassadors who will slowly bring back the days of true *pirumei nisa* — a day where everyone sees and understands the large and small miracles that Hashem has and continues to bestow upon us.

## Reclaiming Our Portion in Hashem

### Rabbi Zvi Sobolofsky

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The Midrash, *Bereishis Rabbah* 2:4, describes *galus Yavan* — the period of persecution that the Jews experienced in the time leading up to the Chanukah story — as *choshech*, darkness, because the Greeks darkened the eyes of the Jews by telling them to write on the horn of an ox, “you have no portion in the G-d of Israel.” Much has been written and said about this midrash. I would like to focus on what it means to have a portion in the G-d of Israel.

In Parashas Korach (18:20), Hashem states that the Kohanim and Levi'im will not receive a portion of land in Israel. Rather, *Ani chelekecha v'nachalasecha*, I am your portion and share. The Kohanim and Levi'im have a direct portion in Hashem. What do they do to attain that portion? They had two primary roles. First, they performed *avodah*, service, in the Beis Hamikdash. Second, when they weren't actively performing *avodah*, they were involved in learning and teaching Torah (see Rambam, *Hilchos Shemitah V'Yovel* 13:12). As such, having a portion in Hashem means having a portion in Torah learning and *avodah*.

The Greeks understood what it meant to have a portion in Hashem and their decrees reflected that. First, they wanted to ensure that we had no portion in Torah learning. In *Al Hanisim* the first thing we mention is *l'hashkicham Torasecha*, they attempted to have us forget the Torah. Second, they wanted to eliminate the *avoda* in the Beis Hamikdash by defiling it.

On Chanukah, we have an opportunity to reclaim our portion in Hashem. Our lighting of the Chanukah candles is an act of *avoda*. It mimics the lighting of the Menorah in the Beis Hamikdash and it is something even non-Kohanim can do. Chanukah is also a time when we can rededicate ourselves to Torah learning. By committing ourselves to Torah and *avodah*, we are stating that we have a portion in the G-d of Israel.

## At the Crossroad of Compromise and Commitment

### Rabbi Moshe Tzvi Weinberg

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While halacha allows for more than one “correct” conclusion arrived on by a competent halachic authority, its process is defined by a thorough search for and implementation of the truth. Worthy poskim may choose to differ in their final analysis, but it is perhaps less common that halacha reflects a blending of the various opinions to create a practice initially proposed by nobody.

A compromise of this sort finds expression in the (Ashkenazi) practice of affixing a mezuzah to our doorways. While Rashi (*Menachos* 33a) favors a vertical upright placement of the mezuzah, Rabbeinu Tam (*Menachos* 33a) advocates for a horizontal positioning of the scroll, echoing the arrangement of the Torah and the Tablets in the *Aron Kodesh* of the *Beis HaMikdash*. What are we to make of these conflicting opinions? While Rav Yosef Karo (YD 289:6) adopts the position of Rashi as normative,

we find a remarkable position, albeit not entirely unique in halacha, in the writings of the *Tur* (Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher, YD 289), which is later cited and recommended by Rema (YD 289:6). “Those who perform mitzvos precisely” seek to fulfill both the opinion of Rashi and Rabbeinu Tam. This is achieved through the creation of a *peshara* of sorts, a compromise opinion — positioning the mezuzah neither vertical nor horizontal but on a slant.

It has been suggested that particularly in the context of mezuzah, which marks the entranceways to our homes and dwelling spaces, it is appropriate to contemplate the need for compromise. The slanted mezuzah serves as a stark reminder of a simple truth and reality. A home, the very place where mezuzos are so proudly displayed, is often an environment of varying voices and opinions. The need for compromise is essential in upholding the metaphorical walls of the home.

However, while the need for confluence and compromise is certain, there are instances that call for our stance to be firm. It is perhaps for this very reason that the Gemara (*Shabbos* 22a) concludes that the optimal placement of the Chanukah menorah is on the left side of the doorway, *opposing*, as it were, the mezuzah. While the mezuzah represents the beauty of compromise, the menorah represents our fierce and unwavering commitment to absolute truth in the face of an oppressive “compromise.” The Ancient Syrian-Greeks never intended to exterminate the Jewish people (see Maharal’s *Ner Mitzvah* at length); rather, they sought to dilute our core Torah values, under the guise of “working together.” Loss of Torah identity is loss of Jewish identity

itself. Perhaps now more than ever, as we stand at the threshold of our homes on Chanukah, enveloped by a mezuzah of compromise on our right and the immutable truth of the menorah on our left, we must once again challenge ourselves to maintain the delicate balance between these two great ideals.

## Igniting The Spark From Within

### Mrs. Miriam White

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Often times we catch ourselves dreaming about making an impact on the world. Our minds race with visions of big achievements and accomplishments, and we hope for the day that we can solve a particular crisis, or enlighten the world in a meaningful way. We then realize that in order to turn these dreams into reality, we need to take practical steps toward these goals. The festival of Chanukah, which celebrates those who have made a unique impact on Jewish history, teaches us how to achieve those grand dreams we aspire to; we can learn this from **where**, **when** and **how** we light the menorah.

A. The Gemara in *Shabbos* (21b) tells us two, almost contradictory, statements about **where** we light the menorah. It says that the mitzvah is “*ner ish uveiso*,” that it is lit by each household, but then says that the menorah should be placed close to the entrance of the house *outside* of the home. [In the Diaspora, we usually light inside the home, but ensure that it is visible to those outside the home.] This duality, whereby the menorah is lit in the home, but in a

way that can be seen outside, teaches us a powerful lesson: that the homes we live in are our miracles, and a home and family has the power to transform the world around us. After all, the Chashmonaim were led by a single family of Matisyahu and his sons! Our success is not found in the masses but in a small number doing the right thing. As we say during Chanukah, “*V’rabim byad meatim*” — “*The many were delivered in the hands of the few.*” Although we Jews make up a small percentage of the world population, we can still have a lasting impact on the world around us. We need not travel to the end of the world and back to make an impact. Sometimes all it takes is the light from our home to illuminate a whole world.

**B. When** do we light the menorah? We light during the night, in the heart of winter, when the nights are the longest. It can feel like the night will last forever, and yet we add a small flame of light every night of Chanukah to remind us that even when all hope seems lost, and the world is too dark and complicated to repair, our job is to create a little bit of light to keep moving forward. Rav Hirsch describes this most strikingly in his book *Horeb*:

*Each year, when the Chanukah season recurs, lights are kindled in every home of Israel, and by every son of Israel, and the events of those days are celebrated in word and in song, paying homage to God. Thus the darkened courses of Israel are lit up by this message: “The spiritual light of Israel will never be dimmed.” And even if round about you everything becomes defiled by the oppression of the time, so long as the light remains pure within the confines of only one house or within the breast of only one man, live on joyfully amid all the wanton aberration, even die joyfully under the frenzy of a madman, for the spiritual life of Israel is saved: God watches over it; and even by*

*the light of one man He rekindles it anew. “Not by might, nor by power, but by My spirit, saith the Lord of Hosts (Zecharia iv, 6).”*

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**C. How** we light the menorah also teaches us a valuable lesson. Instead of starting with eight, we light one candle on the first night of Chanukah, and build from there. Each day we are *mosif veholech*, we add on a little bit more to what we did yesterday. One person can inspire another, who can inspire another, who inspires another, one person at a time.

Chanukah teaches us how to bring light into this world; by bringing light into our homes that can emanate outward, by inspiring us during the dark night to have a bit of hope, and that all it takes is just one individual to inspire another, who will then in turn inspire another, with ultimate hopes of making an impact in the world around them.

## An Interesting Spin on the Dreidel

**Rabbi Yehuda Willig**  
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The tradition of spinning the dreidel has ancient roots in the Chanukah story. Interestingly, we find another ancient custom of spinning: on Purim we spin the gragger. The commentaries note that although these two customs are quite similar, they differ in that the dreidel is spun from the top and the gragger from below. This difference requires an explanation.

The sefer *Ta’amei Haminhagim* suggests an answer based on another contrast between Chanukah and

Purim. On Purim we find that there was a powerful *hisorerusa d’letasa* (inspiration from below) as we fasted and did a communal teshuva. On Chanukah, however, we experienced *hisorerusa d’leila* (inspiration from above) as we undeservedly were granted miracles from Hashem. Based on this distinction we can now understand why, on Purim, we commemorate our salvation by spinning from below in remembrance of the *hisorerusa d’letasa*, while on Chanukah, we celebrate the miracles that occurred through *hisorerusa d’leila* — the spinning of the One above.

We can add another dimension to the meaning of the dreidel and its spin: A dreidel cannot independently stand on its own. Yet with a push and a spin from above it can move with exceptional speed. Similarly, on a national level, Klal Yisrael were incapable of standing on their own due to the terrible oppression of the Greeks. Yet with a push and a spin from the One above, we were able to succeed in an extraordinary victory.

This understanding can lead us to a greater appreciation of Hashem’s involvement in His world. After all, the earth we inhabit is spherical and whirls around and around, resembling the dreidel. Additionally, scientists note that if the world stopped spinning at its normal rate of 1,000 miles per hour, our planet would be uninhabitable. So as we twirl our dreidel this Chanukah, we should recall the miraculous events of the Chanukah story as well as the constant miracle called nature. As we spin our dreidel, we remind ourselves of Who is spinning our earth up above and Who is really in control of our universe.