



HOME IMPROVEMENT: CHANUKAH'S SPECIAL GIFT

Everyone agrees that Chanukah is a holiday that boosts our spirits in the winter season. The month of Kislev, historically, has been viewed as a hopeful time for our nation, even before the miracle of Chanukah took place. The Mishkan was completed in the desert on the 25th of Kislev,¹ and the foundation of the second Beit HaMikdash was started on the 24th of Kislev.² When the Chashmonaim rededicated the Mikdash on the 25th, the outpouring of joy focused on the “House of Hashem,” the *chanukat habayit*.

It is customary to recite Tehillim, Chapter 30, “*Mizmor shir chanukat habayit L'Dovid*” at the end of

Shacharit during Chanukah, which speaks about the dedication of the first Beit HaMikdash. Similarly, the phrase is used again when we move into a new home and hold a celebration. We invite friends and family to celebrate the dedication of our home, symbolizing our own smaller-sized *mikdash me'at*, to be permeated with mitzvot. While Chanukah commemorates unique miracles, such as the jug of oil and the war with the Greeks, it is also apparent that the *chanukat habayit* aspect of Chanukah can celebrate our ability to realize our dreams of bringing Hashem's presence into our own homes, improving our inner selves, and rededicating our relationships.

The centrality of the home is highlighted in an interesting question listed in the Gemara. Certainly, we know the lighting of the Menorah is one of the significant mitzvot of Chanukah. However, the Gemara asks: What does one do if he is too poor and has only enough money to buy either Chanukah candles or Shabbat candles? The Gemara in *Shabbat 23b*, states that Shabbat candles take priority. Why would that be? Shabbat candles are lit primarily to enhance peace and harmony in the Jewish home. Rashi comments that sitting in the dark will cause discomfort and add stress in the home. *Shalom bayit* is therefore so significant that Shabbat candles

take precedence over the mitzvah of Chanukah candles.

In recent months, due to the pandemic, we have spent many days, weeks, and months in our homes in the all too familiar states of “quarantine” or “lockdown.” We have had plenty of time to think, recalibrate and direct our attention to the core values and crucial interpersonal relationships found in a “Jewish home.”

In Torah learning, when you have a repeated word or term, it is called a “*milah mancha*.” It shows us that the word is important and that we are meant to learn from its repetition and emphasis. The word “home” seems to be the recurring theme these days before the holiday of Chanukah, relegating us to our own “*bayit*.” Whether it is the many times we are recommended by health authorities to “house in place” or the aforementioned theme in Kislev of the “*chanukat habayit*” — is Hashem telling us something in this time of Chanukah?

Perhaps the answer is in what Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt”l calls the Jewish Algorithm. Rabbi Sacks posits that the main theme in the Jewish home is the Torah and that the lessons that we learn from the Torah make all the difference in our homes and lives. This “internal moral code” includes, but is not limited to, honesty, respect, tolerance, and responsibility.³ These values are taught through modeling in our homes to our children. It is incumbent upon us to enrich our homes, elevate them and add spirituality to our relationships.

It is interesting to note that these intrinsic home values are the exact opposite of those of the Hellenistic Greeks from the time of Chanukah. The Greeks focused on externals. According to Rabbi Sacks, Hellenism

was about fitness and art, and the greatest ideal was beauty. Our Jewish homes, on the other hand, center around obligation, commitment, and hope.⁴ When you make Torah the focal point and the ultimate guide of your home, Rabbi Sacks states, it strengthens all key relationships. The happiness and success in these relationships is dependent on Torah values.⁵

We are fortunate in many ways. While sitting at home these months, many people have looked around at the walls and the rooms and thought that perhaps they need to do some painting, or to purchase new furniture. However, there is more to be gained from our confinement than simple decorative home improvement. One of the benefits of working from home is that many Torah educators took to the internet and WhatsApp to start sending out short daily Torah messages. Shiurim are being given online and people could literally learn all day and night, without leaving their homes. Rabbis and teachers are succeeding in making learning at home a habit, a daily routine. Technology has assisted us by providing Zoom conferences and webinars, new apps and programs that are delivered with ease into our homes.

Of course, technology can have its flip side, its insidious and distracting impact. Rabbi David Fohrman in his book *A Parsha Companion* speaks about how man creates technological items, like the plow, to make our lives easier. However, he notes we must be aware that these items also can compete for our attention with the things that matter most — like deepening our relationships with our spouse, children, and Hashem. We may be home more often, but

are we “really” there? And if we have succeeded in bringing in shiurim and Torah to our home, have we gone the next step and improved our most important relationships with our loved ones?

Improving Relationships

Undoubtedly, the central focus of the home is the husband and wife relationship. It used to be that the newspaper or TV were the greatest distractions that prevented couples from having meaningful moments throughout the week. With the advent of mobile technology, families are inundated throughout the day and night with distractions. We have been so busy until now looking outside of our homes that it is only now, due to the pandemic, that we have the time to focus inward on the things and relationships that bring us enduring happiness.

So how best can we improve and achieve noticeable change in our lives? This is especially challenging when we are a generation accustomed to instant gratification, a society imbued with Amazon Prime and “next day shipping.” Further, when change doesn’t happen quickly, we get frustrated and give up, even though the initial motivation was high. A new approach is now necessary to rededicate our own homes and enhance our personal relationships. Dr. David Pelcovitz, in his drasha on Leil Hoshana Rabba, mentioned that if we are looking for enduring change, he recommended the practices espoused by the behavioral scientist Dr. B.J. Fogg in his book *Tiny Habits*.

In this book, Dr. Fogg explains that if a person sets goals that are too broad, it is hard to accomplish them. He claims

that we need to break down these goals into “tiny” new positive actions or habits, and then anchor them to an existing prompt or positive behavior. The existing prompt or behavior then leads a person to perform the new habit, which will be easily remembered and constantly reinforced. Eventually, this will become a positive habitual behavior. Ease is key.

How does this translate into a better marriage? Simply stating “I want to have a stronger relationship with my spouse” may be too broad. Instead, we can insert a small new behavior into everyday life by anchoring it to a pre-existing event. Whenever the front door opens (the anchor), a spouse can happily say something like, “Welcome home!” (the new action), which pleasantly acknowledges the other person’s presence with warmth and a smile. Or, on a Shabbos afternoon when the table is finally cleared (the anchor), that can prompt a husband to say to his wife, “What a great day for a walk together” (new action). If a behavior is easily attainable, it can readily become a habit.

Tiny habits will continue and will achieve the desired long-term goals with one more component. Every time a new habit is mastered, it needs a tiny celebration, a positive reinforcement. It is the celebration that taps into the reward system in the brain. Simple celebrations may include saying the word “Yes!” or “Yay!,” a fist pump, or a big smile. We can even give ourselves the “thumbs up,” and note aloud that we achieved the new tiny habit. This releases the dopamine in the brain, making us experience positive feelings. Naturally, the brain likes the feeling, which helps make the behavior more automatic. The emotions cement the tiny habits, not the repetition and frequency,

notes Dr. Fogg. The celebratory step is the crucial ingredient to achieve a recipe for success.⁶

If a person has the aspiration to become more loving and appreciative, there are many “tiny habits” that can change a relationship. Saying “thank you” after a spouse makes dinner. Texting a message of appreciation after a midday coffee break. Answering “I am here for you” after listening to a husband or wife’s stressful day. These meaningful habits, tied to current everyday anchors, will create positivity in the home. Moreover, change leads to more change. We start small, build confidence, and then naturally open ourselves to positive improvement in many ways.

This is confirmed by Barbara Markway, Ph.D, who states in *Psychology Today* that these small acts of kindness can make a big difference in a relationship. Caring gestures often decline in a long-term marriage due to basic neglect. People assume that once they are married these small steps or actions do not matter. It is actually the little things that can mean everything in a relationship. By complimenting a partner, starting a new hobby together, or scheduling a weekly check-in, small actions can lead to big changes. These acts will keep your bond strong.⁷ Remember, anchor them in a preexisting prompt, then follow it with a tiny celebration, to ensure success.

There is a final point that is relevant to our times. Rav Soloveitchik explains in his *Kol Dodi Dofek* (translated into English as *Fate and Destiny*) that we cannot truly understand why any evil befalls this world. He says Judaism teaches us that we need to recognize suffering and not ignore it. Instead, human beings should confront our environment and current

circumstances with introspection and acts of growth. Mitzvot and personal or spiritual self-improvement will undoubtedly lead us forward as we confront those challenges.

Nowadays, we dare not downplay the pandemic. The reasons, causes, or even the world reaction is beyond our comprehension. And, as many of us are now relegated to our own homes, our “*bayit*,” it is in that inner sanctum where we may find solace. Perhaps our current task may be to use our resourcefulness and imagination and seize our learning opportunities, while creating meaningful relationships.

This stressful time can indeed be the ideal moment for rededication and refocus as an ongoing investment to our family, and to ourselves. We can bring Hashem closer into our personal lives and make small changes, through our tiny habits, making our relationships happier and stronger. While we light the Chanukah candles this year, let us decide to actively seek those changes, sanctify our homes, and improve our lives through our own *chanukat habayit*.

Endnotes

1. *Yalkut Shimoni* on the Book of Kings.
2. Chagai 2:18.
3. “The Jewish Algorithm,” A Commencement Speech from Rabbi Sacks <https://youtu.be/J41871B4bfc>.
4. “Candles: In Memory of a Clash of Civilization” by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks.
5. “The Jewish Algorithm.”
6. B.J.Fogg Ph.D “Tiny Habits” Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston New York. 2020.
7. “Fifty Eight Caring Behaviors For Couples” by Barbara Markway, Ph.D *Psychology Today*, available at: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/living-the-questions/201402/58-caring-behaviors-couples>.